

FUNCTIONALISM IN ADLERIAN PSYCHOLOGY

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Vaihinger's philosophy of the "as if" was an important influence on the development of Adler's thought. It provided encouragement and a philosophical foundation for Adler's move away from Freud's mechanistic and biological focus to Individual Psychology's characteristic teleological and subjective focus (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964, pp. 87-90). Adler's debt to the philosophy of the "as if," however, is not fully characterized by the terms "teleology" and "subjectivity," for, though they accurately contrast with Freud's orientation—with what Adler was moving away from—they require further explication of their own. I wish to suggest that a major aspect of Adler's usage of the "as if" was to address what would nowadays be called a functional analysis of human existence, and, in turn, that modern conceptions of functional analysis can help clarify the Adlerian conceptualizations of subjectivity, teleology, and the unconscious.

The Philosophy of the "As If"

The philosophy of the "as if" might also be termed the philosophy of the useful fiction. It points out that fictions which are not necessarily true of the real world may nevertheless be quite useful in dealing with that world, such as the fiction that magnetic compass needles point to true north. Furthermore, and more fundamentally, Vaihinger points out that such fictions are not only useful but that they are absolutely necessary in our dealings with the world, for our very conceptual categories of light and dark, stone and tree, good and bad, are not inherent in the world which they are about but, rather, are creations of the mind—fictions if you will—that we necessarily bring to that world. We treat the world "as if" it contained categories of light and dark, lines of longitude and latitude, average temperatures and average men, and we must so treat it because we have access to the world only through such fictions.

There are two basic aspects of Vaihinger's fictions which must be differentiated in a consideration of his influence on Adler. The first is that fictions are the creative products of mind—of subjectivity—

and that they are not necessarily conscious products. The recognition of the reality, usefulness, and necessity of such created fictions gave Adler an entree into the realm of the subjective. It was within this subjective realm that an acceptable approach to the teleological could be found: subjective goals provided a conceptualization of teleology without the assumption of an influence of the future upon the present. Thus, both subjectivity and teleology as characteristics of Individual Psychology grew out of this first creative product aspect of *Vaihinger's* fictions.

The second aspect of fictions is their relationship to hypotheses. The primary difference between fictions and hypotheses is in terms of the criteria by which they are judged. We ask of a hypothesis that it be verified or confirmed; we ask of a fiction that it be useful and expedient. Their basic unity beyond this difference is seen in the fact that "what is untenable as an hypothesis can often render excellent service as a fiction" (*Vaihinger* in *Ansbacher & Ansbacher*, 1964, p. 82). Thus, a fiction can serve as a working hypothesis—a heuristic fiction—in approaching some subject matter, even if untenable as a strict hypothesis. For example, "the fictional goal was . . . used by Adler . . . as a heuristic concept in that he regarded the individual 'as if' he were striving toward a final goal" (*Ansbacher & Ansbacher*, 1964, p. 90).

For the purpose of my consideration of Adlerian psychology, these two aspects of *Vaihinger's* philosophy of the "as if" can be construed as: (a) fictions as subjective creations—potentially teleological and unconscious—which every individual brings to the process of living, and (b) fictions as heuristic working hypotheses which the psychologist or psychotherapist brings to his or her subject matter. There is a potential confusion involved in these two aspects of fictions in the fact that an Adlerian psychologist may be making use of both of them at the same time. In particular, the Adlerian psychologist will commonly be constructing heuristic hypothesis fictions about the subjective fictions of his subjects or clients. Within such a structure of fictions about fictions, it is not difficult to lose clarity about whose fictions, the psychologist's or the subject's, are being considered, and about the boundary between fiction and strict hypothesis. I wish to suggest that Adlerian psychology has, in fact, developed some confusions concerning fictions about fictions, and that functional analysis can help to clarify them.

The Unconscious as Reified "As If"

What has happened is that some of the subjective fictions that an Adlerian might attribute to a client or subject are real creations of that individual, and some are not, but the Adlerian tends to treat them all on an equal basis—as all equally real. The Adlerian, in other words, has tended to forget the fictive status of his own theoretical conceptualizations.

The basic move can be illustrated with the concept of the fictional final goal. "Several years later, Adler dropped [the heuristic] connotation from his use of the word fictional. . . . Eventually [he] relinquished the term fictional altogether when speaking of the goal" (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964, p. 90). Thus, the status of the final goal as a heuristic fiction of the psychologist was eroded and lost.

Adler, of course, felt that "the goal-striving of the psyche is not only our [heuristic] view but also a basic fact" (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964, p. 90). That is, Adler shifted the final goal from the status of a heuristic fiction to that of a verified hypothesis—a fact.

But, this move from heuristic fiction to fact encounters fundamental difficulties. If the final goal is a fact about the subjective fictions of individuals—a fact about the creations of those individuals—then why don't they remember those creations; why is it so difficult to come to know one's own goal? After all, we don't have so much trouble remembering our decisions to go to the store, or to college, or to get married. Why should remembering the most important goal decision of our living be so problematic?

Adler's answer is that the final goal, or at least most of it, is unconscious. What does that mean? "The unconscious is nothing other than that which we have been unable to formulate in clear concepts. These concepts are not hiding away in some unconscious or subconscious recesses of our minds, but are those parts of our consciousness of which we have not fully understood the significance" (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1973, p. 93). Thus, we are not aware of our final goal—and certain other of our subjective creations—because they are unconscious, that is, because they are not understood.

Clearly there are problems here. How can we possibly choose a goal, construct a lifestyle, adopt an assumption, create any of our subjective fictions, and not be aware of them, not understand our having done so? Adler makes clear the unacceptability of the notion

that we have repressed the memories of such creative acts into various dark recesses of our minds, but he doesn't offer an alternative. What has happened is that certain ideas about the individual's subjective fictions, which we might consider simply as heuristic fictions on the part of the psychologist precisely *because* the individual is not aware of them, are instead treated as *facts* about the individual's subjective fictions about which the individual is unconscious. But what is never addressed is how it is possible for there to be such central components and aspects of our subjective experiencing about which we are unaware—which we do not understand.

Adler's conceptualization of the unconscious as the "not understood" is a great improvement over Freud's basket of reified forces, energies, and causes, but it has become a similarly unacceptable basket of reified goals, assumptions, and choices. The Adlerian unconscious has become a reified "as if." The heuristic status of the fictions of the psychologist has been replaced by the unconscious status of the fictions of the individual as an "explanation" of why the individual is not aware of his own fictions, i.e., why he does not understand his own goals, lifestyle, or assumptions. But, this is to explain how something can be not understood (not in awareness) in terms of its being "not understood" (unconscious): as always, reifications are basically circular. The problem is to dereify, demystify, the unconscious—to break the circularity of the not understood.

Functional Analysis

It is at this point that the usefulness of functional analysis begins to appear. Adler shifted from thinking of the final goal as a heuristic fiction on the part of the psychologist to thinking of it as a real but unconscious part of the individual's subjectivity. But this introduces problems of not-understood subjective components, and of circularities. I will argue that final goals, basic assumptions, and lifestyles are neither simply heuristic fictions from the psychologist, nor real but unconscious components of the individual's subjectivity but, rather, that they are true aspects of the *functioning* of the individual's subjectivity. Thus, Adler was in fact engaged in a functional analysis, but because the appropriate concepts were not available to him at that point in history, he first incorrectly classified his hypotheses as heuristic and later incorrectly classified them as subjectively real but unconscious. The basic revision that I wish to make is to appreciate final goals, basic assumptions, and lifestyles as

functionally real, subjectively not present, and subjectively (usually) not understood.

First, some understanding of functional analysis is required. The basic conceptual form is that if A has some consequence which is useful or essential to B, then that consequence is the function of A for B (Wimsatt, 1972). One of the interesting aspects of functional analysis is that any particular function can be served, any particular consequence can be manifested, by alternatives—sometimes an infinitude of alternatives—to the manner in which that function is actually served in a particular case. That is, it is not A that is useful or essential to B, it is the consequence, and there are usually alternatives to A that will manifest that same consequence. Functional analysis, then, is an analysis of functional relationships, at least partly independent of the things or processes that serve those functions.

This raises problems for talking about functions, since functions are not constrained to particular manifestations. In particular, how do we name or define or describe them? Sometimes we have specifically functional terms that are independent of the materials or processes that manifest them. That is, we define the function strictly as a set of consequences without reference to how those consequences are produced. An example would be the function of a “valve lifter” in an automobile, which may or may not be manifested by a physical “camshaft” (Fodor, 1968, p. 113). Often, however, we describe a function in terms of some standard or canonical means of serving that function—of producing that consequence. That is, we describe a function “as if” it were being manifested in some standard way, even though it might in fact be being manifested in some alternative way. An example would be an icebox, which is no longer truly a box of (or with) ice, but which still serves a similar function.

This, of course, is precisely what I suggest that Adler was doing, though he didn’t realize it: he was describing functional realities “as if” they were the products of actual subjective goals and assumptions, when in fact they were the consequences of alternatives to goals and assumptions. At first he thought they were simply heuristic fictions about individuals, since people weren’t aware of them, but later they seemed so consistently real and true that he decided they must be subjectively real but “simply” unconscious. The move to a functional perspective was not available, and the untenability of

the move to unconscious subjectivity was not (and has not been) appreciated.

Intrapsychic Functional Analysis

The next obvious question is: "What are the alternatives to assumptions and goals?" That is, what, other than subjectively actual assumptions and goals, can manifest assumption-like and goal-like functional consequences? I will not attempt a full answer to that—such an answer would constitute a major chapter in psychology—but I will provide a sufficient discussion to indicate that there *are* alternatives. A discussion which treats the major Adlerian concepts as functionally real, though not subjectively real (and not explicitly from a functional perspective), is contained in Bickhard and Ford (1979).

Consider first an alternative to assumptions. Suppose we have a male client who treats all women as if they were on some fundamental level hostile to him. We might, with reason, choose to describe this man as having a basic assumption that "all women are hostile." One way this might occur, of course, would be if at some point in his life this man had actually adopted an assumption that all women were hostile. In this case, the assumption would be subjectively real as well as functionally real, and the man would be aware of it—able to contrast it with alternative assumptions, perhaps even to present arguments for holding it.

Far more likely, however, is the possibility that the man's early encounters with women were with basically hostile personalities; that expectations of criticism and attack came to be built into his very conceptualization of women; and, thus, that he has no differentiations of other kinds of women. This contrasts with the previous case, in which many potential differentiations among women can be considered, only one of which is accepted as true. In this case, the man can't truly consider alternative classifications because the hostility is built into his very conceptualization of women: it is not a classification of women as hostile; it is hostility as part of the cognitive essence of women. There is no presence of an assumption here; there is, rather, the absence of a differentiation. Furthermore, this unfortunate man will not be conscious of his "assumption" because: (a) it is not subjectively present as an assumption, it is only functionally present as a lack of differentiation; and (b) he is not truly capable of considering any alternative "assumptions," since

hostility is part of his essence for women, not a differentiated classification of women. That is, it is truly possible for the individual to be unconscious—not understanding—of his basic assumption because it is not a subjective assumption to start with; it is, rather, a functional truth about his subjective experiencing of the world. He functions “as if” he held an explicit assumption that women are hostile. Thus, we have a lack of differentiation as at least one alternative for the functional manifestation of assumptions.

Consider next an alternative for goals. Adler thought that a consistency in movement could only be explained by a goal. “The chief characteristic of a movement is that it must have direction and, therefore, a goal” (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1973, p. 85). Thus, in noting the thematic consistency with which individuals approach the world, he postulated the final goal in order to account for that consistency and unity. In Bickhard and Ford (1979), however, this consistency among the many actual subjective goals of an individual’s interactions with the world is explained in terms of a consistency in the origins of those goals. Thus, the directional consistency among goals does not itself require a goal: there is an alternative for the functional manifestation of goal-like directions.

Both assumptions and goals, therefore, can be functionally manifested within an individual’s interactions with the world without there necessarily being actual assumptions or goals subjectively present for that individual. With these two critical points established, I will move to the general conclusion that other Adlerian concepts, such as lifestyle or choice, may similarly be functionally true without necessarily being subjectively true. That is, I will move to the general conclusion that, among other things, Adler was engaged in a functional analysis of the human personality.

Functional For What?

I have discussed the fact that there will be alternative underlying subjective structures that manifest the functions that Adler and Adlerians focus upon. That is, I have pointed out that more than one kind of A can yield a particular functional consequence. But the question quickly arises: “Functional for what?” It may be true that we have alternatives for A, but what is the B with respect to which those functions are defined? What is the overall system within which the functional analysis is taking place, within which the personality is a functional subsystem?

Almost as quickly, the answer arises: The overall system is the individual's interactions with and adjustment to the world. It is from the perspective of this overall system that the various alternatives mentioned earlier are functionally equivalent. From such a perspective, it makes little difference whether an assumption of women as hostile is subjectively real as well as functionally real: the consequences for society, for individual women, and for the client will be essentially the same.¹ Thus, the sense in which Adler was engaged in a functional analysis is related not only to the fact that Adler's theory is a subjective psychology, but also to the fact that it is a social psychology: Individual Psychology is a functional analysis of subjective experiencing from the perspective of social and interpersonal relations.² Individual Psychology is a functional analysis of the individual in society.

Therapy

Explicit assumptions and absences of cognitive differentiation may be functionally equivalent for most purposes of social interaction, but they are not equivalent for the purpose of trying to change the system. Therapeutic intervention must take into account the object of intervention as well as the consequences of that object. Certainly any good therapist will do that, but I suggest that the failure to recognize Individual Psychology as a functional psychology has meant, among other things, that Adlerian theory does not give as much guidance to therapy in this regard as it otherwise might.

The tendency among many Adlerians to treat each assumption, goal, and choice of an individual as explicitly real creations for that individual (though perhaps "unconscious" now), and to hold that individual socially and morally responsible for those creations,³ is, I suggest, not always maximally productive (maximally functional) from a therapeutic perspective. For example, you try to logically

¹Note that, as I am using the term, functions can be negative as well as positive. It is the functional level of analysis that I am referring to, not the distinction between function and disfunction.

²See Bickhard and Ford (1979) for an essentially functional explication of social interest.

³I do not wish to say that an individual is not responsible for who he or she is, particularly for changing who he or she is. I am claiming, however, that an individual is more than what that individual has explicitly constructed.

and factually defeat an explicit assumption (unless it is being defended within the framework of some broader pathological rigidity), but you try to uncover and reveal a lack of differentiation, for to reveal it is to differentiate it. To reveal a lack of differentiation isn't necessarily the only way to change it; but to argue against it, when it is "not understood," is not likely to be at all effective. An explicit recognition of the therapeutic task of uncovering and revealing the subjective realities that underlie the functional realities might well lead Adlerian theory and method to some very fruitful new directions.⁴

Conclusion

I have argued that Adlerian theory is essentially a functional analysis of the individual in society. Insofar as that is true, Adlerian theory is the only theory that I know of that recognizes (even implicitly) the existence and importance of that level of analysis. I suggest that explicit recognition of this characteristic of Individual Psychology could lead to fruitful new directions of development for the Adlerian theories of personality and of psychotherapy, and to powerful new paths of connection to other theories and areas in psychology and psychotherapy.

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⁴Client-centered therapy has focused especially on such uncoverings and unfoldings of subjective meaning (see especially Gendlin, 1970, 1974), though it seems to be markedly deficient in its recognition of a functional level of analysis to guide those subjective explorations. In this respect, Individual Psychology and client-centered therapy might be highly complementary.