

## ADLER'S CONCEPT OF SOCIAL INTEREST: A CRITICAL EXPLICATION

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Adler's concept of social interest is not a single concept, but rather a complex of concepts, theoretical propositions, and functional issues whose richness and complexity demand explication. The analysis in this paper proceeds by considering possible explications of social interest that can be derived more or less directly from Adler's writings. Each potential explication is examined in terms of its own internal logic and in terms of its fit with other areas of Adler's theory. Unacceptable explications are dismissed and modified in a process of convergence upon a final valid core concept. The fruits of this process are, hopefully, threefold: (1) a delineation of the boundaries of the core of social interest, (2) an elucidation of a number of apparent interpretations of social interest that are *not* valid, and (3) a clarification of the relationships between social interest and other issues in Adler's theory.

### ONTOLOGICAL AND FUNCTIONAL LEVELS OF CONSIDERATION

An explication of social interest must proceed on two levels: the ontological and the functional. Ontologically, we want to know what social interest *is*; what its nature is and how it differs from other things of the same nature. Functionally, we want to know what the concept *does* in our theory; how it helps to understand and explain reality. As will be seen, aside from the potential for difficulties within each level, there is no a priori guarantee that the two levels are consistent with each other. One of the strongest tools of this explication, in fact, will turn out to be an iteration between what Adler appears to mean by social interest and what he appears to want the concept to do, hopefully converging on what social interest *must* mean and what it is *possible* for it to do. This iterative dynamic will dominate most of the ensuing analysis.

\*My initial contact and interest in Adlerian psychology, including the topic of this paper, is due to discussions with Richard Kopp. Vital encouragement for writing the paper was received from Guy Manaster. Useful comments and criticisms on early drafts were received from Jan Ford, Margaret Iwanaga, and Frank Richardson.

Initially, we know that "Social feeling means . . . a struggle for a communal form" (Adler, 1964, p. 275). "Social interest . . . is rooted in the germ cell. But it is rooted as a potentiality, not as an actual ability" (Ansbacher, 1973, p. 25). Social interest is some relationship to community which must be developed. We also know that "all that constitutes a failure is so because it obstructs social feeling, whether children, neurotics, criminals, or suicides are in question" (Adler, 1964, p. 283). Social interest, then, is in some sense fundamental to mental health.

These general relationships to community and to mental health will form the beginnings of our ontological and functional explorations. What is not so clear is just exactly what social interest is when it is developed and just exactly what relationship it has to mental health.

#### *An Initial Elimination*

One potential misunderstanding has been clearly eliminated by Adler himself.

It is not a question of any present-day community or society, or of political or religious forms. On the contrary, the goal that is best suited for perfection must be a goal that stands for an ideal society amongst all mankind, the ultimate fulfillment of evolution (Adler, 1964, p. 275)

It is clear that commitment to some particular present-day society is not necessarily associated with mental health. Social interest is a much more abstract concept than that:

It means particularly the interest in, or feeling with, the community *sub specie aeternitatis* (under the aspect of eternity). It means the striving for a community which must be thought of as everlasting, as we could think of it if mankind had reached the goal of perfection (Ansbacher, 1956, p. 142)

#### SOCIAL INTEREST AS MOTIVE AND AS EFFECT

It is here that we begin to encounter difficulties with Adler's lack of precision; when we attempt to discern just what this "interest in" or "feeling with" that constitutes social interest really is, we discover multiple possibilities all of which can be supported within Adler's writings. Two possibilities that are particularly troublesome because Adler could be construed as having contradicted himself concerning them are social interest as *motive* and social interest as *effect*.

*Social Interest as Motive*

On the one hand, Adler speaks of social interest in terms of a "*striving* [emphasis added] for community" (Ansbacher, 1956, p. 142) or a "*struggle* [emphasis added] for a communal form" (Adler, 1964, p. 275). Social interest "is an innate potentiality which has to be *consciously* [emphasis added] developed" (Ansbacher, 1956, p. 134). Much of the support for social interest as conscious motive is not explicit, but rather implicit in the presuppositions of his discussions of the role of social interest in society, for example: "if the person understood how in evading the demands of evolution he had gone astray, then he would give up his present course and join the general mass of humanity" (Adler, 1964, p. 281). In discussing the possibility of error in social evolution, Adler states, "the only thing that can save us from being crucified on a harmful fiction . . . is the guiding star of universal welfare; under its lead we shall be more able to find the path without suffering any setbacks" (Adler, 1964, p. 278). It is easy to derive implications in these and other discussions that social interest is some kind of conscious and preeminent motive structure oriented toward universal welfare.

*Social Interest as Effect*

On the other hand, Adler is rather explicit in stating that social interest is not a motive, but rather an effect: "We are not speaking here of professed motives. We are closing our ears to professions and looking at achievements" (Ansbacher, 1956, p. 153). We read, for example, that "genius is to be defined as no more than supreme usefulness," "he is useful to culture," "if we apply the social measure to artists and poets, we note that they serve a social function more than anyone else." And, finally, that "this value . . . depends upon a high degree of courage and social interest" (all from Ansbacher, 1956, p. 153). Perhaps clearest of all is "the normal man is an individual who lives in society and whose mode of life is so adapted that, *whether he wants it or not* [emphasis added], society derives a certain advantage from his work" (Ansbacher, 1956, p. 154). Motives and intentions are not the point, consequences are.

*Analysis of Motive and Effect*

It is clear that on internal grounds we would be constrained to accept social interest as effect over social interest as motive if those were the only possibilities available; the evidence for social interest

as motive tends to be suggestive and indirect, while that for social interest as effect tends to be straightforward and direct. The apparent support for social interest as motive is possibly a manifestation of Adler's lack of differentiation between goals, assumptions, etc., as actual structures in consciousness, and similar concepts as descriptively useful fictions. In any case, we are not finished with the ontological explication of social interest for two reasons: (1) these are not the only possibilities available, and (2) there are independent reasons not only for rejecting social interest as motive, but for rejecting social interest as effect as well. The basis for rejection is, in both cases, a conflict between these ontological explications and the basic functional role that social interest is to serve in Adler's theory—as a foundation for the concept of mental health.

#### *Analysis of Social Interest as Motive*

Social interest as motive would imply that only those individuals were mentally healthy who were explicitly motivated to work toward the general welfare. This eliminates such apparently healthy primary motives as those toward truth, beauty, and so on, except insofar as these motives might be consciously derived from the even more primary motive of the general welfare. Social interest as motive would thus exclude from mental health probably the majority of people that one would reasonably want to consider mentally healthy.

If it is countered that motives directed toward such things as truth or beauty do not need to be explicitly and consciously derived from considerations of the general welfare in the healthy individual, because efforts toward such motives *do* in fact contribute to the general welfare, whether or not that is of consideration to the individual, then we have moved from social interest as motive to social interest as effect: these motives could "count" as social interest only because of their consequences.

#### *Analysis of Social Interest as Effect*

Social interest as effect fails as a foundation for mental health in two senses. First, it fails to select some people who would reasonably be considered mentally healthy; it underselects relative to mental health. Specifically, it fails to identify those who on other accounts would be considered healthy and who would have contributed to social evolution if it had not been for some exogenous intervention which destroyed the individual's efforts; e.g., a fire or earthquake

that destroys an artist's life work, or a war that eliminates a humanist's reforms, or simply an honest error in what the individual was attempting in the first place. The contributions of an individual's efforts are not entirely of his own making; they depend on extraneous "random" factors as well—the random or probabilistic factors of evolutionary selection.

The counter argument that social interest as effect involves not the actual and ultimate contribution an individual makes, but rather the involvement of the individual in activities that *tend* to make contributions to the general welfare—subject to the normal random selective processes of evolution—might seem to save social interest as effect from the charge of underselection, but it fails to avoid the second problem with respect to mental health; it identifies as healthy some people that could not be reasonably considered mentally healthy (i.e., it overselects relative to mental health). It is easily possible for someone to be highly motivated toward truth or beauty, for example, and even for them to have in fact made significant contributions, and still be quite neurotic; respective examples might be Isaac Newton and Edvard Munch. Social interest as effect thus either underselects or overselects relative to mental health, and thus fails as a critical explication.

#### *Social Interest as Tendency*

A possible redemption of the "social-interest-as-tendency-to-contribute" concept would be to argue that social interest is just exactly the biologically innate tendency for individuals to contribute to the evolution of the species' community. A tendency, of course, subject to the natural randomness of evolution. Thus, for example, "we conceive the idea of social interest, social feeling, as the ultimate form of mankind, a condition in which all questions of life, all relationship to the external world are solved. It is a normative ideal, a direction giving goal" (Ansbacher, 1973, p. 35). Social interest, in this passage, is the ultimate perfection of mankind, toward which social evolution is headed, such that "we shall approach a condition of larger contributions, of greater ability to cooperate, where every individual presents himself more fully as part of the whole" (Ansbacher, 1973, p. 35). And, finally, "we are in the midst of the stream of evolution, but we notice this as little as we do the spinning of the earth on its axis" (Adler, 1964, pp. 271-272).

Relating this ontological concept of social interest to mental health, however, turns out to be rather difficult. Clearly it is not

desirable to include the tendency of mentally unhealthy individuals to make social contributions in the concept of social interest, for then social interest as a concept would again overaccept relative to mental health. Therefore, it is necessary to describe social interest as the evolutionary tendency of *mentally healthy* individuals to make contributions to the community of mankind. This explication suffers neither from overselection—by definition—nor from underselection. It is consistent with Adler, and, in addition, probably true that all mentally healthy individuals have an innately based tendency to contribute to social evolution. Thus explicated, it is consistent functionally and consistent with Adler, but involves us in a trivial circularity if we attempt to found the concept of mental health upon it: mental health has been used in the explication. It is functionally consistent, but functionally useless—we are forced to some independent basis for explicating mental health. Thus stripped of its primary functional role, as a foundation for mental health, the concept of social interest would become a rather minor appendage to Adler's theory. Such a trivial role is hardly consistent with Adler at all, and in fact, does not do justice to the insights contained in the concept.

At this point in this paper, however, we have not indicated those insights. Three conceivable ontological explications of social interest have been considered, all initially plausible and supportable to varying degrees within Adler's writings, and all have been found upon analysis to be unacceptable.\*

#### AN ALTERNATIVE STRATEGY

In Adler's most concise definition, social interest

means feeling with the whole, . . . under the aspect of eternity. It means striving for a form of community which must be thought of as everlasting, as it could be thought of if mankind had reached the goal of perfection. (Ansbacher, 1973, pp. 34-35)

We have been to this point primarily considering possible interpretations of such words as "feeling" and "striving," without success. That is, we have been exploring what kind of an activity or process social interest might be. An alternative strategy would be to consider such words as "whole" or "community"—to explore the object or goal of

\*Note that it is not crucial to the preceding arguments that Adler actually intended the interpretations presented. It is sufficient that he may be construed as supporting these interpretations to require their consideration and rebuttal.

the activity—and perhaps to infer the nature of this activity from its object.\*,\*\*As discussed earlier, one possible object has already been explicitly ruled out by Adler—particular present day societies.

### SOCIAL AND INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE

Another possible object for social interest (another potential interpretation of “community under the aspect of eternity”) might be the perfect society in the sense of the perfect social and institutional structure of a culminated social evolution. Clearly, social evolution is not likely to ever actually culminate, but all Adler needs to successfully provide an object for social interest is a useful fiction, a “normative ideal,” and he need not make any particular assumptions about any actual culmination. In accordance with this, we find: “Never can the individual be the goal of the ideal of perfection, but only mankind as a *cooperating community*” (Ansbacher, 1973, p. 40). Adler writes that a real fellow creature must cooperate for the amelioration of the wrongs of the community “and further that he must not expect this amelioration to be brought about by some mythical tendency to evolve, or through the efforts of other people” (Adler, 1964, p. 282). Obviously, no one can expect to know what the ultimate social form might be—“It is obvious that we are concerned not with the possession of truth, but with the struggle for it” (Adler, 1964, p. 279)—but, under the lead of the concept of social interest, “we shall be more able to find the path without suffering any setbacks” (Adler, 1964, p. 278).\*\*\*

The primary difficulty with ideal social and institutional structure as the object of social interest is that it seems impossible to accept this object without also accepting social interest as a motive at the level of individual activity, and we immediately encounter the previously discussed difficulties. Although it is difficult to imagine work-

\*Note that social interest purely as evolutionary tendency has no activity, only an object. It is essentially this lack of an independent conceptualization at the level of activity, process or capacity, i.e., something resident in the individual, that prevents social interest as tendency from adequately capturing Adler's intentions, either ontological or functional.

\* \*This distinction between the object and the process of social interest is essentially the same as that in Ansbacher, 1968.

\*\*\*Here we find Adler's explicit consideration of the basic randomness of evolutionary selection. The path to truth is not certain or guaranteed; there are, instead, optimal strategies in the face of basic uncertainties.

ing toward some ideal institutional structure without some corresponding motive, with some stretching we might coordinate this object with the activity or process of social interest as effect, but again we encounter previously discussed functional problems regarding the identification of mental health. In general, it is difficult to imagine how the concept of ideal social and institutional structures can constitute all or even part of the definition of individual mental health no matter what activity it might be combined with. It is also worth noting that, although Adler wrote a great deal about the elimination of specific social problems such as war, prejudice, etc., he did not himself venture into speculations about ideal social and institutional structures per se. Perfection of social structure, then, is not an acceptable object of social interest.

#### MAN AS SOCIUS AND MAN AS HUMAN

It is perhaps of significance that the German word which is translated as social interest is *Gemeinschaftsgefühl* and not *Gesellschaftsgefühl*—that is, feeling for “community” rather than a feeling for “society.” Besides giving us further reason to reject ideal institutional structure as the object of social interest, this choice of Adler’s (and the fact that it is a choice within the German language) provides an additional suggestion concerning the object or goal of social interest—the ideal community of man in precisely a noninstitutional sense of community: the ideal interpersonal fellowship of man, or the ideal man as human being.

Actually, we again have more than one possibility: (1) the ideal of man as interpersonal being, which I will term “man-as-socius,”\* and (2) the ideal of man as human being, which I will term “man-as-human.” Man-as-socius refers to man’s capability of relating to and interacting with other human beings, while man-as-human refers to that broader class of particularly human potentialities which would include man-as-socius, but would also include, for example, such potentialities as encountering and transcending one’s individual finitude, or deriving meaning from one’s own experience. Thus man-as-human is at the same time broader and less specific than man-as-socius.

\*Socius: A companion, an associate, a member.



*Man-As-Socius*

Again there is support within Adler's writing for alternative interpretations of social interest. Thus, concerning man-as-socius, we find in Adler's strongest comments that social interest "means a striving for a *form* [emphasis added] of community" (Ansbacher, 1973, p. 34), a form of community in which "the individual [can never] be the ideal of perfection, but only mankind as a *cooperating community*" (Ansbacher, 1973, p. 40). In conjunction with such support for man-as-socius as an object of social interest, we also find support for a complementary process or capacity: "We see immediately that this ability coincides in part with what we call identification or empathy" (Ansbacher, 1956, p. 136), and "All of the problems of human life demand, as I have said, capacity for cooperation and preparation for it—the visible sign of social feeling. In this disposition courage and happiness are included" (Adler, 1964, p. 284). Thus social interest appears to be an ability for identification or empathy, which constitutes a capacity for cooperation, which in turn permits a participation in the evolution toward an ideal cooperating community.

*Man-As-Human*

Concerning man-as-human, the search for textual support must be somewhat more careful than usual; if man-as-socius is included as part of man-as-human, then support for man-as-socius is ipso facto support for man-as-human per se. But we seek support not simply for man-as-human per se, but rather for man-as-human as differentiated from man-as-socius. Thus we must find support for at least some of those characteristics of man-as-human that are not part of man-as-socius; e.g., issues of individual meaningfulness.

Accordingly, we find "what happens to those persons who have contributed nothing? They have disappeared, have become extinct" (Ansbacher, 1973, p. 36) and, even more clearly,

What has happened to those people who have contributed nothing to the general welfare? . . . They have disappeared completely. Nothing remains of them. . . . It is as though the questioning cosmos had given the command: "Away with you! You have not grasped the meaning of life. You cannot endure into the future!" (Adler, 1964, p. 279)

The intended relevance of social interest to issues of life's meaning, and thus to man-to-human, is apparent. In support of man-as-human as object of social interest, we also find a strong emphasis in Adler's

writings on a complementary capacity: the creative power of the individual, the power of individual choice (e.g., Ansbacher, 1973, pp. 86-87, 293-295).

Thus we find support in terms of object and support in terms of capacity for both man-as-socius and man-as-human. We are thus again confronted with two candidates for the ontological explication of social interest. Optimally, we could now, as before, turn to functional considerations to clarify and select between them. This is, in fact, what is intended, but the involvement of functional considerations in the issues of man-as-socius and man-as-human is much broader and more complex than with previous issues, and will require, before we proceed on the ontological level, a further explication of the functional characteristics involved.

#### FUNCTIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

There are, in fact, three primary functions which Adler attempts to make the concept of social interest serve: (1) as the foundation for morality and moral judgment, (2) as the foundation for human meaningfulness, and (3) as the foundation for mental health. Furthermore, the sense of "foundation" in these functions appears to be the same in all three cases: (1) social interest *is* morality, meaningfulness, and mental health—that is, they are identical kinds of things, and (2) social interest is both necessary and sufficient for morality, meaningfulness, and mental health—that is, social interest is implied by each of the three, and conversely, each is implied by social interest. Taken literally, these functions would together imply that social interest, morality, meaningfulness, and mental health were all different names for the same concept. This is *prima facie* absurd, and thus there must be an error or errors in the argument; examination will show that there are, in fact, errors regarding all three functions, but that they are not the same in all three cases.

##### 1. *Morality*

Concerning the identification of social interest with morality, Adler states that "What we call good or bad character can be judged only from the viewpoint of the community" (Ansbacher, 1956, p. 130) and notes that:

If there exists, at least to some extent, a reliable knowledge of that meaning of life which lies beyond our own experience, then it is

clear that this puts those persons in the wrong who flagrantly contradict it. (Adler, 1964, pp. 16-17)

Note that those individuals who contradict the meaning of life are not simply in error, they are wrong. In context, it is clear that the meaning of life referred to is social interest—thus, it is wrong to violate the principles or characteristics of social interest, or, conversely, to develop social interest as a moral imperative. Since social interest is also the criterion for mental health, we also find that to develop mental health is a moral imperative, i.e., psychopathology is by the nature of things always also moral guilt. By thus construing social interest as criterion for both ethical value and mental health, Adler both explains and justifies his pervasive willingness to moralize issues of mental health and mental illness: failures in mental health are always also failures in social interest which, in turn, are always failures in morality.

*Objections.* There are a number of problems with this. To begin, it is questionable what proper role moral evaluations have in a theory of personality and mental health in the first place. Second, Adler does not develop any arguments for this purported function of social interest; it is rather a claim supported by the unexamined assumptions in Adler's style and usage. Third, the truth of claim is not obvious—it seems easy enough to think of psychopathologies that do not obviously involve ethical failures (e.g., a simple phobia) and thus the claim, even if true, requires argument. Fourth, it is possible to think of examples (e.g., childhood autism) for which the claim seems exceedingly implausible and thus, in the absence of serious counterargument, it must be considered disproven.

*Category Error.* There is a fifth and even more fundamental objection that does not directly involve considerations of mental health, but is rather intrinsic to the identification of morality with social interest. It is a common philosophical claim that issues of ethics cannot proceed solely from issues of fact; you cannot derive "ought" from "is," and to attempt to do so is to confuse completely different kinds or levels of discourse—it is to commit what is called a category error, a confusion of fundamental categories. Adler's claim either violates this philosophical position, and thus requires extensive (and absent) rebuttal of philosophical arguments, or else it makes both social interest and morality not matters of the factual relationship between an individual and his world, but rather pure matters of value judgment. Thus, the conceptual content of social interest would lose

contact with the basic factual characteristics of an individual's relationship to the world—it would be impossible to arrive at a value-free understanding of an individual's social interest. This position would seem to be consonant with some of Adler's discussion, such as those in which he moralizes social interest: "and thus each separate individual is not only responsible for every deviation from it [the social ideal] but has also to expiate it" (Adler, 1964, p. 283), but in direct contradiction to others:

In Individual Psychology all irrefutable facts of experience are looked at and understood from this point of view [that of social feeling], and its scientific system has been developed under the pressure of these experiential facts. . . . Individual Psychology has done all that is necessary to satisfy the demands of a rigorous scientific doctrine. . . . If I am venturing now to maintain the right of Individual Psychology to be accepted as a view of the universe, since I use it for the purpose of explaining the meaning of life, I have to exclude all moral and religious conceptions that judge between virtue and vice. (Adler, 1964, pp. 276-277)

Clearly, Adler is involved in internal contradictions concerning social interest and morality.

With regard to the identification of social interest with mental health, this separation from basic facts would imply that it is not possible to make a value free judgment that an individual is in a dysfunctional relationship with his environment; or in other words, that all conceivable judgments of dysfunction are value laden. It is clear that some judgments of dysfunction are value laden, but the implication that all such judgments are necessarily so is highly dubious, and, at a minimum, requires extensive argument in its own right.

In view of these arguments and internal contradictions, and in the absence of any counterarguments, it is necessary to conclude that, at a minimum, Adler did not avoid the objection that there is a category error in his conceptualization of morality. Without a construction that successfully deals with this objection, there can be no satisfactory definition of morality in Adler, for he attempts to define it directly in terms of social interest, which is precisely what must be rejected. This error, incidentally, seems to have definite consequences in Adler's thought; it has the form of a definition of ethical content, but in fact is a definitional tautology without content. Thus, Adler's concepts of both social interest and ethical nature are open to unexamined elements from his own private ethical beliefs, e.g., his

characterization of homosexuality and masturbation as perversions (e.g., Ansbacher, 1956, pp. 424-427).

*Developmental Necessity.* Adler's identification of social interest with morality intrinsically involves a claim of the logical necessity and logical sufficiency of each for the other. In the process of rejecting this identification, we have also rejected this claim of necessity and sufficiency.\* But these are not the only possibilities, and, in particular, we find in Adler's writing the notion that the development of social interest is prerequisite to the development of morality in the individual—a developmental necessity rather than a logical necessity. Thus, we find Furtmüller contending that

according to this view, ethics and mental hygiene arrive at a particularly close relationship. It is not as if ethics could be a means toward mental health. On the contrary, mental health appears rather to be a prerequisite for genuine ethics. (Ansbacher, 1956, p. 148)

And Adler echoes that "the ethical nature . . . will always be founded upon the truest social feeling" (Ansbacher, 1956, p. 155). Such a hypothesized relationship between social development and moral development is, as a matter of fact, supported by current research (e.g., Kohlberg, 1969). However, this explanatory function could possibly be of use to us in explicating the concept of social interest only if we had some independent explication of "ethical nature" against which we could test potential versions of social interest. We have just rejected Adler's explication,\*\* but research and analysis from other areas could in principle, of course, provide such an independent explication. Suffice it to say that, with respect to its developmental necessity for individual morality, the research mentioned earlier (Kohlberg, 1969), as well as other research in the area, would seem to be interpretable as supporting *either* man-as-socius or man-as-human as explications of social interest.

*Developmental Sufficiency.* Adler does not seem to have made the claim for the developmental *sufficiency* of social interest for morality.

\*Note that this does not necessarily exclude some such implicational relationship, but that such a relationship would have to derive from a definition of morality beyond that contained in Adler's writings.

\*\*In any case, Adler's explication of "ethical nature" is not independent of social interest, it is rather defined in terms of it. Note that by thus claiming both the logical and the developmental necessity of social interest for morality, we become involved in still another circularity.

But, if we make it for him by extension from his implicit argument for logical sufficiency, we find, in my opinion, that Kohlberg (1969) and others would provide a stronger foundation for man-as-human as explicating social interest than for man-as-socius. We are by now, however, far afield from the direct contents of Adler's writings, and my above stated opinion would in any case require extensive development of its own. So any such purported support for man-as-human must be considered to be minimal.

Altogether, the ethical function of social interest in Adler's theory would seem not only to be in error, but also not particularly useful in attempting to understand social interest.

## 2. *Meaning*

The situation regarding the second theoretical function of the concept of social interest, that is, as a source of human meaningfulness, is complicated in a special way. If we reexamine a critical quote,

What has happened to those people who have contributed nothing to the general welfare? Nothing remains of them. . . . It is as though the questioning cosmos had given the command: "Away with you! You have not grasped the meaning of life. You cannot endure into the future!" (Adler, 1964, p. 279),

we find not only a concern with the issue of meaningfulness, the point drawn earlier, but a concern of a very specific form. That is, Adler might seem to imply that the meaning of an individual's life derives from society, that the only source of human meaning is participation in, and thus endurance or continuance through, social evolution. It is as if social evolution is the only access an individual has to eternity, and eternity is the ultimate core of meaning. In support of this view of social evolution as the source of meaning, we find such comments as

the individual's proper development can only progress if he lives and strives as a part of the whole. The shallow objections of individualistic systems have no meaning as against this view (Adler, 1964, p. 282),

and, "never can the individual be the goal of the ideal of perfection" (Ansbacher, 1973, p. 40).

*Relevance to Man-as-Socius and Man-as-Human.* The special point to be made regarding this view of meaning is that it contradicts the

earlier discussion upon which the distinction between man-as-socius and man-as-human is based. Thus, if those characteristics of man-as-human which I claimed *differentiated* it from man-as-socius are instead in fact *derived* from or identified with man-as-socius, then there is no differentiation, and man-as-human equals man-as-socius. Correspondingly, the two alternative explications of social interest with which we are faced would instead be one, and the task of explication would be much simplified. Thus, it becomes immediately critical to examine this potential construal of Adler's position, to examine this purported function of the concept of social interest.

An initial presupposition of this formulation is that meaning exists independently of and external to any particular individual; meaning is "out there" in some external and eternal, perhaps platonic, form, and the individual may "choose" to draw upon this meaning, to partake of it, and thus to provide meaning for his life. The individual may insert his life in the framework of meaning, or the individual may "choose" to not partake of meaning, and, correspondingly, to live meaninglessly. In fact, Adler implies meaning is "out there" in the specific form of social evolution and the culmination toward which it tends, and to partake of it is identical to participating in this evolution.

There are at least two levels upon which this conceptualization of meaningfulness can be criticized, and it seems fatally flawed on both levels: (1) the assumption of the externality of meaning, and (2) the particular external form that Adler gives it.

*Externality of Meaning.* Concerning the externality of meaning: meaning would seem to be a particularly human property, a property bestowed on various parts and characteristics of an individual's experience by that individual himself. That is, meaning is specific to the individual who provides it. It is derived from the individual, not the other way around; its source is internal, not external. It is not at all clear what the nature of meaning could possibly be that would be consistent with its being derived externally.\* These sentences, of course, do not really constitute an argument, and even less a definitive argument, but they are rather representative of the conclusions reached by vast literatures of analyses and arguments (e.g., Merleau-Ponty, 1963; Schutz, 1967; Spiegelberg, 1971) with which this interpretation of Adler is in contradiction. As once before, in the

\*Thus, the assumption of the externality of meaning is a category error.

absence of meaningful counterargument—and Adler's consists simply of the dismissal of "the shallow objections of individualistic systems" (Adler, 1964, p. 282)—we must consider this assumption disproven.

*Social Evolution and Meaning.* Concerning social evolution as the particular source of meaning, we may ask why social evolution should be presumed to have any intrinsic meaning at all? Why should it have any more meaning than might be derived from individual human existence? How would or could Adler counter the charge that social evolution, or biological evolution in general, is intrinsically absurd and meaningless? The only hint of an answer that seems extractable from Adler is that social evolution is the individual's only access to the eternal, the only opportunity to "endure"; which raises still further problems. First, why should we presume that the eternal, in the sense of "endurance," has any intrinsic meaning? Secondly, even if we accept that it might, the fact of the matter is that participation in social evolution does not at all insure such endurance. In fact, this argument has the same structure as that for social interest as effect and the same flaw, the randomness of evolution. To assume that meaningfulness depends on continuity through contributions to social evolution is to assume that the meaningfulness of an individual's life is at least in part dependent on factors not of his own making; it is to assume that an individual could be perfect in every other respect, but that accidents of history, geology, or whatever, could render his life meaningless. Such a pessimism of randomness hardly seems consistent with Adler's concept of meaningfulness, and, for that matter, seems inconsistent with the positive spirit of much of the rest of Adler's writings.

Furthermore, the basic argument shares another flaw with that for social interest as effect; it not only fails to include genuinely meaningful lives because of the randomness of evolution, it also includes lives not genuinely meaningful. Contribution to social evolution is no more dependent on living a meaningful life than it is on living a mentally healthy life. Thus, Adler's criterion would have us considering many unactualized, perhaps even evil, people as living meaningful lives by "virtue" of their contributions to social evolution.

*A Revision.* It might be conceded that meaningfulness does not derive per se from any external source, let alone from social evolution; and it might be conceded that meaningfulness derives from the choices of actions and interpretations from which the individual constructs his life, but then countered that, among the possible choices



an individual could make, only those which do in some sense involve the individual in the process of social evolution are, in fact, meaningful, and that this constitutes the core of Adler's position. Thus meaningfulness derives from the choice or the choosing, rather than flowing from the chosen, but that some choices are meaningful—those that involve the individual in social evolution—and some are not. This position clearly is not subject to the criticisms of externality, nor is it subject to the simple randomness criticism—it does not depend on endurance, only choice—nor, for the same reason, is it subject to the simple overselection criticism. It is a much more subtle and acceptable position, and probably truer to the basic spirit of Adler, though it contradicts some of his statements.

Though still probably wrong (e.g., it would seem highly desirable to speak of an individual deriving meaning from his confrontation with the fact of his own finitude, and that would not seem to have much to do with choosing to participate in social evolution), the revised position is nevertheless suggestive and stimulating and would be worth pursuing. But it need not be pursued now, for the main point at issue has already been conceded: meaning derives internally, from individual choice, not externally. Individual choice is not a social process, and it is in every sense prior to an individual's participation in that process; thus there is an aspect of man-as-human that is not encompassed within man-as-socius, man-as-human is differentiated from man-as-socius, and we are again faced with two alternative explications of social interest.

*Man-as-Socius and Man-as-Human Intact.* The original "pure" version of Adler's construal of social interest as source of meaning is unacceptable, and thus is not useful to the explication of social interest. The revised version is not so clearly in error, but is not able to help much in the analysis of the man-as-socius and man-as-human alternatives for a different reason; insofar as we focus strictly on the derivation of meaning from the act of choosing, we derive meaning from a specifically man-as-human characteristic, and would seem to lend support primarily to that alternative. But, in fact, even with the revisions suggested, it is clear that Adler's focus regarding the source of meaning is on the chosen, not the choosing. Specifically, it is on the participation in social evolution. It is precisely Adler's interpretation of social evolution that we are trying to explicate, because social interest is the aptitude for or process of participating in that social evolution. Thus meaning is derived from the "choice" to develop

social interest, the "choice" to participate in social evolution; that is, to participate either in the evolution as man-as-socius *or* of man-as-human, and still we don't know which.

*Necessity and Sufficiency.* Regarding the issues of necessity and sufficiency, the identification of the development of social interest with meaningfulness involves an assumption of the logical necessity and sufficiency of social interest to meaningfulness. Although Adler does not seem to have made any explicit claims of necessity or sufficiency in this or any other sense, we could, in principle, make them for him (e.g., in a logical or developmental sense), but to do so we would find ourselves involved again in issues of great complexity far afield from Adler's writings; any implications regarding the explication of social interest would be weak at best.

Thus far we have examined two of the purported theoretical functions of the concept of social interest: as the foundation for morality and as the foundation for human meaningfulness. Neither of these functions has proven useful in explicating social interest. Both, in fact, were found to involve fundamental errors. We turn to the third theoretical function, then, social interest as the foundation for mental health, with man-as-socius and man-as-human both still viable as potential explications of social interest.

### 3. *Mental Health*

Adler's position regarding the relationship between social interest and mental health is easily summarized:

In a neurosis we are always confronted with a highly placed goal of personal superiority. . . . That such a . . . goal of personal superiority betokens a lack of the proper measure of social interest . . . is understandable. The striving for personal superiority and the non-development of social interest are both mistakes. However, they are not two mistakes which the individual has made; they are one and the same mistake. (Ansbacher, 1956, pp. 240-241)

All failures—neurotics, psychotics, criminals, drunkards, problem children, suicides, perverts, and prostitutes—are failures because they are lacking in social interest. (Ansbacher, 1956, p. 156).

. . . all that constitutes a failure is so because it obstructs social feeling. (Adler, 1964, p. 283)

Thus, we clearly see both Adler's basic identification of social interest with mental health, as well as the more specific implications of social interest being both necessary and sufficient for mental health.

*No Category Error.* The concepts of mental health and mental illness involve issues of the functionality and dysfunctionality of the psychological processes in the individual. The concept of social interest involves an aptitude for some kind of positive functioning of the individual; man-as-socius and man-as-human specify the current alternatives concerning just what kind of positive functioning. Thus social interest, a positive functioning, would seem compatible with mental health, also a positive functioning, while lack of social interest, a negative functioning, would seem to be compatible with mental illness, also a negative functioning. Thus, there would not seem to be any category error involved.

Accepting that there is no category error, however, is not necessarily accepting a full identification of the terms. A lack of category error implies that the two concepts are of the same kind; it does not necessarily imply that they are identical. In particular, it does not imply either necessity or sufficiency—thus, further analysis is required. In this analysis, we have our last opportunity to select between man-as-socius and man-as-human as explications of social interest.\*

*Necessity.* Concerning the issue of necessity, the basic question is whether or not it is conceivable that an individual could be mentally healthy without having a developed social interest. If so, then social interest is not necessary to mental health. With regard to man-as-socius, the answer would seem to be that it is conceivable, but only with rather forced exceptions; e.g., an isolated child raised solely by machines in some science fiction future might be mentally healthy but with no capacity for relatedness. Obviously, even this strained example is contestable. Regarding man-as-human, the answer would seem to be clearly negative. It seems inconceivable that an individual with no sense of meaningfulness of himself or his actions could be regarded as mentally healthy. Thus, both the categorical compatibility of social interest and mental health, and the relationship of necessity between them, seem to be well supported, but supported in ways that do not much differentiate between man-as-socius and man-as-human. Only in a very marginal way would man-as-human seem to be more strongly supported than man-as-socius.

\*Recall that man-as-socius refers to man's capabilities as an interpersonal being, and man-as-human to a being with broader human potentialities, including such differentiating potentialities as those for meaningfulness.

*Sufficiency.* Concerning the issue of sufficiency, the situation is somewhat different. To argue that the development of man-as-human is sufficient to the development of mental health seems quite easy—to argue otherwise would require the specification of some sense in which being fully human does not imply being mentally healthy, or, conversely, some sense in which it were possible to fail to be mentally healthy that does not also involve a failure to be fully human. The implausibility of this suggests that man-as-human is indeed sufficient to mental health. With regard to man-as-socius, however, we have already seen that a characteristic *not* encompassed by this explication is necessary to mental health—in particular, meaningfulness—but this immediately implies that man-as-socius cannot by itself be sufficient. Thus, for the first time, and with the last possible opportunity, we seem to have a clear functional selection of one possible explication of social interest over the other—of man-as-human over man-as-socius.

#### OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Unfortunately, again the situation is not as simple as would be desired. We have shown that in order to serve the legitimate functions which Adler wants the concept of social interest to serve, it must be explicated as man-as-human. We have also shown that man-as-human is an initially plausible explication of social interest, and, in fact, that Adler explicitly considered a differentiating characteristic of man-as-human—namely, meaningfulness. Functional considerations, however, are not the only ones present. In particular, we have furthermore shown that Adler's introduction of meaningfulness was fundamentally in error: that he introduced it in such a way as to reduce man-as-human, with some capacity to internally derive meaning, to man-as-socius, with no such capacity, thus eliminating man-as-human as a possibility. Also, it is clear in Adler's writing that, although concern for the issue of meaningfulness is often present, it is far overshadowed by Adler's pervasive concern for man-as-socius, that is, for the particular issue of man's capacity for fellowship and cooperation. The extreme generality of the concept of man-as-human would thus blur Adler's primary focus.

Overall, a case can be made for the explication of social interest either as man-as-socius or as man-as-human. Clearly, the concepts are different, though related. Therefore, social interest must be explicated as one and not the other. The case for man-as-socius is notice-

ably stronger than the case for man-as-human; explicating social interest in terms of man-as-socius does some damage to the theoretical functions that Adler wanted it to serve (in particular, it cannot by itself be considered sufficient to mental health), but explicating it in terms of man-as-human would do extensive damage to Adler's position regarding the nature of meaningfulness and would distort Adler's discussions regarding social interest. In this regard, we note the following comments from Ansbacher:

The term social interest denotes the innate aptitude through which the individual becomes responsive to reality, which is *primarily* the social situation. In Adler's mature theory, social interest is not a second dynamic force counterbalancing a striving for superiority. Like other psychological processes or traits, it is *a part* of the individual's equipment, although the most important part. It is used by him in his striving for superiority or perfection, which in itself is *socially neutral*. [emphasis added] (Ansbacher, 1956, p. 133)

Clearly, we find here confirmatory recognition that (1) the primary focus of social interest is the social situation—man-as-socius; and (2) there are human characteristics—e.g., the striving for perfection—that are beyond or prior to the characteristics of social interest.

#### SUMMARY

The discussion has concerned itself with five potential explications of social interest, considered in two primary groups: (1) social interest as motive, (2) social interest as effect, and (3) social interest as tendency to contribute, followed by (4) man-as-socius, and (5) man-as-human. It was argued that the first three candidates involve essential misunderstandings of the functional role that social interest serves in Adler's theory.\* The latter two possibilities, however, require the involvement of issues at the center of Adler's theory for their resolution. The resolution is not clearcut; what Adler functionally demanded of social interest requires it to be man-as-human; yet what Adler said about the nature of social interest requires it to be man-as-socius. Man-as-socius was chosen as the most appropriate explication.

\*Ideal social and institutional structure as a potential object of social interest was found to reduce to either social interest as motive or as effect in terms of process, and thus to be unacceptable for the same reasons.

In the course of the analysis of social interest, a number of important additional issues have been encountered and left for later resolution. First, although the ontological outlines of social interest have been delineated, we are provided at best with a framework for an ultimate understanding of its ontological nature. We know that social interest involves an innate potential for the development of the capacity for cooperative fellowship, but we do not know of what that potential, or that development, or that capacity consists. It was Adler's insight to recognize that social fellowship requires its own cognitive and motivational prerequisites; it remains for others to specify what those prerequisites are.\*

Another issue left unresolved is the relationship of social interest to morality. A human ethic must be grounded on the existence of choice and freedom within the framework of human nature.\*\* Adler's recognition of choice is explicit, and his discussions of social interest constitute a primary contribution to the understanding of human nature; the task of deriving an ethic remains.

A connected topic is the relationship of evolution to ethics. Human nature ultimately rests on human evolution; the precise nature of their relationship to ethics, however, is subtle and complex, and is still an issue of disagreement (see, for example, Simpson, 1949). As Adler foresaw, a valid ethic must ultimately fit consistently in an evolutionary framework.

The issue of the relationship of social interest to meaningfulness has also been raised by Adler. It would seem clear that human fellowship can manifest a powerful participation in an individual's construction of a meaningful life, but the opportunities and limitations of that participation have not been as well developed. Schutz (1967) argues that meaning is given in the manner in which we regard our experiences and actions, but there is no argument that such meaning is unboundedly and uniformly arbitrary. The structure of potential

\*Note that any attempt to assist the development of social interest in children, a vital Adlerian concern, must of necessity be guided by at least implicit hypotheses concerning these ontological questions. The sizeable literature in this area thus already begins such a specification. Kohlberg (1969) presents a highly relevant discussion from outside the Adlerian tradition.

\*\*It should be noted that such a dual foundation for ethics would be contrary to Sartre, for example, who claims that the realm of human nature is created purely out of man's freedom—in effect, that man has no human nature (Spiegelberg, 1971). Sartre's position does not seem to be tenable, since it would seem to leave no ground upon which one could avoid an ethical nihilism. Adler's concept of social interest could provide an essential correction.

meaning must in some sense be framed by the nature of being human, and thus must reflect the existence of social interest, and must, as with ethics, fit consistently in an evolutionary framework.

Finally, the relationship of social interest to mental health provides its own special directions for further exploration. Social interest does not cause mental health, nor does it explain it. Conversely, failures of social interest do not cause or explain failures of mental health; social interest is a (partial) *explication* of mental health, a definition. It describes what mental health *is*, not why it develops nor where it comes from. The theoretical function of explanation, causal or otherwise, must be served by other elements of the theory. For these functions we turn to such concepts as the inferiority (symptom) complex and the striving for personal superiority. The question concerning the precise manner in which these concepts explain failures in the development of social interest, and thus failures in the development of mental health, initiates the explication of other portions of Adler's theory.

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