

**WHO IS THE OTHER?**  
**SOCIAL INTEREST AND INTERDEPENDENCE**  
**IN ADLER AND ZEN BUDDHISM** \*

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Being alive is a risky business. Our innate aspiration to reach that ever-fleeting, ever-changing “state”, *homeostasis*, or at least the resemblance of *psychological health*, only seems to promise one thing: a fuller immersion in the world of *uncertainty, impermanence and becoming*; a fuller exposure to the elements, to the whirlwind of chaos, to the hermaphroditism of the psyche. Conversely, *maladjustment* offers at least *the mirage of a safe haven*, an Arcadia within the padded walls of *private logic*, where I can listen over and over to *the same familiar loop*: like Vivaldi through the speakers of a Hotel elevator, or the purring of a bluesy Starbucks chanteuse, as I sip my double espresso macchiato and reflect on *my painful feelings of inferiority* and *my unquestionable superiority*.

There, in the safe environment of the lounge at the Private Logic Club, I am alone, I am the King of the Castle. I am not *accountable* to others. I am not accountable to the Other. Please allow me to introduce myself, I’m a man of wealth and taste. I am His Majesty the Ego. And yet, in this cozy *isolation* I find myself in, I think, and my thoughts have an *interlocutor*. I write, and as I write, I envision a reader.

At close scrutiny, the fashionable deconstructionist’s potential *nihilism* of the formula “there is nothing outside of the text” is untenable: there is definitely something *outside of the text*: when the text is spoken it is spoken to *one who will hear it*. But the one who will hear the text, *the other*, has *tremendous demands on me*. She insists that I leave the air-conditioned lounge of Private Logic, and come out in the open. She insists that I quit averting her gaze and instead *encounter her existence fully*. And here in *the open, face-to-face with others*, I become their *hostage*. I can no longer answer by saying: “Am I my sister’s keeper? Am I my brother’s keeper?” for that would be *the beginning of ill-health*, and the first step in a career on *the useless side of life*.

In seeing the development of *Gemeinschaftsgefühl* as central to *a re-organization of life along a useful path*, Adler reminds us of *the centrality of ethics* in human life. Sometimes relying on the ethical foundations established by a philosopher of ethics of another time, Immanuel Kant (Manning & Chase 2002:185), Adler prepared the ground for *a radical reappraisal of ethics* as a field of endeavor that requires *courage and resilience*.

The root cause of *suffering* is, according to Buddhism, *ignorance*, i.e. a belief in the separate existence of the *I*. Adler had a different word for it: *Ichgebundenheit* -- *self-boundedness*. The self bound individual ends up undermining his own welfare for he loses touch with the natural flow of *interdependence*.

“The *self-bound* individual forgets that his self would be safeguarded better and automatically the more he prepares for *the welfare of mankind*, and that in this respect *no limits* are set for him” (Adler, cited in Ansbacher and Ansbacher, 1956/1964, p. 112).

Self-boundedness is *egotism* in its most coarse manifestation. It is based on *unreality*, it is, in Adler’s words, an “artifact thrust upon the child during his education and by the present state of our social structure. The *creative power* of the child is misled towards *self-boundedness*.” (Ansbacher 1958: 138)

Other, more intelligent, sophisticated, even “enlightened” forms of *egotism* do not stop at the all too common accumulation of expensive status symbols, but instead take into account and prize highly *spiritual teachings*. For they provide the self with the possibility of acquiring a polished aura, a marketable halo, and imbue it with the scent and the whiff of the otherworldly. One thing is to be rich, successful, and respected member of society; quite another to be considered enlightened, endowed with penetrating insight and transcendental wisdom. The man who has it all now is on his *quest to know and be it all*.

The achievement for one who were to travel this path is not buddhahood, but, as Tibetan teacher Chögyam Trungpa was fond of pointing out, *ultimate ego-hood*.

I believe Adlerian psychology provides us with the tools that will help us avoid such ruinous fall into *spiritual materialism*. *Common sense*, a constant theme, a contrapuntal note in Adler’s thought, is the ideal complement to the *transcendental wisdom* associated in Buddhism with the Bodhisattva Manjushri. The *transcendental or absolute wisdom* of Zen cuts through our core delusions, our *deep existential fears* related, among other things, to mortality and loss. Conversely, Adler’s *common sense* fully restores *the human element, the relative, conditional aspect of wisdom* which we need if we are to *walk honorably and serenely* through our days and nights on earth’s poor crust. Common sense also constitutes *the only antidote* against the most insidious of all *ego-inflations: spiritual inflation*.

It is unfortunate that Buddhism -- and Zen in particular -- such a treasure house of wisdom and compassion -- can be potentially *misused* in a maneuver that John Welwood calls “spiritual bypassing”, which he defines as “the use of spiritual ideas and practices to *bypass or avoid* dealing with certain personal or emotional unfinished business, to shore up a shaky sense of self, or belittle basic needs, feelings, and developmental tasks, all the in the name of enlightenment.” (quoted in Winter 2006)

Meanwhile, back in the Private Logic lounge, I learn *yoga and meditation*, how to profitably use my early recollections, how to *stretch* Adlerian psychology into a marketable brand of *transpersonal psychotherapy*. I have discovered that I can meditate on Saturday and indulge my greed and anger on Sunday. That I can go to endless Zen meditation retreats, and then binge on alcohol, sex, and gambling or, when everything fails, hours on end of mind-numbing television. Or that I can even take care of my shortcomings, compulsions and self-defeating strategies: be more agreeable, disciplined, sociable and trustworthy without ever leaving the air-conditioned lounge of the Private Logic Club. I can straighten out my act. I can be spiritual you know. But I ask one thing only: *to be left alone*. I don’t want to face another human being. I want nothing to

do with other people. Build those fences and shut that door. I communicate through my computer only. I joined spiritual chat-rooms. I do all my business through my laptop. All I ask is to *be left in peace*. Don't want your "social interest". There are too many immigrants out there. Too many Mexicans and El Salvadorean shouting "Si, se puede". Se puede what may I ask? OK I'll tell you what: I'll sign your petition, I am a liberal after all and we do need underpaid workforce. But please don't come anywhere near me.

The other powerful antidote in dealing with this form of hazard is of course Adler's *Communal Feeling*, or *Social Interest*. This is "more than a feeling"; it is "*an evaluative attitude toward life*" (Ansbacher, 1958:135). *Maladjustment* stems from isolation, from a defect of perception in noticing the interdependence of our existence. In the words of Ansbacher:

"Maladjustment results from inferiority feelings, underdeveloped social interest, exaggerated uncooperative goal of superiority". (1958)

True *belonging* is not achieved through *effort*. It is not a *condition* we can aspire to or move towards. We *already* belong. We are *interdependent*. Everything is *connected* to everything else. Everyone is connected to everyone else.

We are *social beings*, whose every action, word, and thought has tremendous implications and repercussion for others.

If there is *no peace in society*, this is imputable to a variety of interrelated causes. The Dalai Lama wrote:

In the past, families and small communities could exist more or less *independently* of one another.... Today's reality is so complex and, on the material level at least, so clearly *interconnected* that a different outlook is needed. Modern economics is a case in point. A stock market crash on one side of the globe can have a direct effect on the *economies* of countries on the other. Similarly, our *technological achievements* are now such that our activities have an unambiguous effect on the natural environment. And the very size of our population means that we cannot any longer afford to ignore others' interests.... In view of this, I am convinced that is essential that we cultivate a sense of what I call *universal responsibility*. (Dalai Lama, 1999: 160)

That does not involve, however, *a direct responsibility* for anything that happens in the world, no matter how far from me. That wouldn't be universal responsibility, more a universal guilt-trip, what Adler would call Redeemer complex. Cultivating a sense of universal responsibility is *A reorientation* of our heart and mind away from self and toward others.... Though of course we care about what is *beyond our scope*, we accept it as part of nature, and concern ourselves with doing what we can. (Ibid, pp. 162-163)

The Fourth Noble Truth taught by the historical Buddha as an *existential* way out of our own self-manufactured misery is expounded in the Eightfold Path. The eight factors of the Noble Eightfold Path (often symbolized by a wheel consisting of eight spokes) can be grouped into three strands -- *wisdom, morality and samadhi or meditation*.

Wisdom consists of two factors, *Right Understanding and Right Thought*. The first of these has to do with developing an understanding of the Buddha's principal teachings, including the four noble truths, the law of cause and effect, and the three marks of existence (suffering, impermanence and no-self). Right Thought is thought free from ill will, cruelty and lust. Throughout, the adjective "right" is used, a word that is not to be interpreted *dualistically*, i.e. of *right versus wrong*. On this point, there are as many views and interpretations as there are schools of Buddhism. I have heard my teacher say that right in Zen can be seen as no, i.e. right understanding is no understanding right thought is no thought and so on. My own sense of it is that no understanding takes place when we come from a more comprehensive perspective (no perspective) rather than understanding based on ego. Other times it may be helpful to substitute the word "right" with "harmonious" or "appropriate".

Morality in this context is the manifestation of the *insight and wisdom* of the practitioner, the printout as it were of one's inner state. In the Noble Eightfold Path, this is characterized by Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood. The aspiration is to abstain from lying, harsh or malicious speech, and gossip. Similarly, by Right Action, a Buddhist abstains from killing (including animals), stealing and unlawful sexual intercourse. Right Livelihood means to earn our living in such a way as to entail no evil consequences. To seek that employment to which can give our *complete enthusiasm and devotion*. That of course cuts to the core of our dualistic understanding of *work* as other from *play*.

"Outside the prison cell of dualism, work and play are *one and the same*. Work becomes a meaningful activity encompassing *the joy of play*; it becomes an instinct, an instinctual gratification, not just the 'right to work', or work as an economic necessity or a social duty or a moral penance lay onto Adam after leaving Paradise.

Philosophers at the heart of Protestantism inflated and glamorized play to metaphysical proportions, seeing it as diametrically opposed, and incompatible to, the realm of work. In a realm devoid of being, human activity is *unified*, work and play become *one*." (Bazzano 2006: 45)

It is my contention that Adler contributed to a gradual shift in *the perception of ethics in psychology*. He started from a Kantian approach, but from the beginning this was already atypically reconciled to Nietzsche's notion of the Will to Power. From Kantian, *heroic morality*, based on *abstract universals*, Adler moved to *a contingent and pragmatic form of ethics*, to an understanding of morality that no longer relies on *ontology* (on the supremacy of being) but deals instead with *the lived experience of being with others*. The seeming dichotomy between innate *Gemeinschaftsgefühl* and innate drive towards *superiority* is beautifully resolved in Adler. It is the *innate altruism* of the psyche that drives us towards *community*, and not a categorical moral imperative, a sense of duty, or the mere desire to appease the discontents of civilization.

The essential triad of *love, work, and community* presents us at all times with a presence we cannot escape: *the Other*. This also potentially moves Adlerian psychology away from mere "ego-psychology" (that was Freud's unfair criticism against Adler) without resorting to the numinous reification of the unconscious, nor to the portentous platitudes of transpersonal psychology and new age spiritualism. Adler was *a subjective psychologist*, who substituted

*masculine protest* for the sex drive (Ansbacher 1958), without incurring in the fashionable malady that took hold of his famous colleagues, namely *scientism*. As a subjective psychologist, he had a tremendous -- and mostly unacknowledged -- influence on later psychologies such as *phenomenology*, *Gestalt*, and *existential psychotherapy* to name but a few within the broad field of “humanistic” psychology. With one essential difference: all of the above are, in one form or other, confined to *a psychology of the self*, conceived as *autonomous and independent*. With Adler, the self is fundamentally grounded in *society*. Life acquires *meaning* when it *is of service to the other and to the community*. For Adler, *the meaning of life is contribution*. Even in Buber, who was to greatly influence Carl Rogers, the relation self-other is rooted in the self. Even though Buber defined *neurosis* as “the outcome of a *refusal of a self-centred self to meet another self*” (in Ansbacher), that very self still exists in *a solipsistic, individualistic fashion*. Buber’s *Thou* is a replica and a reference point for the *I*. It is *self-conscious altruism*, a sophisticated form of *egoism*. In Adler, even the ominous-sounding “striving for superiority” turns out to be “a coercion to carry out *a better adaptation*” (Adler 1973: p. 32). Not a merely *contingent, utilitarian adaptation* aimed at exploiting “the accomplishments of the striving of others” in the manner of a pampered child, but instead what Adler calls *active adaptation*. What sounded ego-driven and selfish ends up being *an act of service and liberality*. In my book *Buddha is Dead*, 2006, -- which incidentally will come out in 3 weeks -- I have argued that *Will to power*, at least in the sense Nietzsche, and later Adler, attributed to it, is at heart what Buddhists call *Dana Paramita*, the practice of *generosity*.

Martin Buber was representative of a “mild” version of Kantian ethical theory, founded on an alleged “symmetry of attitudes”. The *There I-Thou model* betrays an assumption of *symmetry*, a “commonality of ontological predicament ... which hides a possibility of *ethical neutrality*” (Bauman 1993:49). Assumed neutrality and symmetry derives from the existential postulate of *being with and being with another* (Heidegger’s *Mitsein* and *Mitenandersein*) whose importance has been overrated in both philosophical and psychological thought: “Being with another is but a moment of our presence in the world. It does not occupy central place. *Mit* means *to be aside of* ... it is not to confront the Face, it is *zusammensein*, perhaps *zusammenmarschieren* (*to be together, perhaps to march together*)”. (Levinas, 1987:122)

The neutrality of being with is *non-committal*; moreover, it is susceptible to *misuse*. Heidegger’s *subtle philosophising* did not prevent him from endorsing *Nazism*, a fact all-too often glossed over in our textbooks. And the history of *psychotherapy* has not been without its tales of *abuse and manipulation*.

German existentialist philosophy has influenced humanistic psychology greatly. It would be helpful, however, to consider briefly some of its shortcomings. Walter Benjamin’s and Theodore Adorno’s rightly question the “aura” of Heidegger’s language, expressing “autonomy without content”, fulfilling “heroic cultural models independent of the society” (Schroyer, in Adorno 2003:vii and xv). For Adorno, the “jargon” of existentialism hides a “transcendental philosophy” in which “the *empirical* is totally lost” and in which a “*mythology of Being* emerges” (ibid, xv) For the skilled therapist, staying with the *phenomenological dimension* and remaining loyal to the *empirical method* is paramount in avoiding the danger of transforming psychotherapy into a language where “words ... are sacred without sacred content, as frozen emanations” (Adorno 2003:6).

The natural outcome of *phenomenology*, at least in the path traced by Levinas, is *ethics*. This does not mean a “Code of Ethics”, for a code of ethics is not enough, it only *regulates my being with another* (a *symmetrical* relation). *Being for*, however, cannot be regulated: it is *asymmetrical*; it stems from *my responsibility and obligation* towards the other. Being with is not enough. A therapist also needs to *be for*. The client comes first in a *relational* mode where the ‘we’ is not the plural of ‘I’ (Levinas, 1987: 43)

I see Adler as the forerunner of *subjective psychology* who went beyond the *individualistic* limitations of later psychologies. In this context, *the self* is required at all times to be *flexible and creative* in the ways in its *interaction* with the world and the *measure* of its well-being (*homeostasis* or indeed *homeodynamics*) is equivalent to its capacity to *actively and creatively adapt*. We are miles away from the *glorification of selfhood* that has become a hallmark of contemporary psychology. It is also miles away from the *denigration of the self* carried out in Buddhist circles, where *the self* has become a four-letter word and where a lot of emphasis has gone to underline the importance of *no self*.

During a conversation with Buddhist writer Stephen Batchelor last December, he told me how easy it is to *misinterpret* Buddhist scriptures according to a *particular bias*:

“In a verse I came upon recently, verse 80 in the *Dhammapada*, the Buddha says: “Just as a farmer carves channels in his field to irrigate it; just as the maker of arrows fashions an arrow; just as a carpenter shapes a piece of wood, so does the *pundita* -- the sage or wise person -- *tames the self*. I think this is a very interesting idea. Equating the self to the piece of wood, the arrow, the field, makes it into the *object* with which one works in a *transformative* way. All translations in English of that verse lose that point by making ‘self’ a *reflective* function of the verb: “... so the wise person *trains himself*.’ But in the *Pali*, the word self is in the *accusative* form, exactly the same grammatical relationship to the verb as the field, the arrow, and the block of wood. It is very noteworthy to see how very learned and well-intentioned translators will miss that point. It is almost *as if a knee-jerk, a default reaction* is betrayed. Also, in his critique of the cast system, the Buddha says, ‘The Brahmin is not a Brahmin but *what he is* but by *what he does*’, and ‘A thief, a soldier, a king are not what *they are* because of their birth, but because of what *they do*’. You have what we would nowadays call a ‘performative’ conception of self. The notion of *no self*, therefore, is not about denying that the self exists, which is frankly absurd....” (Batchelor 2006)

Neither a *glorification*, nor a *denigration* of the self. Instead, its grounding in *social interest*. Not a search for mental health, or even enlightenment, both conceived in *the Darwinian spirit of self-preservation*, which, according to neurologist Kurt Goldstein is “characteristic of sick people and is a sign of anomalous life, of decay of life” (Goldstein 1995/1934). Instead, *active adaptation and expansion of one’s own limitations*, for “the tendency of normal life is towards *activity and progress*”. (Ibid). This is also one way of understanding *transcendence*. No longer *an otherworldly goal*, transcendence here becomes *going beyond my own limited ways*, beyond my obsessions and compulsions, beyond a life lived on the useless side. The *defining moment* of this trajectory is when I come to a meeting with the Other face to face, when faced with my obligation to the Other. The other’s face carries, as Levinas reminds us, *a powerful injunction and a tremendous obligation*. This does not occur solely in *the physical presence* of the Other,

but indeed *at all times*. For our very lives are *interdependent*. Our every thought, deed, our every word is imbued with the presence of the other.

Meeting another in the consulting room requires that we let go of *ideology* and become ready to enter the “fundamentally *ethical context* of the face-to-face relation (Levinas, 1969). I believe that, as an endeavour rooted in *human science* and not *natural science*, Adlerian psychology can embrace such challenge and truly contribute to *re-establishing psychology as ethical science*. There is something more valuable than *self-government and emancipation*, and this *is our responsibility towards the other*.

Enlightenment is not a *permanent* state achieved once and for all. This point is made clear by Dogen Zenji, particularly in the *Genjōkōan* fascicle -- Genjōkōan means manifesting *suchness*, a term, in the words of Abe and Waddell, pointing “to ultimate reality in which all things exist in their *distinctive individuality* and are at the same time *identical* in their manifesting of suchness” (Abe & Waddell 2002:40). Dogen wrote:

“To learn the Buddha Way is to *learn one’s self*. To learn one’s self is to *forget one’s self*. To forget one’s self is to be confirmed by all *dharma*s [manifestations]. To be confirmed by all dharmas is to cast off one’s body and mind and the bodies and minds of others as well. All trace of enlightenment *disappears*, and this traceless enlightenment *continues on without end*.” (Abe & Waddell 2002:41).

If any trace of enlightenment remains, then we have what it’s commonly known in the trade as *the stink of Zen*, that unsound sense of *spiritual superiority* which, unlike the Adlerian *strive for superiority*, has no function other than *self-aggrandizement*. I asked my partner in London what kind of literature, material, or ‘props’ I should bring with me to Chicago. She smiled mischievously and said: “Bring some clothes-pegs for the audience”. I said, ‘Why?’ She replied, “To protect them from the stink of Zen”.

Faced at all time with the presence of the Other, we are forced outside the prison cell of the *ego*, outside the bourgeois notions of *individuality*, outside *narcissistic* notions of spiritual enlightenment, as well as those *self-serving ideologies* that sustain the existence of nation-states in this day and age.

With Adler, we are moving towards a *post-modern perspective on ethics* which has found his chief exponent in the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. For Levinas, Ethics is the “non-reductive relation of the subject to the Other”:

“Being *responsible for the other* is something dreadful, because it means that if the other does something I am the one who is responsible. The *hostage* is one who is found responsible for what he has not done, the one responsible for the wrongdoing of the other. I am responsible *in principle*, and I am so before the justice that distributes, before the scales and measures of justice. It is concrete, you know! It is not made up! When you have encountered a human being, you cannot drop him. Most often we do so, saying, ‘I have done all I could!’ We haven’t done anything! It is this feeling, this consciousness, of *having done nothing* that gives us the status of

hostage with the responsibility of one who is *not guilty*, who is *innocent*. The innocent, what a paradox! That is one who *does no harm*. It is the one who *pays for the other*.

The other involves us in a situation in which we are *obligated without guilt*, but our obligation is no less for that. At the same time it is a *burden*. It is heavy, and, if you like, that is what *goodness* is.” (Levinas 1999)

Who is *the other*? A direct pathway beyond the hindrance of *selfishness*. A presence through which we come into *being*. Commenting on the teaching of the great Indian sage Nagarjuna, Dogen wrote:

“If you want to see *the Buddha-nature*, you must first *eliminate self-egoism*. You must without fail discern and affirm the essential significance of this. It does not mean *the absence of seeing*. Seeing is in itself *the elimination of self-egoism*.” (Waddell and Abe, 2004:79)

It is not possible to *see* without a *suspended attitude* (*epoché* in the words of the phenomenologists), without an openness to the immediacy of *the moment-to-moment lived experience*. The other exposes me to a realm “beyond dialogue”.

If we undertake “a phenomenological investigation into *the experience of being human*”, we find at the origin of that experience, *the ethical obligation to the other*. *Ethical obligation* is thus the natural outcome of phenomenological and existential exploration. Paradoxically, such *outcome* had been the Adlerian *prerequisite* from the very start.

It is neither a *regulatory, moralistic prerequisite* for therapy nor the “facile, spontaneous élan” (Levinas 1999:88,) of quasi-mystical “presence”, but instead, in the words of Levinas “the difficult *working on oneself: to go toward the Other* where he is *truly other*, in the radical contradiction of their *alterity*....” (ibid)

It is appalling that the contribution of *the chief instigator and original affirmer of the ethical imperative in psychology* went largely unacknowledged. Now at last contemporary psychology -- particularly schools based on the *phenomenological* approach -- have discovered *the Other*. It won't be long until it will discover the *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*.

I would like to end with two quotes. The first is from Adler :

“The capacity for *identification*, which alone makes us capable of friendship, love of mankind, sympathy, occupation, and love, is the basis of *social interest* (Adler, as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956/1964, p. 136).

It is paramount, he says, “to see with the eyes of another, to hear with the ears of another, to feel with the heart of another”. (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964, p. 135).

And the second quote are the verses of the *Bodhisattva Prayer* by Shantideva:

May I become at all times, both now and forever  
A protector for those without protection  
A guide for those who have lost their way  
A ship for those with oceans to cross  
A bridge for those with rivers to cross  
A sanctuary for those in danger  
A lamp for those without light  
A place of refuge for those who lack shelter  
And a servant to all in need.

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