

WHEN TIME IS OUT OF JOINT: ON ADLER'S FICTIONAL FINALISM

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Positive Fiction

“A person would not know what to do with himself,” Adler (1964) pointedly wrote, “were he [or she] not oriented toward some goal. *We cannot think, feel, will, or act without the perception of some goal*” (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, p. 96).

For Adler, having a goal and a purpose in life is vital to the crystallisation of personality and to a person's well-being. In this theoretical framework, as Karen John (2011) writes,

“Behaviour is viewed as ‘purposeful, goal-directed, self-determined’. We humans set our own goals and determine our own movements through life, although rarely are we fully conscious of our goals or why we behave the way we do” (p. 1).

The term “goal” typically indicates an aim or desired result, the destination of a journey. Implicit in the positing of a goal are desire, destination, and journeying. Similarly, “purpose”, from the Latin *proponere*, which means to put forward, is usually defined as the reason for which something is done or for which something exists – it implies resolve or determination. In order to act purposefully towards a goal, we need a desire and a benign drive to move forward without hesitation. To have a goal would then mean to desire an outcome and to pursue it resolutely.

A Spanner in the Works

If Adler's view on finalism had stopped at the above formulation, he would have merely been a precursor of contemporary pop-psychology of the positive-thinking/manifest-the-life-you-want variety. He would have become a more or less acknowledged forerunner of the myriad of self-help publications crowding the shelves of the psychology section in libraries and bookshops – arguably, the sort of literature that gives psychology a bad name. Instead, supported by a refined philosophical stance steeped in his readings of Kant, Nietzsche, and Vaihinger, Adler (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964) affixed an ambiguous adjective to the word *goal* – a spanner in the works for all those who ever considered bringing Individual Psychology down to the level of the current wisdom-while-u-wait orthodoxy. The adjective Adler chose is *fictional*. He spoke of fictional goals (ibid); a person's guiding goal is all-important yet fictional. Fiction, from the Latin root *fictio*, means to “contrive”, “invent” or “construct”. That a goal should be fictional is a very modern nuanced acknowledgement of our inherent inability as humans fully to understand reality, thus having to resort to create our own idea of it.

Adler's Pragmatist Idealism

Fiction can of course denote falsity (Engler, 2009), mask self-regard, and stand for the glorification of one's own embroidered claims. Perhaps it is not fortuitous that current fashionable autobiography tends to brim over into the realm of narrative “fiction” where the self is addressed in the second or third person, a “you” or “he” or “she” bizarrely bestowing an aura of righteousness and historical consequence to the narrator, something evident in the recent autobiographies of Paul Auster (2012) and Salman Rushdie

(2012). Self-veneration may be more than palpable in the above examples, but even more undemonstrative instances of the genre cannot shake away the thought that autobiography itself might well be a form of consolation, a kind of mourning even for a self that continues to evade us as we speak. More or less “fictional” autobiography might also be an attempt at exerting temporary control over the way in which we are being perceived by others.

Fictional notions can, in short, be used to foster delusional claims in the history of a person and even of a people. In Adler’s case, however – as with Kant, Vaihinger and partly Nietzsche – fiction does not mean that we single-handedly *create* the world but rather that we establish a *limit* to our role within it through our instruments of knowledge, forms of sensibility and the logical structures which partly constitute us (Kant, 1787/1998). No matter how ambitious or inspirational the formulated goal might be, in setting it up a person sacrifices her youthful dreams of “infinite possibilities” narrowing the focus of her purpose.

The individual has an important role in relation to her world but is not omnipotent in terms of knowledge or practical application. This is what distinguishes Vaihinger’s (and Adler’s) *pragmatist* idealism from dogmatic idealism, a widespread view according to which we effectively manifest our world. Too many times I have heard clients lamenting that they have brought misery upon themselves by thinking negatively and that they wanted me to help them “manifest” better things, be it a caring partner or a fulfilling job. In her book *Smile or Die*, Barbara Ehrenreich (2009) humorously and painstakingly denounces a multi-billion dollar industry that bullies people into thinking that when disaster strikes, whether through redundancy or cancer, the causes must be sought in the person’s negative thinking habits. It would be a gross mistake to correlate Adlerian therapy with similar nonsense, no matter how steeped the latter might be into the venerable tradition of dogmatic idealism.

Indispensable Errors

Adler's stance is also at variance with Freud's mechanical interpretations of the principle of causality (Engler, 2009) and the latter's reliance on the past as well as on the philosophical stance of dogmatic materialism. What strikes the attentive reader is Adler's (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964) nuanced argument:

“Indeed I am convinced that the most erroneous assumptions are precisely the most indispensable for us, that without granting the validity of the logical fiction, without measuring reality by the invented world of the unconditioned, the self-identical, man could not live” (p. 87).

Two things are striking in the above passage:

- a) Adler's emphasis on the *unconditioned*, which could be an allusion to Kant. In examining the differentiation between theoretical and practical cognition, the latter (1787/1998) discusses the *practical* use of cognition directed to an unconditioned goal. For Kant theoretical cognition eventually gravitates towards a performative practice and application, unconditioned only in the case of ethics, which suggests that speculative reason *gravitates* towards ethics – morality and more generally our deeds. The other implication here is the potential link with recent developments in contemporary thought, particularly the practice of “non-philosophy” proposed by François Laruelle (Laruelle, 2010; Mullarkey & Smith, 2012) which, although problematic and contradictory in its formulation (McGettigan, 2012), intriguingly advocates the use of philosophical concepts not as “representations” but as part and parcel of reality. This advocates a non-parochial, non-academic application of philosophy along

the lines of the neo-Kantian hypothesis (Cohen, 1919/1995) and compatible with Vaihinger's notion of *fiction* (1925, 2008).

- b) Adler's seeming oxymoron, comparing our "most erroneous assumptions" to "the most indispensable for us" is also indebted to Kant (1787/1998) for whom the same claim that guides our rational inquiries is also the place of error. For Kant, reason itself is a unique kind of error, associated with metaphysics and what he often likes to call "transcendental illusion" (ibid). Reason itself is then a *useful* error, affording us our creative flights into scientific discoveries, our excursions into the sacred and the mundane, as well as our assemblage of imaginative goals setting our organism in motion towards a life of meaning, giving, and greater integration.

My hypothesis is that the fictional element in Adler's psychology and philosophy is easily overlooked in our profoundly *literal* times. Literal teleology has always been a risky proposition. In politics, it has often fostered tyrannical ideologies, something that Adler knew all too well, for not only was he ~~was~~ one of the few truly socially progressive practitioners within Freud's quintessentially bourgeois circle, but he also tragically lost a daughter in the Soviet Union to the brutality of literal teleology in action.

With metaphors, symbols and similes hurriedly done away in our frenzied hunt for proof and evidence, it would seem that little space is left for nuanced arguments in psychology and psychotherapy, let alone for grappling with as sophisticated a notion as Adler's fictional teleology. Every decade perhaps understands Adler differently - much in the same way as, for instance, every era interprets Bowlby differently. The latter's pivotal contribution (Bowlby, 1969; Bowlby, 1988) has been filtered, even misinterpreted through three decades of supremacy of cognitive and behavioural approaches to child development, something which only recently, with the

resurgence of motivation and emotion, has begun to redress (Ryan, 2007). Similarly, Adler's pervasive legacy has so far developed more in relation to the literal and pragmatic elements of Individual Psychology than with regards to the less quantifiable yet vital elements of his philosophical and psychological perspective. Perhaps the time is right for a deeper appreciation, in tune with a desirable paradigm shift in psychotherapy reflecting the changes in the field of science and philosophy.

Change is notoriously slower in the helping professions than it is in most other areas of human endeavour, a fact partly due to the constant interference of state and government who happily misconstrue therapy as the policing and normalisation of individuals rather than seeing it as their potential route towards emancipation.

Desire and the Future

Desire is key in the formulation of a fictional goal and is moreover directly linked to Adler's pragmatic stance, derived, via Vaihinger, from Kant for whom the "desiring faculty" (as cited in Ferraris, 2011,) is the fundamental basis of our actions in the world, given that only via *praxis* "we introduce something radically new into the world without confining ourselves to the contemplation of the world" (p. 94). Like motivation, desire is a tremendously important concept, greatly neglected during the decades of the cognitive turn, which resulted in a cognitivist reading of emotion, i.e. in the tendency to understand the latter as an outcome of *belief* rather than desire. This development began with a move away,

“... from affective or feeling-based theories of emotion, toward theories which stress the intentionality or ‘directedness’ of emotion ... Somehow in the process ‘intentional’ became assimilated to ‘cognitive’ and the intentionality of

desire was sidestepped or unrecognized” (Marks, 1986, p. 3)

Fictional Past

While it can be said that Adler’s fictional finalism is future rather than past-oriented (the latter typical of Freudian perspectives), I believe the most innovative element is the non-literal understanding of time. If our future goals are fictional, then also are our interpretations of the past, through the imaginative faculty of memory. If our future is “fictional”, so is our past. For some contemporary philosophy, the experience of time is “structurally akin to the experience of desire” (Reynolds, 2004, page number ?). In this dimension of time evoked by memory, “we violate the purity of an absolute past and fail to understand it in its difference and singularity” (ibid. page number ?). In his criticism of Freud, Deleuze (1994), perhaps provocatively, goes as far as to say that, “every reminiscence, whether of a town, or a woman, is erotic” (p. 85). Eroticism is for Adler (1964) linked to “the central nervous system ... thus making all peripheral functions, including sex, subordinate to one central function” (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964, p 57). A consequence of such a holistic view of the human organism is that our complete perception of time is implicated. Time itself was already for Kant (1787/1998) a mediation belonging to the mind - a human construct, a necessary condition created by our fundamental compensatory need. A more contemporary perspective would hasten to add: linear time is itself a construct. The common view of time as measurable continuum - “the dividing line of the present moving in regular and solemn silence from the dead past into the unborn future” (Burt, 1959, p.86) - is constantly being challenged by new formulations in science and in modern metaphysics.

Yet when a startling *event* takes place - a visitation, temporarily jolting us out of the slumber of quotidian life, time is “out of joint”. The latter are the words spoken by Hamlet *after the event*, i.e. after the encounter with his father’s ghost:

The time is out of joint: O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right!
(Hamlet Act 1, Scene 5, 188-189)

Are not perhaps our forays into past and future are akin to expeditions into the realm of the uncanny, like ghostly visitations? The ghost of our past blights and arouses our present deeds. The ghost of our future self spurs us into meaningful action. What happens to a person who has been diagnosed with a terminal illness? In what way is one’s view of the future altered? I recently heard the moving case of a young woman of seventeen affected by an undiagnosed illness and who knew she did not have long to live. She decided, despite her anxious father’s reluctance, to cram in as much life as she could (BBC, 2012). It reminded me of the thoroughly difficult spell I experienced as a psychotherapy trainee in the palliative care ward of a London hospital - working day in and day out with people who knew the time was up - a haunting, unforgettable experience.

Life in Purgatory

My client “John”, an accomplished artist, came to see me because he was suffering from stress, bouts of dizziness and low self-esteem. What emerged in our sessions was the agonising burden of his past, the unredeemed loss suffered after a divorce ten years before for which he was still grieving. He described his current predicament as being suddenly swept away from the present into the past “like being his own former self, speaking to the ghosts of his former life,” a condition which made him exhausted and joyless. His paintings - remarkable in their beauty, intensity

and multi-layered texture of meaning and emotional appeal - also had distinctly haunted and ethereal qualities. Our work, still on-going at the time of writing, alerted me to the relative dimension of time, something which I would miss if I were to espouse the current “mindfulness” orthodoxy which emphasises and reifies the “here and now”. The ghostly presence in John’s life is real and present, more present than the present. Moreover, it is the source of high-level artistic expression, which would be crushed under the weight of a “problem-solving” approach - one for which in any case John, an articulate, highly intelligent individual, has no time. He effectively lived in a kind of purgatory, a ghostly existence linked to the spectre of his past love.

Exit Ghost

Purgatory is the middle space of the realm of the dead. A creation of Christendom and to our secular, modern ears, a relic from a remote past, purgatory is appropriated by Shakespeare in *Hamlet* (Greenblatt, 2001). The great Renaissance playwright and conjurer called forth, through the power of language, “those things – voices, faces, bodies and spirits – that are absent (ibid, p 3). It is uncanny that a play that greatly contributed to the creation of “the subjectivity effect” in Western culture (Fineman, 1991) should also be so closely linked to the conspicuous ghostly presence of Hamlet’s father, whose final words to Hamlet are “remember me”:

“Fare thee well at once.
The glow worm shows the matin to be near,
And 'gins to pale his uneffectual fire.
Adieu, adieu, adieu. Remember me”
(Hamlet Act I, Scene 5).

Time and the Event

Our everyday dimension of linear time is disrupted by an *event*. When an event occurs time is “out of joint” (Derrida, 1997). We reinvent our sense of time altogether, when mourning, unhappiness and sadness open, “A vulnerable space and entry-point through which ghosts might make their appearance” (Jameson, 1995, p.90). Falling in love; the death of a loved one; facing a startling occurrence, or something wonderful or something ominous; facing an illness or a crisis - in these instances time stretches or shrinks, our very perception of time is disrupted. Even the unexpected visit of a distant friend and meeting a stranger displace and decentre our senses, expands our sensibility. “Future” and “past” become relative notions, and so does our so-called present, the time of our breathing, of this heart beating - a dimension in which, like a river, we can and cannot step twice, perhaps not even once ...

We can be haunted by the future as much as by the past. But there is no valorisation of the future in philosophy or psychology that can afford neglecting Nietzsche’s notion of the eternal recurrence of the same Nietzsche’s (1887/1974) poetic metaphor – *what if* your life as it is were to recur eternally? - is in itself a haunted revelation, insinuated by a “demon”. It represents both an invitation to a full appreciation of our existence and a disruption of our cosy perception of linear time, an interruption to the temporal order. What would our life be like if we were to live *as if* it were to recur eternally? What would we discard, what would we cherish?

Messianic Futures

A spectre can belong to the past as well as the future. Its presence breaks our linear story and history:

“The appearance of the ghost is a non-narrative event, we scarcely know whether it has really happened at all in the first place. It calls, to be sure, for a revision of the past, for the setting in place of a new narrative” (Jameson, 1995, p. 90).

For those schooled within the Anglo-American tradition, Shakespeare probably represents the “high culture of European classicism” (Jameson, 1995, p. 97), but to a “continental” European such as me, it could be said that Shakespeare lucidly embodies disturbing and volcanic energies above and beyond the restricted sphere of personality. Thus spectral representations (in *Hamlet* as in *Macbeth*) do not belong to the “spiritual” dimension. A spectre is not a “spirit”, but a mirage; it does not require a *literal* belief in the existence of ghosts nor (except in cases of acute mental distress) a belief that the past is right here, present and directly influencing our present actions. Spectrality “undermine[s] the very ideology of spirit ... Ghosts are ... material; [they] resist the strategies of sublimation [and] idealization” (Jameson, 1995, p. 90).

Future Friendships

To speak of fictional goals implies a flexible view of the future; it is a due recognition of life’s inherent uncertainty, vital in our most cherished concerns. For instance, a long friendship is repeatedly tested over time; it passes through ordeals (Reynolds, 2004), maintaining and renewing an inconceivable yet indispensable faith in the timeless, and cultivating what Jacques Derrida (1997) calls a “contretemporal habitus” (p. 16), the result of an open heart which - despite Aristotle’s description of friendship, reliant on stability - thrives from difference: of time itself, of the other person, and from change (Reynolds, 2004). Perhaps true friendship is unstable, open to the quirks of time and the insubstantial nature of the self. Perhaps true friendship needs to hold a fictional view of the time to come, something akin

to the appreciation of what Nietzsche (1888/1977) calls the *innocence of becoming*, i.e. a non-linear view of time and history which fully realises the emergence of the unforeseen, the sheer eventfulness of newness of life – its luminous immanence.

A flexible perspective of time can help dissolve the atavism of rancour and the perverse intimacy of hatred, “rancour ... freezes the person who has injured us and does not accept alterations or the fact that the other is part of the river of living-and-dying (Bazzano, 2012, p. 37).

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