

THE TASKS OF LIFE I. ADLER'S THREE TASKS

Rudolf Dreikurs and Harold H. Mosak
Alfred Adler Institute of Chicago

Work, society, and sex, Adler and subsequent Adlerians wrote, comprise the three life tasks with which each person must cope and attempt to find solutions.* However, like many other fundamental views shared by Adlerians, the concept of the life tasks is by no means clearly defined. The purpose of this paper is twofold--first, to indicate the subtle differences of opinion as they appear in the writings of Adler and his associates, and second, to enlarge the presently accepted formulations. These extensions are logical derivatives of some cursory statements which Adler and other Adlerians have made but did not develop fully.

Of more than historical interest is Adler's first formulation of the life tasks. He considered all problems confronting man as falling into three categories. "They make up reality for him...He must always answer these problems, because they are questioning him" (4, p.5). He considers the first as a consequence of our "living on the crust of this poor planet earth, and nowhere else. We must develop under the restrictions and with the possibilities which our place of habitation sets us...Every answer must be conditioned by the fact that we belong to mankind and that men are beings who inhabit this earth" (4, p.5).

This formulation is exceedingly significant and too often overlooked by those who discuss the three life tasks. It designates in clear fashion the field in which man moves. All of man's problems are presented by his very existence in a given field which is "the fact that we are tied to the crust of this...earth, with all the advantages and disadvantages which our position brings" (4, p.6).

The second set of problems in Adler's earliest formulation is presented by the fact that "there are others around us and we are living in association with them, and that we would perish if we were alone" (4, p.6). The third set of problems results from the fact that we exist in two sexes, and that the preservation of individual and group life must take this fact into account.

In this formulation Adler makes no reference to work as a life task. Yet, when he summarizes the three problems, his position shifts to include it, for he continues, "how to find an occupation which will enable us to survive under the limitations set by the nature of the earth; how to find a position amongst our fellows so that we may cooperate; how to accommodate ourselves to the fact that we live in two sexes, and that the continuance and tolerance of mankind depends on our love life. We found no problems in life which cannot be grouped under these three main problems--occupational, social, and sexual" (4, p.7).

Adler is not always consistent in his designation of the primacy or relative importance of these tasks. Later in the same volume (4, p.202), he considers the problem of relationship to other men as

For an outline of the problems included in the first three life tasks and a comprehensive bibliography of Adlerian writings in this area, the reader is referred to Mosak and Shulman (11).

first task of life and the occupational task as second. Love and sex remain the third. Later he again calls the problem of occupation the first task, but he suggests that the best method of coping with it comes through the solution of the second problem, that of living in association with others, through friendship, social feeling and cooperation. "With the solution of this problem, we have an incalculable advance toward the solution of the first" (4, p.239). The relative importance of the tasks alternates throughout Adler's lifetime; in his last book we learn that "all the questions of life can be subordinated to the three major problems--the problems of communal life, of work, and of love" (3, p.42).

In the earliest expression of his viewpoint Adler finds all of the tasks interwoven, remarking, "none of these problems can be solved separately; each of them demands the successful approach to the other two" (4, p.239). Continuing, he comments, "These three problems are never found apart; they all throw crosslights on the others; and indeed, we can say that they are all aspects of the same situation and the same problem--the necessity for a human being to preserve life and to further life in the environment in which he finds himself" (4, p.241).

Way's formulation of Adler's position is that "Adler summarized into three main groups the practical demands which the society is all the time making upon the individual's capacity for adaptation. These three great sets of problems, of Society, of Occupation, of Love are closely interlocked" (13, p.179). Way considers these three tasks as being nothing else than "those old friends of psychology, the three instincts of the Herd, of Nutrition, and of Sex. Only they appear in Individual Psychology no longer as urges of a subjective nature, but are seen from the other side, as external facts belonging to the logic of communal existence. They are absolutes, insofar as it would be difficult to conceive a society in which some form of adaptation along these lines would not be demanded of the individual. But the character, and the extent of adaptation as well, will vary with every generation and with every alteration in the structure of society. The problems they pose can never be solved once for all, but demand from the individual a continuous and creative movement toward adaptation" (13, pp.179-180).

Observing the approach of an individual to these tasks, we can test an individual's training in cooperation. However, says Way, "the human being does not necessarily develop himself at all equally, and may find himself much better equipped for the solution of one of these problems than for the others. He may succeed in occupation but not in love; or love and social contacts may both be easy to him as compared with the difficulty of earning a living" (13, p.180). It is apparent that Way, in contrast to Adler, recognizes different levels of "adaptation" or, perhaps better stated, different levels of fulfillment of one or the other of the life tasks. "There are often cases where one or the other of these demands remain deliberately unanswered" (13, p.181). However, he does share Adler's view of the primacy of the occupational task in his observation that, "Most people manage a certain amount of adjustment to the problem of work, since their existence depends on it. The problem of

love and marriage is not so immediately urgent. It may be postponed, or even be avoided altogether, especially, if work has been sufficiently successful to act as compensation" (13, p.192).

Wolfe parallels Way's views. He states, "In contrast to the other two great problems, failure to solve the problem of sex need not result in personal disaster. For this reason, aberrations in the solution of the sexual problem are most numerous. The tyranny of our stomachs compels us to work lest we starve, and the tyranny of loneliness compels us to make certain gestures toward our fellowmen, lest we become insane. But men and women can evade the solution of the sexual problems and still live...It is the problem most frequently left unsolved. In no other problem does the seeker after guidance find so many obstacles in his way. Many false solutions of the sex problems are passively tolerated by society, despite their anti-social meaning" (14, p.201).

Dreikurs (7), too, finds the love task comparatively rarely fulfilled at the present time. Defective social interest can more readily reveal itself in this task because this intimacy of love and sex, tests their capacity for cooperation to the utmost and destroys the distance which can usually be preserved in occupational and social relationships. Moreover, the newly emerging relationships of equality between the sexes presents problems in courtship and marriage which did not exist previously (5).

The above discussion demarcates clearly the difference of opinion centering about two points. In the first instance, there is the disagreement, Adler himself reversing his viewpoint, as to which of the tasks takes precedence over the others. With respect to the second, Adler assumes, with other Adlerians dissenting, that "none of the three problems of life can be solved separately" (4, p.239). In an even stronger vein on the topic of the unity of the life tasks, he comments, "For the answer we give to these three questions, by virtue of our style of life, is seen in our whole attitude toward them...everyone's style of life is reflected more or less in his attitude toward all of them" (3, pp.42-43).

This implies other issues which find Adlerians at variance. The third difference of opinion is as to whether a person's life style determines all of his approaches to the tasks of life. Adler seems to imply that this is the case. If this were really so, then a person could not be helped in his adjustment without parallel changes in his life style. Yet experience demonstrates that much help can be given to individuals within the framework of the existing life style. Dreikurs' work in child guidance, especially, (6,9) resides upon the premise that many individuals fail in the life tasks because of lack of knowledge and training in effective methods of coping with contemporary problems rather than through ineffective life styles. Mosak (10) offers a rationale to explain why Adler feels these changes must involve a change in life style and Dreikurs does not. If the life style is seen as a modus vivendi, rather than as a modus operandi, then many types of behavior are possible within the same life style. These behaviors may be modified or changed even when the basic apperceptive mode remains relatively intact. Therefore, we are probably justified in saying that while a mistaken life style

certainly is not conducive to successful fulfillment of any life task, in some instances the individual may even be able to operate adequately despite his mistaken concepts and limited social interest. Adler often pointed out that one can never be sure of a person's social interest, unless it is tested. If a person lives under particularly favorable conditions, he may not reveal his inadequacy until circumstances present more subjectively stressful problems for him to solve.

A fourth implication of Adler's discussion of the life tasks is that, were a man to be capable of solving them, he would be free of inferiority feelings and not fall victim to neurosis. A typical statement of this opinion reads, "If a man can be a good friend to all men, and contribute to them by useful work, by a happy marriage, he will never feel inferior to others or defeated by them" (4, p.262). True enough, a person with such an amount of social interest is not likely to have any inferiority feelings. However, we should be forced to borrow Diogenes' lamp to find such a person. Even could such a person be found, Way would challenge Adler's statement, "An individual can succeed in solving all the elementary tasks of life, yet still become neurotic if he cannot succeed in reaching his subjective goal of perfection. Even successful persons thus fall into neurosis because they are not more successful. Moreover, success along any other line than that which fulfills the fictional goal has no influence on the person's estimate of himself...Outward adaptation is no criterion in itself. One may be outwardly successful, yet a failure in one's own eyes. Conversely, one may be a failure from the world's point of view, yet sufficiently content in oneself" (13, p.180). He proposes that "the individual's first duty is to himself, and the resolute independence is the only guarantee to his social usefulness" (14, p.181).

If "the individual's first duty is to himself," is he really confronted only with these three tasks and can he be satisfied merely by solving the problems of occupation, association, and sex? Maybe we should recognize the existence of other tasks, all interrelated, and therefore, affecting the solution of the three tasks, but transcending them. Neufeld (12) offers such a proposal. He speaks of the "Four 'S' problems--Subsistence, Society, Sex, and Self." He refers to a statement by Adler which seems to indicate that the individual may be a problem to himself and thereby be part of the "outside world" with which he must deal. "The individual adopts a certain approach, a certain attitude, a certain relation toward problems of the outside world (the outside world includes the experience of one's own body, as well as the experience of one's psychic life)" (2, p.7).

An earlier statement of Adler's emphasizes the same point. "This outside world includes the individual's own body, his bodily functions and the functions of his mind. He does not relate himself to the outside world in a pre-determined manner, as is often assumed. He relates himself always according to his own interpretation of himself and of his present problem" (1, p.5). This makes it quite clear that man is a problem to himself. Everyone has to learn not merely how to get along with people, with a person of the opposite sex and how to keep a job; he also is required to learn how to

get along with himself, how to deal with himself. This, then, seems to us to be the fourth life task.

And there seems to be a need to consider yet another task of life, besides those mentioned before. Each individual is confronted with the task to relate himself to the Universe, which is becoming more and more clearly an extension of our life on this earth. We are no longer merely "living on the crust of this poor planet earth" as Adler phrased it. We extend our life experience into the Universe, with the need to re-evaluate our place on this earth in relatedness to the Universe, to space and time, to eternity.

The problem is not new. Man always established his relationship with transcendental powers and forces in his religions. But our changing concepts of the Universe, of life and of ourselves makes it necessary to re-evaluate concepts and beliefs which were handed down to us throughout the ages. We can, therefore, speak of a fifth life task, the need to adjust to the problems beyond the mere existence on this earth and to find meaning to our lives, to realize the significance of human existence through transcendental and spiritual involvement.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Adler, A., "The Fundamental Views of Individual Psychology," Intl. J. Indiv. Psychol., 1935, 1 (1), 5-8.
2. Adler, A., "The Neurotic's Picture of the World," Intl. J. Indiv. Psychol., 1936, 2 (3), 3-13.
3. Adler, A., Social Interest: A Challenge to Mankind. London: Faber & Faber, 1938.
4. Adler, A., What Life Should Mean to You. London: Allen and Unwin, 1932.
5. Dreikurs, R., The Challenge of Marriage. New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1946.
6. Dreikurs, R., The Challenge of Parenthood. New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1958.
7. Dreikurs, R., Fundamentals of Adlerian Psychology. New York: Greenberg, 1950.
8. Dreikurs, R., "Psychotherapy as Correction of Faulty Social Values," J. Indiv. Psychol., 1957, 13, 150-158.
9. Dreikurs, R. and Soltz, Vicki, Children: The Challenge. New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1964.
10. Mosak, H.H., "Early Recollections as a Projective Technique," J. Proj. Tech., 1958, 22, 302-311.
11. Mosak, H.H. and Shulman, B.H., Introductory Individual Psychology: A Syllabus. Chicago: Alfred Adler Institute, 1961.
12. Neufeld, I., "Application of Individual Psychological Concepts in Psychosomatic Medicine," J. Indiv. Psychol., 1955, 11, 104-117.
13. Way, L., Adler's Place in Psychology. London: Allen and Unwin, 1950.
14. Wolfe, W.B., How to Be Happy Though Human. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1932.

SOCIAL INTEREST IN ACTION: A REPORT ON ONE ATTEMPT TO IMPLEMENT ADLER'S CONCEPT

by George H. LaPorte
Psychotherapist, Alfred Adler Clinic, New York

It seems appropriate that, soon after the publication of the Ansbacher's most recent book (1), an article should appear dealing with a concrete instance of the abstraction to which Alfred Adler referred. He described "social interest" as, "a striving for a form of community which must be thought of as everlasting, as it could be thought of, if mankind had reached the goal of perfection. It is never a present-day community or society, nor a political or re-