**A PSYCHOLOGY OF MEANING** by Gina Stepp

Adler named his approach Individual Psychology for its emphasis on viewing the individual holistically. Far from emphasizing individuality in the sense of separateness or singleness, it insists that the whole person includes biological issues, psychological attitudes, and family, social and community ties. To Adler, who understood the idea of indivisibility inherent in the Latin roots of individual, no practitioner could hope to understand any person’s problems apart from all of these contexts.

Indeed, modern approaches to both psychology and medicine are increasingly moving toward a biopsychosocial model in assessment and treatment, and Adlerians have found little difficulty adapting to this outlook. Psychologist Abraham Maslow wrote in 1970 of his increasing respect for Adler as the evidence supporting his approach mounted, noting that Adler’s holistic view of the individual was particularly ahead of its time.

Summaries of Individual Psychology are not difficult to find, but many of these reduce Adler’s theories to a level that robs them of much of the meaning he attached to them. This is particularly ironic, because for Adler, meaning was all-important.

“No experience is in itself a cause of success or failure,” he wrote in his 1931 book, [What Life Could Mean to You](http://www.oneworld-publications.com/pdfs/what_life.pdf). “We are not determined by our experiences, but are self-determined by the meani*ng we give to them; and when we take particular experiences as the basis for our future life, we are almost certain to be misguided to some degree. Meanings are not determined by situations. We determine ourselves by the meanings we ascribe to situations.”*

Adler accordingly addressed his psychology to discovering meaning in areas common to the human experience. He did not espouse a specific religion or political creed himself, but he deeply appreciated religion’s potential for offering positive meaning to his patients, in sharp contrast to Freud’s view of religion as a group neurosis. “The best conception hitherto gained for the elevation of humanity is the idea of God,” wrote Adler. “There can be no question that the idea of God really includes within it as a goal the movement towards perfection, and that, as a concrete goal, it best corresponds to the obscure yearnings of human beings to reach perfection.”

Adler renounced both the ability and the responsibility to define an “absolute” meaning of life, preferring to leave that to his patients. He “was always very particular never to disturb a patient’s religion, or his philosophical creed,” records biographer Phyllis Bottome, “and most careful to tell his disciples never in any way to let their treatment interfere with a patient’s beliefs.” Instead, Adler believed that people could be shown where their personal approach to life, which he called their “lifestyle” or “style of life,” was getting in the way, preventing them from fully living their beliefs.

The concept of lifestyle is important to Individual Psychology. In Adler’s usage, it refers to styles of approaching life based on the expectations we have of others and of the world. We cull these expectations from our interpretations of life experiences and influences. They may include beliefs such as “hard work pays off,” or “life is unfair,” or perhaps in the case of someone who has had an abusive childhood, “the world is a harsh and dangerous place.” These styles, or approaches, have a far-reaching effect on our ability to cooperate with others. They provide the scaffolding for the meanings people construct, and they affect their attitudes and behaviors as they seek either to fulfill or to avoid life tasks that Adler saw as common to everyone.

In What Life Could Mean to You, he expressed these tasks in the context of three constraints everyone must face. First, he said, because we live on a small planet with few and precious resources, we each have a responsibility to work consistently to improve our life and the lives of all people on the earth. Second, none of us is the sole inhabitant of the earth, and our weaknesses make it impossible to survive without the help and fellowship of other human beings. And third, the preservation of humankind also depends on successful procreation.

According to Adler, we face these constraints continually as we seek meaning in the domains of work, society and intimate relationships. It is when people apply mistaken meanings to these domains that problems arise. He defined mistaken meanings of life as those that work against the most fundamental and undeniable principle of mental health—that each individual must develop an interest in the welfare of others. “There is a law,” he remarked, “that man should love his neighbor.” As his theories developed, Adler intended that his whole psychology should rest against that backdrop.

This hints at the chasm between Freud’s and Adler’s theoretical orientations. It also gives context to Freud’s apparently pointed discussion in Civilization and Its Discontents, where he essentially asked, “Why should I love my neighbor as myself?” He condemned it as an unreasonable imposition, a “grandiose commandment” to which he took great exception.

Adler’s focus on this principle as the basis of all “true” meanings of life made it impossible for him to share Freud’s view of humankind as a collection of individual drives, with the libido—the sexual drive—forming the basis of all neuroses. Rather, to Adler, neuroses resulted from an unhealthy focus on perceived inferiorities and mistaken ideas of superiority. These mistaken meanings arise from a person’s interpretation of their biological and social limitations. People could free themselves from their self-imposed prisons only through well-practiced interest in the welfare of others. Love of neighbor was not simply a part of Adler’s psychology; Adler himself described it as the ultimate goal. He thus saw Freud’s attempt to free the libido without addressing people’s innate self-centeredness as “a most dangerous and anti-social theory.” Adler was all for allowing people to fully express their personalities as long as their drives were focused in the direction of what he called [Gemeinschaftsgefühl](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Gemeinschaftsgef%C3%BChl).

**SOCIAL INTEREST AND LOVE**

Adler’s term Gemeinschaftsgefühl has often been rendered “social interest” or “social feeling” in English translations of his work. But Paul Stepansky, a historian of psychoanalysis, argues that if this had fully encapsulated Adler’s meaning, he would likely have used the more common sozial Gefühl. Indeed, both English phrases fall far short of conveying the significance Adler attached to the term. Stepansky’s preferred translation, “community feeling,” may be only marginally more helpful.

In What Life Could Mean to You, Adler explained it this way: “There have always been people . . . who knew that the meaning of life was to be interested in the whole of humankind, and who tried to develop social interest [Gemeinschaftsgefühl] and love. In all religions, we find this concern for the salvation of humankind. In all the great movements of the world, people have been striving to increase social interest, and religion is one of the greatest strivings in this direction. Religions, however, have often been misinterpreted”—a problem that might be overcome, he wrote, by “a closer application to this common task.”

The context of this passage suggests that “social interest” is actually synonymous with what Adler called the law of “love thy neighbor,” and it is difficult to argue with his conclusion that religion has often been misinterpreted through its failure to apply this law.

Similarly, many of Adler’s psychological concepts have been misconstrued through failure to understand them against the backdrop of Gemeinschaftsgefühl. For instance, in characterizing the Viennese schools of psychology, Adler’s former pupil Viktor Frankl suggested that Freud’s view of human motivation could be characterized by the “will to pleasure” and Adler’s by the “will to power.” Yet, as some analysts have pointed out, Adler’s view of power motivations can hardly be described so simply. It might better be explained as the “will to change for the better,” the “will toward mastery of problems,” or even the “will to perfection.” Adler’s associate Alexander Müller referred to it in terms of “creative power,” or the power that allows us to let go of mistaken goals and redirect our efforts.

Adler certainly saw in human beings a desire for mastery, a desire [to change](https://www.vision.org/visionmedia/article.aspx?id=298), to grow, to overcome. Viewed against the backdrop of Gemeinschaftsgefühl, it is a far cry from Nietzsche’s “will to power”—the desire for dominance over others.

Adler clarified his version in his discussions of superiority and inferiority, two additional terms which, like power, do not mean quite the same thing in today’s vernacular as they did to him. From his perspective, it was the individual’s interpretation of superiority (attainment of mastery or excellence) or inferiority (awareness of weaknesses or deficits) that determined its value in motivating behavior. He theorized that people are more comfortable with not just barely meeting a positive level of contribution but at least somewhat exceeding it. In a mentally healthy outlook, an awareness of one’s deficits or inferiorities will thus be a positive force for constructive change toward a certain level of excellence or superiority. In fact, Adler believed that human progress has always depended on this force.

On the other hand, if a person has a mistaken idea about achieving a positive state—an idea not aligned with Gemeinschaftsgefühl—then the awareness of his deficits may induce an “inferiority complex” that influences him to either withdraw completely from societal responsibilities or conversely to seek domination over others. Such a person would not be operating by a true meaning of life according to Adler; his or her lifestyle would be based on what the psychologist termed a “private intelligence” that cannot be shared with or benefit others because it is not concerned with cooperation or outgoing concern.

While Adler cautioned his students to “be careful not to make too hasty an assessment” of someone else’s underlying motivations, he noted that “we can find in all goals one common factor—a striving to be God-like. . . . In old religious disciplines the same objective is visible: Disciples should educate themselves in such a way that they become God-like.” But some people, Adler acknowledged, take a “wrong turn” in their interpretation of God-likeness: “Insane people often express their goal of God-like superiority quite openly. They will assert, ‘I am Napoleon,’ or ‘I am the Emperor of China.’ They wish to be the center of worldwide attention, to be constantly in the public eye.” Such individuals interpret the goal of God-likeness as one of gaining power for themselves rather than of serving, helping and giving pleasure to others.

Adler saw the will of humans to change weaknesses into strengths, whether manifested positively or not, as being directly connected to an innate desire to be Godlike. “To some degree we are all caught up in this meaning—God and God-likeness,” he observed. “Even the atheist wishes to conquer God, to be higher than God.”

This striving for God-likeness, when applied to Adler’s three primary domains of meaning in life (work, social connection and love), can produce any number of goals. Whether or not those goals are compatible with Gemeinschaftsgefühl determines whether a person’s behavior could be characterized as healthy or neurotic. But so long as that behavior is helping him or her attain the chosen goals, the behavior will continue. It is only when a person can be convinced that a goal “was badly chosen,” Adler insisted, that behavior could change.

**EVERYTHING OLD IS NEW AGAIN**

This emphasis on helping patients modify their beliefs and ways of thinking in order to change behavior and overcome difficulties is only one concept that has earned Adler citations as “the earliest of the cognitive therapists.”

Among the most widely used modern therapeutic approaches are cognitive-behavioral therapies (CBTs). Similarities between Adlerian theory and modern CBT approaches can be seen in concepts such as a patient’s “underlying schemas” (Adler’s “lifestyle”) and the emphasis on the establishment of a cooperative and collaborative therapeutic relationship in which to encourage change. Founders of certain models within the CBT approach, including Aaron Beck and Albert Ellis, have acknowledged Adler’s influence, and while a full assessment of his reach is difficult, many of the principles underlying his approach are also found in attachment theory, the positive psychology movement, and the study of trauma and resilience.

In 1987 Carl Rogers, whose person-centered approach to therapy bears many marks of Adler’s influence, wrote to fellow psychologist Heinz Ansbacher about his exposure to Adler during his New York internship. “I was shocked by Dr. Adler’s very direct and deceptively simple manner of immediately relating to the child and the parent,” Rogers wrote. “It took me some time to realize how much I had learned from him.” Frankl also acknowledged Adler’s significant influence, as did Rollo May, who—like Frankl—studied with Adler in Vienna.

Recognition of his impact did not seem to be Adler’s aim, according to his biographer. Bottome records a conversation that took place shortly before his untimely death (see the biographical sketch, “[*To Heal and to Educate*](https://www.vision.org/visionmedia/biography-alfred-adler/41041.aspx),”). A friend commented with regret on the lack of credit afforded to Adler by many of his former colleagues. “My enemies have always blessed me,” Adler gently contradicted. “It is true that when they do not resent my ideas, they very often run off with them and call them their own; but they will spread them all the more readily on that account! I believe that I have made some discoveries, and whether they are called ‘Adler’s’ or not does not concern me. I believe, however, that those discoveries are true and that, therefore, they will be of lasting use to mankind; and this makes me happy.”

In fact, some of his discoveries might have been better termed “rediscoveries” and as such should not be called Adler’s at all. As he pointed out in Social Interest: A Challenge to Mankind, profound examinations of human nature and personality exist in ancient writings, which he said point to the understanding that people cannot be treated as islands apart from their [interpersonal connections](https://www.vision.org/visionmedia/social-relationships-introvert-vs-extrovert/50363.aspx). Considering Adler’s Judeo-Christian roots, it is not surprising that he cites the Bible as one example of these ancient writings, particularly in light of his emphasis on love of neighbor as a law for humanity. The foundation of Judeo-Christian belief is that the whole law for mankind can be distilled to two principles: love of God and love of neighbor (see “[*The Bible on Relationships: Love Your Neighbor*](https://www.vision.org/visionmedia/article.aspx?id=37947)”).

Adler focused most of his attention on the second point, but there are clear indications in his writings that he also allotted significant value to the first, not only in his references to human strivings to be Godlike but also in his regret that God was becoming a “more meager” concept, being thought of merely as “forces of nature.” He insisted that Individual Psychology could regard such a directionless mechanistic understanding only as “an illusion,” likening it to psychologies that reduce humanity to a collection of drives.

Nevertheless, Adler did not overlook the difficulties religion presents to the scientific method. “While the materialistic view lacks the goal, which after all is the essence of life,” he said, “the religious view, far ahead in this respect, on the other hand lacks the causal foundation, for God cannot be proven scientifically; He is a gift of faith.” The more concrete this faith, Adler theorized, the more substantial people’s success in striving to overcome and to enrich the lives of others.

It seems remarkable that Adler showed such a tendency to give credit to religious principles, particularly considering the fact that his adult children would later describe their family as atheistic. But his observation was that resistance to religion arose from the “not infrequent” abuse of it rather than from the nature of religion itself, and he did not therefore intend his psychology to supplant religion. “[Individual Psychology] will be satisfied in the practical application of its science to protect and further the sacred good of brotherly love where the religions have lost their influence,” he wrote in Religion and Individual Psychology, a 1933 book coauthored with Lutheran minister Ernst Jahn; “I regard it as no mean commendation when it is emphasized that Individual Psychology has rediscovered many a lost position of Christian guidance. I have always endeavored to show that Individual Psychology is the heir to all great movements whose aim is the welfare of mankind.”

Despite this lofty goal, Adler’s theory has not escaped its share of challenges and criticisms. For instance, some have raised concerns about the lack of a clear basis for defining the level of Gemeinschaftsgefühl that would constitute mental health. Others have seen sinister overtones in the influence of Adler’s “conformist values” on his psychology, such as his conclusion that monogamy is the most socially responsible approach to marriage and that sex should not precede the marriage commitment. While Adlerian theory has certainly evolved over the decades, some have argued that in current practice it still needs updating.

Supporters of Adlerian theory nevertheless cite its implicit values as the reason for their attraction to it as an approach to changing human behavior. These values—that each of us is bound to encourage, help and contribute to others by the law of “love your neighbor,” and that each of us is capable of making the necessary changes in our lives to fulfill this responsibility—are not new. They have been part of the Judeo-Christian ethic for millennia. But they have yet to be practiced widely enough to bring about the changes in society that Adler envisioned.

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