

SONGS AND BLOODLESS DUELS: ON SOCIAL INTEREST AND MUTUAL AID ¹

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Adler's Neat Solution

Writing on spirituality and Adlerian psychology, Erik Mansager (2003) warned against an over-simplified understanding of Adler's notion of striving:

“Striving is not just periodic conscious activity aimed towards a current, short-term goal. Rather, striving is *the very activity of life*. Life is movement towards an end state – not only that which we know, but also that towards which we can only hope and seek ‘as if’ it exists. Not only the minus of desire and the plus of satisfaction and completion; but also that striving towards which a given individual lives as his or her ultimate concern, final goal, ‘eternal destiny’. *Because of our social embeddedness*, such completion seeks connection and belonging within the greater community” (pp. 65-66, italics added)

Ingeniously contained in the above passage we find not only the personal and motivational dimension of will and effort inferred in striving - as well as the necessary social context in which such endeavour takes place - but also a greater domain (“life”), an area which each person will portray in line with his or her beliefs. The statement “striving is the very activity of life” may be therefore understood existentially, biologically

¹ This paper is dedicated to my dear friend and colleague David Herbert, who first suggested that I write something on the “Big Society”. I know, it took me such a long time, but here it is...

and spiritually. Striving is *my* life's activity, reverberating and finding meaning in the social domain as well as in the existential/spiritual dimension. Unambiguous yet inclusive, Adlerian psychology is at heart refreshingly un-dogmatic in its statements, hence it is up to the recipients – students, practitioners, clients – to respond according to their level of perspicacity. Whatever the nature of the subject's response, there is a *non-personal* trait to the striving as the “very activity of life”. In my view, this inscribes Adlerian psychology within the area of *psycho-therapy* rather than *ego-therapy*, setting it apart from more reductive approaches to counselling and psychotherapy.

The distinction between psycho-therapy and ego-therapy might constitute a more significant dividing line (albeit fluctuating, not rigidly defined) than the one emphasising instead philosophical dissimilarities between various approaches to therapy. I have found that too narrow an allegiance to theoretical frameworks engenders sectarianism, dogmatism, and an outmoded tribe-mentality bent on ousting and shaming the unorthodox or heretical element in one's midst. This is distressing, especially when the very principles of a particular modality emphasise inclusivity, solidarity and an ability to engage in constructive dialogue.

Unlike psychotherapy, *ego-therapy* means care of the ego – the term “ego” employed here not in the psychoanalytic but in its current colloquial meaning, which flawlessly matches the way it is used in Buddhist discourse, i.e., as excessive preoccupation with myself, the *notion* (often deluded, always inaccurate) I have of myself, what Rogers calls “self-concept” (Rogers, 1956, p. 830), a bordering on (and brimming over) narcissism. Adler (1956) conveys an equivalent notion when he writes on the attachment of the self to cherished opinions:

“Everyone subordinates all experiences and problems to his own conception. This conception is usually a tacit assumption and as such unknown to the person. Yet he lives and dies for the inferences he draws from such conception” (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, p. 24).

Rather than deconstructing the ego and/or situating it into the social/existential/spiritual context to which it belongs, ego-therapy confirms and validates the encapsulation of “the self-bound individual (ibid. p. 112). Instead of recognising the ego as a convergence of aggregates, of social and cultural conditionings, thus potentially mitigating the agonising and preposterous melodrama of its plight, ego-therapy awards it substance and essence, stitches it all up together after the defeats and humiliations it has suffered in the hustle and bustle of the everyday, and sends it back to its coveted seat in the traffic jam.

Conversely, psycho-therapy means care of the *psyche* or soul, i.e., caring for a wider domain than the ego’s. Long gone are the days when, in pre-Socratic Greece, care of self effortlessly *coincided* with the care of the soul, with the cultivation, through *askesis*² (Foucault, 2009), of the entwined domains of the spiritual, the ethical and the political. What followed after that was Socrates, and with him (arguably), a decline into logic and dialectical reason (Nietzsche, 1996; Bazzano, 2006) and later Christianity, a tradition which identified psyche too narrowly with the ego and the individual soul, while later influential developments - the psychology of Descartes among

² For the Greeks, the word does not mean “ascetic”, but has a very broad sense denoting any kind of practical training and exercise. For example, it was commonplace to say that any kind of art or technique had to be learned by *mathesis* and *askesis* – by theoretical knowledge and practical training (retrieved: 09.09.2011: <http://paris-philo.over-blog.org/article-26558892.html>).

them - envisioned a divided world of living subjects and dead objects (Hillman, 1975).

Subsequently, in the neo-liberal, neo-Darwinian world of unbridled individualism and survival of the richest in which we now live, the very idea of “care of the soul” is incomprehensible, quaint, even surreal – at best relegated to the practices of established if obdurate religions or the unbridled eccentricities of “new age” spirituality.

Given this scenario, the necessary yet painstaking work of the psychotherapist and counsellor is to attempt to rebuild a link between self and psyche. However differently psychotherapists and theoreticians appreciate and conceptualise *psyche*, what many of them seem to emphasise is its more expansive nature in relation to the narrow confines of the self-bound individual.

Without explicit reference to “psyche” or soul, humanistic psychology has nevertheless stressed the importance of the *organism* (Goldstein, 1995), and of *organismic experiencing* (Rogers, 1956) as vital conditions for the congruence (or incongruence) of a person, for her defensive or non-defensive stance, for her leaning towards constructive contribution and co-operation or enmity and self-interest.

Jungians have on their part highlighted the polyvalent nature of psyche, thus decentring the excessive importance attributed to personality (Hillman, 1975). Even Freudian psychoanalysis, in spite of its belief in a separate, Cartesian psychic apparatus, and in spite of its reification of the unconscious, still paid heed to rich and rowdy impulses, drives and instincts which go on displacing and humbling the ego’s claims to executive-style control.

Adler offered a neat and typically understated solution: he grounded the self-pity, grandiosity and vanity of the ego firmly within the social domain, which is one of the favourite dwellings of psyche, for *soul loves community* - one of the ways, some may add, in which *immanent*, rather than transcendent divinity, is most clearly manifest. Adler also grounded his positive notion of mental health in social interest (Adler, 1965; Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956).

I hope the brief examples listed above might help designate an approach that is different from the boisterous Titanism of an overconfident *Zeitgeist*, a way of understanding human experience that John Dewey (1934) saw as veering towards imagination:

“Ultimately there are but two philosophies. One of them accepts life and experience in all its uncertainty, mystery, doubt, and half-knowledge and turns that experience upon itself to deepen and intensify its own qualities – to imagination and art. This is the philosophy of Shakespeare and Keats” (p. 34).

Of Will to Power as Generosity

I came to Adler via the philosophical route first. Here was a psychologist who had appreciated Nietzsche’s controversial (often maligned, invariably misunderstood) notion of the “will to power” and, by translating it into striving (for superiority, for meaning, ultimately for positive contribution) had found concrete reaches of Nietzsche’s thought in psychology. This is something Nietzsche would have no doubt appreciated, given that he thought himself a psychologist and *physician* of culture, and that psychology alone – rather than religion, or even philosophy – could, in his view, tread where other disciplines no longer dared.

Will to power, now translated into striving for superiority and meaning, eventually resolves itself in acts of generosity and creativity. Will to power becomes will to create and will to contribute. Adler specifies and contextualises what was already latent in Nietzsche's notion. Painstakingly but to no avail, Nietzsche had pointed out that there is no *individual* will in the will to power, nor is there power understood as domination *over* others. Giles Deleuze (1983) explained it thus:

“Will to power is essentially creative and giving: it does not aspire, it does not seek, it does not desire, above all it does not desire power. It gives: power is something impossible in the will ... power in the will is the ‘bestowing virtue’, through power the will itself bestows sense and value” (p.15).

Paradoxically perhaps, in both notions (will to power and striving for superiority), one finds humility, the recognition that individual needs, desires and instincts need to be contextualised and grounded within a wider domain. Needless to say, these notions are at odds with current mainstream claims of sorting out once and for all the dilemma of the human condition via pseudo-scientific reductionism.

Examples of Reductionism at Work

By the 1950s, behaviourism, already popular in some totalitarian regimes and gaining increasing influence thanks to the work of Thorndike, Hull and Watson, was cogently developed by B.F. Skinner, who inferred human behaviour from studying rats and pigeons and who understood learning as *reinforcement*: organisms produce new behaviours spontaneously, and those that are positively reinforced “are more likely to occur in similar circumstances in the future” (Godfrey-Smith, 2010). Skinner's abhorrent views were

extended to human language and expounded in his *Verbal Behaviour* (1957), a book brilliantly ravaged by a talented young linguist, Noam Chomsky (1967), who argued that Skinner had overplayed the importance of “stimulus, response, reinforcement” (ibid.) and completely overlooked “the internal structure of the organism”(ibid.).

Now ubiquitous and dominant – and largely unchallenged, behaviourism is one of the strands of current reductive attitudes to human psychology. One of the ways in which the reduction from psyche to ego has taken place is via the medicalisation of mental distress (Sanders, 2007), as part of its sweeping reduction to the *physiological* domain. Before being an over-simplification of what it is to be human, this perspective also misrepresents the body, for body/mind is an indivisible unit, and given the teachings of phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, 2010), according to which the body is embedded in the environment, some practitioners therefore speak of “body-environment” (Gendlin, 1980; Madison, 2010). Contemporary philosophers such as Judith Butler (2009) write of the body as “social phenomenon ... exposed to others, vulnerable by definition”. Its very existence “depends upon social conditions and institutions” (p. 33). Yet for the reductionist view, the body is conceived as a *machine*, separate from the environment, an apparatus that can be more or less fixed and made to function again in order to meet the demands of the global market.

Very recent in the long list of examples of “reductionism in action” is the creation of residency programmes in addiction medicine in the United States in July 2011 (Quenqua, 2011). The U.S. medical establishment has put its full weight behind the physical diagnosis in order to “establish addiction medicine as a standard specialty among the lines of paediatrics, oncology or dermatology” (ibid., p. 2). For Dr. Daniel Alford, who oversees the programme at the Boston

University Medical Campus, “the management of folks with addiction becomes very much like the management of other chronic diseases” (p. 2), while for Dr. Nora Volkow, the neuroscientist in charge of the National Institute on Drug Abuse in Bethesda, Maryland, it is only a matter of time until the dilemma of addiction is solved, given that “it is very simple to understand a disease of the heart – the heart is very simple, it’s just a muscle – it’s much more complex to understand the brain” (ibid., p. 2).

This is only one of the many examples confirming a current trend towards a reductive view of human beings, variously manifesting as “naturomania” (Marrone, 2011), i.e., narrow-minded naturalism; as “neuromania” (Tallis, 2011) i.e., dogmatic neuroscience; or as “Darwinitis” (Tallis, 2011), i.e., the elevation of Darwin’s evolutionary hypotheses to an unassailable code of belief.

Survival of the Richest

At the heart of the popular reductionism of our times is the understanding of humans almost exclusively in biological terms, with Darwinism and post-Darwinism providing an evolutionary framework that confers authenticity and scientific validation. As psychotherapists and counsellors we have been historically in awe of hard science, motivated at times by *physics envy* and perhaps by a sense of inferiority towards a branch of knowledge seemingly presenting a more solid rationale to its claims. There is also a tradition in Western culture of what Gramsci (2007) back in 1929, had called “scientific superstition” (p. 513), namely a “superficial infatuation” for science paired with “the greatest ignorance of facts and methodologies”, engendering “ridiculous delusions and conceptions more puerile than religious ones” (Gramsci, 2007, p. 513). By concurring with the prevailing view within the natural sciences, we forget that these comprise of a wide

array of perspectives; and that they are, in turn, influenced by the social sciences and by other disciplines traditionally associated with the humanities (Bazzano, 2011b). More than ready to accept half-baked scientific pronouncements, the world of psychotherapy and counselling, in its sycophantic effort to be acknowledged as a science, often forgets the philosophical and social matrixes on which rests its own *modus operandi* and from which it draws inspiration (ibid).

Adler, who found a basis for his Individual Psychology in the social sciences as well as in the humanities, with the central notion of social interest providing a positive yardstick for measuring mental health, is for this reason the notable exception.

Mutual Aid and Evolution

There have been several perspectives in biology, contemporary to Darwin's and consistently critical of Darwinism, which were not popular because their key tenets did not advocate the Malthusian ideology of survival of the fittest befitting the needs of the Empire at the time. I have written elsewhere on the subject (Bazzano, 2011b), tracing the history of multimodal, non-Darwinian hypotheses mainly associated with Alfred Russell Wallace, through the vitalism of biologist Hans Driesch (1914), the philosophy of Bergson (1944) and the political ecology of contemporary vitalist philosopher Jane Bennett (2010). Here I would like to concentrate on one of these early evolutionary hypotheses, *mutual aid*, because of its fascinating parallels with Adler's co-operative and egalitarian notions.

Kropotkin's pivotal work, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (1902), was written in response to T.H. Huxley's "atrocious article", *The Struggle for Existence in Human Society*, in

which he famously compared the animal kingdom to a “gladiator show”, a “nature red in tooth and claw” full of the suffering of both “vanquished and victor” (Huxley, 1888, Internet file), Kropotkin’s work represented the peak of a coherent and concerted critique of Darwinism put forward over several decades by Russian writers and biologists.

The first problem with Darwin, they all said, was his Malthusianism, a view of biology and evolution replicating the division of labour and justifying the unbridled selfishness of an overcrowded industrial society in Victorian England. Commenting on Malthus and Malthusians, Tolstoy (1887) wrote of “weak and erring folk [who used] the imposing word ‘science’ to sanctify their views” (p. 173). In chapter eight of *Anna Karenina* (Tolstoy,—2003), his character Levin attacks the moral consequences of Darwin’s views (p. 26). Shortly before he died, too weak to write, Tolstoy dictated his last letter on November 1, 1910. Addressed to a son and daughter who did not share his views, he offered a last word of advice:

“The views you have acquired about Darwinism, evolution, and the struggle for existence won’t explain to you the meaning of your life and won’t give you guidance in your actions, and a life without an explanation of its meaning and importance, and without the unfailing guidance that stems from it is a pitiful existence. Think about it. I say it, probably on the eve of my death, because I love you” (as cited in Gould, 1997, p. 12).

Daniel Todes (1987) published a ground breaking paper on the topic, charting the critique of Darwinism from Kropotkin to contemporary biology, a discipline increasingly informed by ecology and by the importance of interdependent processes in all living systems. What the new biology shows is that “nature uses extraordinarily ingenious techniques to avoid conflict and competition, and that cooperation is extraordinarily widespread” (p. 537).

Travelling in Crimea, Russian biologist Kessler had seen colonies of different species playing happily together:

“Some like to entertain one another with song, others enjoy various flying competitions, still other find satisfaction in dance and in bloodless duels before a crowd of their fellows” (as cited in Todes, 1987, p. 538).

Kessler (ibid.) found that co-operation contributed to evolution in two ways:

- a) it augmented the resources and life span of a species, thus the probability that the direct action of the environment would create new forms; and
- b) it increased the possibilities that these forms would flourish.

He wrote (ibid.):

“I do not reject the struggle for existence, but only affirm that the progressive development both of the entire animal kingdom and, especially, of mankind is not facilitated by mutual struggle so much as mutual aid” (p. 238).

As with Adler’s notion of social interest and co-operation, Kessler’s and Kropotkin’s argument did not rest on starry-eyed notions of universal love but on a painstaking analysis of the dynamics of the struggle for existence. Kropotkin made this abundantly clear when he wrote:

“No naturalist will doubt that the idea of a struggle for life carried on through organic nature is the greatest generalization of the century. Life *is* struggle; and in that struggle the fittest survive... ” (as cited in Todes, 1988, p. 132).

An admirer of Darwin, as a young biologist, Kropotkin travelled to Siberia in order to study and observe natural life,

expecting to find Darwin's hypotheses confirmed. Instead, and not without a mounting sense of dismay, he found things that contradicted them.

He summarised his findings in four points:

- a) the noticeably shifting conditions clarified for him how crucial is the struggle against abiotic forces;
- b) the "paucity of life", rather than overpopulation, a common condition in nature, made him question Darwin's Malthusianism;
- c) where animal life was abundant, he saw mutual co-operation in the struggle against adversity; and
- d) he noticed that when physical conditions were unforgiving and intra-species competition allegedly at its most harsh, "the entire group's survival was imperilled". Survivors were few and "so much impoverished in vigour and health, that no progressive evolution of the species can be based upon such periods of keen competition" (Todes, 1988, p. 129).

In an article for the anarchist weekly *Le Revolté*, Kropotkin (1882) wrote:

"It is sociable species, where all individuals live in solidarity with one another, that prosper, develop and reproduce; while those which live by brigandage, like the falcon, for example, are decaying throughout the world. Solidarity and joint labour - this is what supports species in the struggle to maintain their existence against the hostile forces of nature" (as cited in Todes, 1988 p. 130).

Social Interest and the Colonisation of Public Life

As I am writing this, the debris and dust of the 2011 London riots have just cleared, with the event casting a sinister shadow on the celebrated “multiculturalism” of this city. They also cast a shadow on a notion, celebrated as well as ridiculed, and broadcasted from the plush surroundings of Chipping Norton and Oxford: that of the “Big Society”. We have now officially entered, as the recent propaganda sound bite has it, a “broken society”.

The riots were not political - we kept on hearing - it was just looting. There was also looting in Baghdad after the U.S. invasion, as documented by Naomi Klein (2011) in the newspaper *The Guardian*:

“After watching for so long as Saddam Hussein and his sons helped themselves to whatever and whomever they wanted, many regular Iraqis felt they had earned the right to take a few things for themselves. But London isn’t Baghdad, and ... David Cameron is hardly Saddam, so surely there is nothing to learn there. How about a democratic example then? Argentina, circa 2001. The economy was in free fall and thousands of people living in rough neighbourhoods ... stormed foreign-owned superstores. They came out pushing shopping carts overflowing with the goods they could no longer afford - clothes, electronics, meat. The government called a ‘state of siege’ to restore order; the people didn’t like that and overthrew the government”.

The Argentines’ looting was called *el saqueo* - the sacking, the same word used to describe the selling off of the country’s assets by the country’s elites in corrupt privatisation deals (*ibid.*). The same word “looting” could be applied to the bankers and the massive bailout granted to them by the G8 and G20 meetings. This state of affairs is possible because unbridled individualism has triumphed, while co-operation, mutual aid, and social interest have effectively become

countercultural. Novelist and writer Hari Kunzru (2011) spells this out in his own way in the newspaper *The Guardian*:

“In a society that has abandoned or devalued most forms of mutual assistance in favour of a solipsistic entrepreneurialism, it’s hardly surprising that, faced with the end of the good times, people help themselves. Fear and greed are our ruling passions. That’s true of the kids smashing shop windows to steal trainers. It’s also true of the MPs fiddling their expenses, the police officers taking backhanders, the journalists breaking into phones. Why wouldn’t they? Why wouldn’t any of us? The example has been set by our new masters, the one per cent for whom and by whom we’re governed. The ability of powerful actors in the financial markets to socialise risk while privatising profit appears, to the financial peasantry, indistinguishable from organised crime. No reason for the rest of us to stand on ceremony”.

Solidarity and social interest are here intimately linked to a clear perception of injustice and a refusal to accept the suffering of the oppressed and the underdogs. There can be no real solidarity or real ethics without considering squarely the problems of poverty, injustice, class division and xenophobia (Bazzano, 2011a). Adler’s notion of *Gemeinschaftsgefühl* - as I understand it – takes fully into account the embeddedness (Mansager, 2003) of human experience and steers away from blindly universalising perspectives that perpetrate injustice by choosing not to see it squarely. British Prime Minister David Cameron’s idea of the Big Society is a recent example of this, with its empty rhetoric in favour of local communities and its effectual suppression of the public sector in favour of the needs of the market. What the Big Society effectively succeeds in doing is setting local communities and local groups against one another “in bidding for pots of cash from a ‘big society bank’” (as cited in *The Guardian* by Walker and Corbett, 2011). Alan Walker and Steven Corbett (ibid.) pointed out:

“This is the latest stage in the colonisation of public life by the logic of the market, which began in earnest in the 1980s, under Thatcher, and continued under the Blair/Brown governments. The consequences of imposing competition for essential resources have been clearly demonstrated ... : a vast increase in social inequality, along with a decrease in community spirit or solidarity and a decrease in freedom for the majority, and especially the vulnerable, who always lose out in competitive markets. It is no wonder that Cameron addresses prospective participants in the big society as consumers of political choices. By equating the big society with the market, the concept itself is undermined.

Conclusion

A reductive view of human beings and psychology is currently being validated and justified by an equally reductive perspective in science. The reduction of body/mind to physiology, of the human being to an isolated monad, and a view of life as brutish, competitive and individualistic are not conducive to human fulfilment and actualisation but exacerbate instead the ills of our societies. Our task, as psychotherapists and counsellors, is to appraise these perspectives critically and maintain a stance of intelligent and supple adherence to an altogether different philosophy of life, one that contextualises the human ego within the domain of psyche and understands the fundamental embeddedness of our human experience. Within science too there are several perspectives, metaphors and modalities which are more in harmony with the spirit of co-operation which is crucial to human development; one of these is Peter Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid* (1902), understood as an important factor in evolution and the thriving of life and life-forms.

Adler's vision - rooted in social interest, co-operation and positive striving towards meaning and contribution - is an inspiration to psychologists, educators and whoever feels the need to contribute to the wider domain of culture and society.

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