

IN DREAMS BEGIN RESPONSIBILITIES: ADLER AND CONTEMPORARY ETHICS

Published in the Adlerian Year Book 2007

Manu Bazzano

Am I my Brother's Keeper?

Drawing on the Adlerian triad of *love, work, and community* - the three essential tasks on the path to healing and integration - I will attempt to show how Individual Psychology can exercise an innovative influence in our post-modern world. It is my contention that psychology is an *ethical human science*, i.e., it deals essentially with the realm of *ethics*, which is not the same as, on the one hand, the prohibitions, prescriptions, and punishments administered by the law, and on the other hand, a mere "code of conduct". Ethics is not mere *law* nor *code of conduct*, but in order to gain a deeper understanding we must look at each of them separately:

1) *Ethics as law* presupposes a gloomy view of human nature - in line with Hobbes and Freud - according to which beastly mankind must be duly restrained before access is granted inside the dignified museums of civility.

In popularising the original idea of sublimation - already found in Novalis, Goethe, Schopenhauer, and most of all in Nietzsche (Bazzano, 2006, p. 140), Freud also left out its crucial *alchemical* nature, so that from *spiritualization*, sublimation metamorphosed into *repression*. A long way from Nietzsche's view, who instead saw sublimation as *chemistry*:

“All we require ... is a *chemistry* of the moral, religious, aesthetic conceptions and sensations, likewise of all the agitations we experience within ourselves in cultural and social intercourse, and indeed even when we are alone. What if this chemistry would end up by revealing that in this domain too the most glorious colours are derived from base, indeed from despised materials?” (Nietzsche, 1986, p. 12).

2) *Ethics as code of conduct* can become the straightjacket ensuring that human nature does not contaminate therapy with the threat of unpredictability, a mode that may engender under-involvement, a thoroughly modern form of neglect and even abuse. A “code of conduct” might ensure that life itself is left out of the therapy room.

The realm of ethics I am trying to depict has more to do with what Immanuel Kant called “the mystery of morality inside me” (as cited in by Bauman, 1993, p. 35). It is a departure from utilitarianism; it connects with that deep core within ourselves, where questions such as, “Why should I be moral?” or, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” are unthinkable. These are highly pragmatic questions and also constitute the beginning of iniquity: could there be a link between utility and immorality?

Ethics as I intend it is therefore not ruled by *utility* but by *grace*. In its psychological ramifications, the ethical exigency results in a change of heart, a secular Damascus, a conversion, a salvation, both in the way the person experiences herself and through her opening to others via the awakening of social interest.

To the original Adlerian triad I will then add a fourth one, *meditation*, an essential element of my Zen Buddhist training: not a place of self-bound, delusional “spirituality” (the

transcendence trap) but instead the discovery of a deep existential correlation with all beings.

All You Need Is Love?

It took psychoanalysis nearly one hundred years to discover the existence of the other. It was not until 1994 that Stolorow and Atwood (1994), greatly influenced, among others, by Richard Rorty's pragmatism, expressed a need to move beyond an "isolated mental apparatus", which they saw as a "central metaphor of the traditional psychoanalytic paradigm" (1994, p. 91).

At variance with Freud's original model, Stolorow applied a relational model, bringing to its logical outcome a line of practice originated by Ferenczi, actualised by Kohut (as cited in Kahn & Rachman 2000, p. 295), and by Carl Rogers, another pioneer in the field of psychology whose efforts, like Adler's, went on the whole unrecognised.

I do not doubt that the discovery of the *other* by psychoanalysis is a positive occurrence. I can only hope that in a few decades Freudian analysts will also discover *Gemeinschaft*, community, thus moving on to the next level.

However, even this relational model of inter-subjectivity, where the self meets the other, is based on an illusion. The ideal situation of an equal encounter presupposes the existence of an idyllic community that values, in Bernstein's (1983) words, "the type of mutuality, sharing, respect and equality required for a genuine dialogue" (p. 190). Within such idealised notion of inter-subjectivity, the issue of power is overlooked. And when something is overlooked, it goes "undercover". An attitude of openness to the other is desirable, but it is naïve to ignore the fundamental *asymmetry* of the encounter. We do not meet in a vacuum, but within a social and economical reality weighed down by injustice and inequality - unless we are willing to be

open to grace, to love, to presence. And one of love's metaphors is the *caress*. Not seduction, but a lyrical, non-possessive appreciation of the other's fleeting presence. I cannot possess the other. Rodin could not possess the souls he lovingly enshrined in stone.

To come to the caress, one has to travel far and wide. Perhaps a shipwreck has to be endured before we are willing to meet the other.

*Every heart, every heart
To love will come
But like a refugee
(Cohen, 1992)*

But who is the other? At first, perhaps she is a remote flickering lamp in a desert landscape, appearing to threaten one's cherished solitude. As the harshness of winter sets in, however, the sight of the distant lamp becomes, gradually, inexorably, the hope of communion. Breaking the isolation through love is an act of grace. No longer "object-relation"-but true inter-subjectivity:

"Individual Psychology does not recognize perception of a sexual object. Sexuality, love, and marriage are tasks of two equal persons, tasks of forming a unit, and can be rightly solved only if persons are trained for sufficient social interest". (Adler, 1965, p. 220)

"Love, as a task of two equal persons calls for bodily and mental attraction, exclusiveness, and a total and final surrender. The right solution of this task of two persons is the blessing of socially adjusted persons who have proved their right attitude in having friends, being prepared for a useful job, and showing mutual devotion." (Adler, 1965, p. 223).

A man is greatly helped in this task by the sensitivity and intuition of the woman: And it is a woman philosopher, Luce

Irigaray (2000), who stresses the fact that inter-subjectivity is a mode of relationship preferred by women:

“With men, one finds both a material and spiritual relationship between subject and object in place of the intersubjective relationship – however incomplete – desired by women. There is another difference: the relationship with the object, with the other, is realized through an instrument, which can be the hand, sex, and even a tool added to the body, language, or a third mediator. Finally, instead of the feminine universe’s relationship between two, man prefers a relationship between the one and the many, between the I- masculine subject and others: people, society, understood as *them* and not as *you*.” (p. 17).

Love as we know it might not be enough; it might in fact conceal, weaken, and even dishearten our search for true communion through private terrors and convulsions, the glamorised versions of which we buy in paperbacks or watch on a giant screen. Not wholly dissimilar, perhaps, in its beastly desperation, from the ‘love portrayed by Kafka (1926/1973) among those poor villagers who will never get anywhere near the remote radiance of the castle:

“She was seeking and he was seeking, they raged and contorted their faces and bored their heads into each other’s bosoms in the urgency of seeking something, and their embraces and their tossing limbs did not avail to make them forget, but only reminded them of what they sought; like dogs desperately tearing up the ground they tore at each other’s bodies, and often, helplessly baffled, in a final effort to attain happiness they nuzzled and tongued each other’s face. Sheer weariness stilled them at last and brought them gratitude to each other” (pp. 63-4).

Love, understood as *karuna*, i.e., charity, or compassion, belongs - not unlike forgiveness - to *grace*. In an age when religion is

increasingly becoming associated with intolerance, fundamentalism, crusading, and its discourse narrowed down to tribal righteousness, Adler's thought inspires us to be *religious* without having to resort to theology or having to inconvenience God.

It is not only possible, but indeed desirable, to think of love and grace without falling into the transcendence trap. I am duty bound to the other. I am a *hostage* to the other. That does not oblige me in any way to subscribe to a belief system. It does not oblige me either to go after a psychological system whose adepts appear to be "bearers of secrets and mysteries who promise us treasure but only leave us with a lot of mumbo jumbo" (Bachelard, 1950/2000, p. 53).

I cannot agree with Alain Badiou (2001) when he writes that it is not possible to have devotion to the other without having been a believer in the "Altogether Other" (p. 23). It is possible to be profoundly ethical whilst keeping an open mind about questions of divinity and metaphysics.

All Work and No Play ...

It is through work that love becomes manifest. No longer punishment or duty, constructive work marries *Eros* and *Ananke* at the altar of *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*. The god of love and the goddess of need begin a mutual dance where pleasure and necessity come together, giving birth to what Emerson, inspired by Heraclitus, called "the beautiful necessity" (as cited in Bazzano, 2006, p. 24).

Adler's uplifting view of *work as contribution* does away with Freud's suggestion that "every culture is based on compulsory labour or instinctual renunciation" (Jones, 1957, as cited in Furtmüller, 1965, p. 320). Furtmüller sees Adler's outlook close to the Marxist view of work for, he argues, work is, "under the proper conditions ... man's most species-specific form of living,

his great joy in asserting himself through being creative and constructive” (ibid.). It is an interesting view for it confirms Adler’s progressive and socially conscientious outlook, although much of Marxist thought unfortunately relies both on the Hegelian spirit of revenge and on messianic delusion.

Through purposeful, creative work, and when paired to the awakening of social interest, we open up to the possibility of *salvation* (Adler, as cited in Furtmüller, 1965, p. 320): a *secular* salvation, a salvation before the grim reaper’s knock on the door, through a life lived purposefully, a life of contribution to the common welfare.

Adler’s view of work also does away with hedonism, with the glorification of de-sublimated play, the alienated plunge into oblivion that was to characterise much of post-war culture and our current shopping-mall universe. When work becomes contribution instead of mere duty, the rupture between love and necessity is healed and made whole again. Yet, one must also relinquish the associated error that hedonism signifies: that consumerism and excessive self-interest will fill the void.

We are paying dearly for this metaphysical error, for we have designed for ourselves a more ominous life than our ancestors amid the “dark Satanic mills” ever could dream of. With renewed vigour, we skip and shuffle from car to tram, from train to crowded bus, joining the rat-race to nowhere, marching along on our pilgrimage to no-man’s land.

In the North of the human world, where the Protestant work ethic reigns, drunken labourers of hands and mind stagger out of crowded bars and pubs on a Friday night. In smoky rooms we grope for forbidden pleasures, living out a dream suppressed during the working week.

Individual Psychology offers a way out of the impasse in which psychological thinking has fallen in the second half of the 20th Century by opposing duty to play, the latter often a product of what Marcuse (1972) called “desublimation” (p. 56):

“Loss of conscience due to the satisfactory liberties granted by an unfree society makes for a happy consciousness which facilitates acceptance of the misdeeds of this society. It is the token of declining autonomy and comprehension. Sublimation demands a high degree of autonomy and comprehension; it is mediation between the conscious and the unconscious, between intellect and instinct, renunciation and rebellion. In its most accomplished modes, such as in the artistic *oeuvre*, sublimation becomes the cognitive power which defeats suppression while bowing to it” (ibid., p. 56).

Community and Imagined Communities

“The honest psychologist” – Adler (1965) wrote - “must therefore talk and work also against poorly understood nationalism if it harms the community of all men; against wars of conquest, revenge, and prestige” (p. 65).

One of the greatest threats to the actualisation of social interest in real and vibrant communities is the strengthening of the nation state. It would be a mistake to equate communities with nation-states, particularly in an era when these have become the “new religion” (Bauman, 1983, p. 135). Nationalism has worked hard at replacing plural communities by promoting the so-called “national spirit”, fuelled by so-called “neutral laws”, the result of which was “a well-nigh total subordination of morality to politics” (ibid., p. 138).

Nowadays, communities are seen by the centralised nation-state as “nostalgic” and “romantic”, even “conservative” and ultimately destined to oblivion.

The case of Israel is instructive: whatever one feels about the State of Israel, its creation in modern times offered us a valuable paradigm and a metaphor for the notion of the state in general and for the impossibility of the existence of a self-bound political and/or ethnic entity. Like the self-bound ego, a nation holds fast to its fears and prejudices; love of the soil replaces love of the earth. “The typical individual of our times” - wrote Martin Buber (1939), a Zionist who had nevertheless opposed political Zionism as a form of betrayal – “holds fast to his expanded ego, his nation” (as cited in Rose, 2005, p. 74).

Our commitment to the welfare of humankind must entail, when necessary, non-conformity, refusal of the status quo, active rejection of the iniquity and cruelty perpetrated in the name of lofty abstractions. Our commitment is to an *ideal* yet not one that is abstract - *community*, a community *sub specie aeternitatis*. Such an ideal gives us courage and inspiration in times of difficulty. Its function is normative and teleological:

“We conceive the idea of social interest, social feeling, as the ultimate form of mankind, a condition in which we imagine all questions of life, all relationships to the external world as solved. It is a normative ideal, a direction-giving goal. This goal of perfection must contain the goal of an ideal community, because everything we find valuable in life, what exists and what will remain is forever a product of this social feeling” (Adler, 1933/1965, p. 35).

MEDITATION

Through the experience of love, work and community, the self shifts towards inhabiting a more fluid, actively adapted locus. This newly found place of rest and regeneration is neither Ithaca

- perhaps the real and symbolic return from an ego-safari in a shopping centre or to a package holiday - nor does it follow Abraham's example – the injunction of having to leave his country forever. This new place, in other words, is neither Athens nor Jerusalem.

In meditation, we contemplate our life's three tasks and the life of the very self we had attempted to protect through our membership of the Private Logic Club. To our astonishment, the self now appears to be less solid, and at every moment existing solely through interdependence with others and with every living thing. Meditation gives us new strength and inspiration to continue our creative contribution to the whole, whatever our field of endeavour.

We might start to practise meditation as a form of relaxation, as a valuable stress-reductor to counteract the unruliness of modern living. But that is only the beginning. Sooner or later (if we carry on sincerely and deepen our practice) we start unraveling and dismantling the self-bound and seemingly solid core of our personality - what has become, over the years, both accomplishment and confinement, both our place in the sun and our place of detention, both the creative result of our handling of troubles and an attempt to ensure that no life (whether chaotic, inconsistent, unpredictable, or pluralistic) ever passes through the metal detectors of Private Logic. And I quite like it in here, if I am honest: it is cosy, it is predictable, no one knocks at the door unexpectedly. The trouble is, I am not happy...

For many, the techniques associated with Zen meditation assist in unmasking the culprit, and the culprit is *the doer*: the little me inside each of us who would do anything but avoid *doing nothing*. Daoists called it *wu-wei*, non-doing. Non-doing is non-seeking. Non-seeking opens us to what Zen calls *Daisbin*, or Big Heart/Mind. We no longer identify with our small self - which by definition is constantly desiring, afraid, needy and discouraged - but instead with a spaciousness, an expansiveness

that harbours the qualities of wisdom and compassion. It is an experience, a tangible feeling before being an aspiration. We find the courage to include all living things and open the doors of the prison: what then arises is a tremendous feeling of appreciation for the life we share with countless beings, and a natural desire to give back some of the gifts we have received and continue to receive. At this point, *doing* is a creative act: no longer killing time but getting down to business in the three tasks of life with a sense of joy and purpose, knowing that our individual contribution is essential.

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