

Private Logic and the Logic of Social Living

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Abstract

This essay is adapted from the author's address delivered as the Heinz L. and Rowena R. Ansbacher Memorial Address on June 26, 2008, at the annual meeting of the North American Society of Adlerian Psychology in Harrisburg, PA. The author discusses private logic and attempts to define the iron logic of social living, or "common sense."

This summer I am pleased and honored to give this Ansbacher Lecture at the NASAP meeting (and also the president's talk at the IAIP Congress in Lithuania at the end of July). Rather than accept these as heavy obligations to impress and shine, I've taken these as opportunities to learn and see if I could make sense of what I've seen as holes, or soft spots, in Adlerian theory and knowledge. (The IAIP talk will delve into the question of Adler's notion of the "innate potentiality" of social interest using evolutionary psychology and social psychology to explore the correctness and limits of the notion.)

For tonight's talk I thought I was taking on a topic for which ample studies would exist and I could make some sense of the materials and find an acceptable answer. It did not quite turn out that way, but I have enjoyed the journey.

I've been at almost all NASAP meetings for the past 44 years. I've been a professor at the University of Texas for 40 years. (This talk is not to pad my vitae. I'm well past concern about tenure-my concerns now have to do with longevity.) I am at the point where I know what I know and what I do not know. The ratio has changed through the years-now I know much less than what I don't know, and what I know seems much less important and interesting than what I don't know. So rather than try to wow you with what I know, I will try to involve you in what I don't know, or didn't know, and see whether you will wonder with me and after the talk wonder beyond me. I think the question for the lecture is interesting, important and worth pursuing. I

think the answer I'll present is, at best, an adequate start, but, I hope, worth including in your efforts to develop a fuller answer.

Simply put, we, Adlerians, do a wonderful job of identifying and explaining individuals' private logic. We do so because it is therapeutically useful, a fabulously challenging and fulfilling exercise, and an essential aspect of Adlerian theory. In the unity of Adlerian theory, private logic necessarily but significantly incorporates all of the elements of the theory.

Private logic diverges from common sense. We believe and attest that the degree of divergence, the discrepancy between private logic and common sense, what Adler called the iron logic of social living, is an indicator or measure of mental health. However, the thought that inspired this presentation, the realization that rather stunned me, is that we, Adlerians, have done almost nothing to define and describe the iron logic of social living.

Funny enough, as we practice, we are comfortable. We assume that we know the common sense, maybe because we so often see with great clarity the divergence, the discrepancy. One of my earliest therapy clients was referred to me for a diagnosis (the referring therapist suggested schizophrenia) so I could be the second signature on the commitment. Through lifestyle analysis, the client and I agreed that his goal was to be perfect in mind, body and soul-his words and he thought them reasonable. After considerable conversation and a long look through history to find someone equally perfect whom he could emulate, he lowered his sights toward making a living and a job in which he did good. He mentioned that he might want to be a teacher but said he did not qualify because he did not play the piano. I didn't get it so he explained that all his grammar school teachers had played the piano. Wanting to be perfect in body, mind and soul was beyond the common sense. In a more immediate and practical way, not exploring being a teacher because he could not play the piano was beyond the common sense.

I know this and you know this. We can usually, I think, identify what is not common sense. But do we know and agree on what fits the iron logic of social living, what is the common sense social living? I don't think so.

So, I am going to go over the meaning of private logic with some case examples. And then try to figure out what the iron logic of social living might be, what the common sense of social living might be, and how we might understand and explain it for ourselves and others.

Private Logic

Griffith and Powers (2007) explain,

Private logic, a term Dreikurs and H.L. Ansbacher each adapted from Adler's "private intelligence," describes the fictional line of reasoning proceeding from private meaning, that is, meaning premised upon the person's private and unique valuation of self, others, and the world, and what life requires of him or her. Private logic, *as if* reasoning that dysfunctional, erratic, and anti-social behavior is necessary, is the fiction of a hidden argument. Private sense in a pattern of conviction is not conscious. It is an artifact of the psychotherapeutic transaction, revealed by indirection, *as if* particular thoughts and ideas were operating to require self-defeating or otherwise damaging behavior....In Adlerian therapy an individual's behavior (thought, feeling, and action) is explained to the client, as if it were a conclusion required by a private logic, as client and therapist uncover the private meaning which the client has relied upon for answering such questions as: (a) What kind of person am I? (b) What kind of a world is this? (c) What must I, as a person such as I am, do in a world such as this is in order to make a place for myself? In sum, the effort to clarify the private meaning asks, "What would have to be true to make an otherwise particular, peculiar, and socially senseless pattern of behavior, intelligible." The *Individual Psychologist* thus assumes that the person is acting as if the behavior were an intelligent response in the situation, according to a private logic, answering the requirements of a private meaning. (p. 81)

Dreikurs (1973) saw private logic globally, saying "it comprises all unconscious ideas, concepts, intentions and goals upon which the individual acts." He said, "The fundamental

interpersonal conflicts are reflected in the intrapersonal conflict between the conscience, which recognizes the social obligations, and the personal desires, which may stand in the way of cooperation. The conflict between the individual's private logic (private sense) and his conscience (common sense) may be resolved in three ways": as neurotic, psychotic, and psychopathic.

Private logic is the particular, orderly way a person thinks and thus acts in keeping with his or her ideas, concepts, perceptions and apperceptions, intentions and goals, held knowingly or not.

Dreikurs (1973) said that "we can distinguish three psychological processes as part of the private logic. They are long-range goals of the lifestyle, the immediate goals within the situation, and the hidden reasons which justify a person's actions, deeds and thoughts" (pp. 31-32).

Helpful, yes, but I submit the heart of private logic is not its parts-the important element for "connecting" with the client is not long-range or immediate goals or the reasons-it is the *reasoning*. What we are trying to do in therapy is to follow the individual's thinking, show the person we follow it, and show where it leads, and show how, usually, slight alterations in line with common sense would change the individual's goals and especially outcomes.

Examples of Private Logic—and the Logic of Social Living

The example I just gave, of the fellow who wanted to be perfect in mind, body and soul before truly venturing out into the world, illustrated I hope rather dramatically the nature of the gap between private logic and common sense. Just about everybody on hearing him would have gasped and tried not to laugh and not say, at least, "That's nuts," "No one can be perfect." I surely gaped at him. His goals obviously were at odds with the practical knowledge almost

everyone has, at odds with common sense, the logic of social living. The discrepancy is not usually that great or clear.

Here are other examples of private logic and the discrepancy with the common sense logic of social living taken from recent clients. I will very briefly mention the presenting problem, a short summary of the early recollection interpretation, their basic mistakes, and the heart of the common sense they are missing.

MMM. World-class stutterer, very bright guy, worked cleaning restaurants after closing.

- *Early recollection summary.* I am an insignificant nonentity in a disinterested world, where people are too busy to notice me. Therefore, I have to make mischief and prove my weakness so that people will know I am there. They probably won't be nice to me, but it's better than not being noticed.
- *Basic mistakes.* Exaggerates the importance of being noticed—in the spotlight. Doesn't believe he can belong on his own merits. Fights from weakness (“A weak, threatened person can be good, not strong, but can control the situation in devious ways”; “I have to fight, struggle to get someone to notice.”).
- *Commons sense.* You cannot always be noticed, in the spotlight—most wouldn't want to. Just be noticed as you are for what you are and do. Why make yourself look or be weak just to be noticed?

A. D. Vance. College student with seven years of experience as a counseling patient for his anxieties and primarily his recurring thoughts of molestation.

- *Early recollection summary.* I am a little screw up who keeps trying, an outsider, one who doesn't know how things work. In a world that has rules, some of which you can understand and some of which you cannot—where things just happen that

affect you. Others/big people know/understand. I don't. I can only plug along and try to be good and do right—assert myself as if I were big and okay.

- *Basic mistakes.* Everything would be okay if—I understood everything, could control all the outcomes, always did well and good.
- *Common sense.* No one can understand everything, control everything, and always do well and good.

Patsy Ann. Panic attacks—2 years cognitive behavioral treatment. Whole bevy of restrictions on her movement and activities.

- *Early recollection summary.* I am a good kid—just on my own I'll be nice and okay. While the world goes on in kind of threatening, demanding and unpredictable (unjust) ways. I can try to avoid the demands, and protect against the threats—be nice and hope—but I'd better watch out—it (they) still might get me.
- *Basic mistakes.* Life should be perfect. I should be perfect. If life isn't perfect, there's nothing I can do.
- *Common sense.* Nothing's perfect, and there is nothing you can do about that—accept it and you can make things better.

MD. Manic depressive—1 year out of hospital and electroshock therapy.

- *Early recollection summary.* I am really nothing—sort of an observer of life and a pawn of life's whims. Life can be beautiful—or scary—it can give to you or take from you—and I don't know why. Therefore, I can only just go along—do my thing—grab my fun where I can—and see what happens—get what I can get. I'm scared it will be bad, excited it'll be good.

- Basic mistakes. My way (get the goodies): Yay! Their way (judge the cost/benefits, hope to get the goodies): Maybe boo!
- Common sense. It's not all about you and what you get. It may be nice to get your own way but not dangle up and down on other's whims.

The Courage to Be Imperfect—the courage to be average—is implicit in all of these cases.

Understanding the Iron of Social Living

Alterations in line with commonsensical thinking change the individual's goals and especially outcomes. These examples are intended to show that, basically, we have a sense of common sense—we have a sense of the logic of social living.

Griffith and Powers (2007) note that H. L. Ansbacher and R. R. Ansbacher identify the “iron logic of communal life” as Adler's phrase to convey recognition of the fact that human beings are embedded “in a larger whole” and that the experience of life itself makes demands upon the individual which form the “absolute truth of human experience.” (p. 61). Adler (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964) stated that “human psychological life is not capable of doing just as it likes but is constantly confronted with tasks which have arrived from somewhere. All these tasks are inseparably tied up with the logic of man's communal life” (p. 128).

Common sense (Anonymous, 2008)..., based on a strict construction of the term, consists of what people in common would agree on: that which they “sense” (in common) as their common natural understanding. The phrase is often used to refer to beliefs or propositions that—in [the speakers'] opinion—most people would consider prudent and of sound judgment, without dependence upon esoteric knowledge held by people “in common.” Thus “common sense” (in this view) equates to the knowledge and experience which most people allegedly have, or which the person using the term believes that they do or should have. Whatever definition one uses, identifying particular items of knowledge as “common sense” becomes difficult. Philosophers may choose to avoid using the

phrase when using precise language. But common sense remains a perennial topic in epistemology and many philosophers make wide use of the concept or at least refer to it.

Some artificial intelligence people are trying to determine and catalog common sense. One estimate I read was that in the last five or six years they had listed what they believe to be 2% of the material needed to cover the spectrum of common sense beliefs. In effect, the artificial intelligence effort is to collect the raw data—the situations and understandings thereof—with the aim, eventually, of abstracting what is common among them—essentially to factor analyze from all situations to a common factor—a common sense. That approach does not seem particularly efficient and, surely, is not the strategy used by individuals who come to understand a common sense in their lifetimes within in their own, limited, experience. Now, I wonder about these brilliant people's efforts, but it makes no sense to me that a common sense would be defined by thousands of discrete bits of information. A common sense should, I think, be based on some theme, or premise, that can be generally, commonly, understood and then applied in thousands of situations. What might that common theme be, and why is it so elusive?

The private logic of each of these cases, people, reflects the basic inferiority—superiority axis essential to Adlerian theory. Each in his or her own way construes a superiority, distinctiveness, needed to belong. In its own way each is a put down of others—thereby a “put up” of oneself. These are your basic misapprehensions, basic mistakes, exaggerations, and distortions.

Even these people, as well as most people, sense the common sense—it just does not or should not apply to them in their private logic. (And it is most annoying to them when their private logic is revealed, and they see the discrepancy with the iron logic of social living which, eventually, they can come to perceive).

I have heard many criticisms of Individual Psychology through the years. My two favorites are that Adlerian psychology is simple, too simple, and that Adlerian psychology is just common sense. I love those criticisms. I take them as compliments.

There are all kinds of models I could use here, but, to keep it simple, I'll use the 4R model from Corsini's (2007) 4R Individual Education schools. The 4Rs are Respect, Responsibility, Resourcefulness, and Responsiveness. The people of these cases do not show respect for others (or themselves), do not take responsibility (as others, the world, holds some dominion over them), are not resourceful (except as it promotes their superiority), and are not responsive to the practical and ordinary understandings of their community. In brief, in Adlerian language, they do not show social interest—their private logic is at variance with social interest. If they had social interest, they would feel at one with others, not better or lesser than others; they would feel equal to others, not higher or lower; they would know that they are similar to others, and they would be respectful, responsible, resourceful, and responsive to a common good of their community.

A problem with this formulation is that not all divergence from these egalitarian principles lies in individuals' private logics. Power and the superiority issues within societies and between societies serve to reinforce individuals' same issues and limit the extent of individuals' social interest. Individuals can compensate for their feelings of inferiority by identifying with a group which they accept as superior. The ideal social interest requires identification with humanity, as if one were at one with all others. Our identifications with our race, religion, nation, region, gender, neighborhood, university, football team, and the like raises us above others, serves to raise us above the out-group we make of those who are not of our in-group.

MacLeish (1980) stated that “ethnicity is a form of collective conceit, . . . If a man doesn't think much himself—and in secret most men don't—he takes his pride in his tribe” (p. 99). If we

could take our pride as equal members of the human race many world problems would easily be resolved as would many of our personal problems and our private logic.

This review has still not identified a basis of common sense, the iron logic of social living. But I think, I hope, it has moved us in a direction that points to *an* answer. In a nut shell, if the discrepancy between our private logic and social interest is minimal, we should be able to recognize common humanity and thereby common sense. And we should have a reference for acting on our common sense. We can't have much common cause if our personal goals deviate from common goals, if our actions deviate from common goals. If our personal goals cohere with the goals of our brotherhood of equals and our actions do also, we have the referent.

Let me describe in a few words the journey that got me to this point. I toured Google and the U of Texas catalogue picking and reading anything that might help me understand the basis of common sense. Amazingly there was very little that had to do with the common sense of social living. There was nothing common about philosophers' treatises on common sense and most referents were to practical, tangible common sense—I will never again jump off a seesaw when someone else is at the top. That's just common sense. Anyway, I kept looking. I had an idea but felt I needed some confirmation or support.

I have a pile of articles, anecdotes, quotes, and stories in a miscellany file. I delved through the pile looking for an old fable by the Brothers Grimm that I have long liked for no reason I knew of. Let me read it to you. It's called "The Old Man and his Grandson."

There was once a very old man who was almost blind and deaf and whose knees trembled. When he sat at the table, he could hardly hold his spoon; he could hardly hold his spoon; he spilled soup on the tablecloth, and when he'd taken a spoonful some of it ran out of his mouth. His son and his son's wife thought it was disgusting and finally made the old man sit in a corner behind the stove. They brought him his food in an earthenware bowl and, worst of all, they didn't even give him enough. He looked sadly in the direction of

the table, and his eyes filled with tears. One day his hands trembled so much that he dropped his bowl and it fell to the floor and broke. The young woman scolded him, but he said nothing and only sighed. She bought him a wooden bowl for a few kreuzers, and from then on he had to eat out of it. As they were sitting there one day, the little four-year-old grandson was on the floor playing with some pieces of wood. "What are you doing?" his father asked. The child replied: "I'm making a trough for Father and Mother to eat out of when I'm big." Husband and wife looked at each other for a while and burst into tears. After that they brought the old grandfather back to the table. He ate with them from then on, and even when he spilled a little something they said nothing.

By George, I think he's got it. The parents saw everything we've been speaking about. They were faced with the common sense, accepted the logic, and returned to the normal equality of social living.

I looked through my piles of Adlerian papers and pamphlets. And I looked, maybe for the hundredth time, at Dr. Dreikurs's "The ABC's of Guiding the Child." How many times have we glanced at it, looking further for the practical stuff? How does it begin? What is the first tenet he presents: The Golden Rule.

I felt much better seeing that long ago Dr. D got to the same place I finally got. I would like to say that we, Dr. D and I, submit that the referent, the basis, for the iron logic of social living is the Golden Rule. As he wrote: "This is the basis of democracy, since it implies equality of individuals." It's so simple. It is the basis of common sense and makes good common sense itself.

But when we think of it, as we live our daily lives, as we try to make a decision or a choice in a time of crisis, when faced with a dilemma, we have trouble acting on the Golden Rule. Why? Because, we necessarily filter the situation, as everything, through our private logic, and, as our private logic differentiates us from others on hierarchical grounds, we can't apply the Golden Rule.

How can we do unto others when what we want them to do unto us is maintain the myths of our own superiority and private logic. An individual's private logic is perfectly logical once you understand the person's assumptions. The assumptions of private logic implicate superiority and the straightforward (or very devious) particular strategy for striving for superiority—and therein lies the discrepancy between private logic and the common sense.

If you, to the degree that you do, assume your oneness with humanity and need not strive for superiority, then you can treat others as you would like to be treated—because they are like you. If individuals could do that, they would be able to play the game of life without pretense, without vanity, without the stress and strain of fighting for and maintaining status and could live by the Golden Rule. If groups, states, and nations could do the same, we would be better able to live in peace and friendship with each other.

Adlerians understand this as we understand social interest. The rest of the world tries, I think, to understand this as they set the Golden Rule as a standard for living. All the world's major religions and many lesser known religions now and through history have as an essential tenet some version of the Golden Rule.

The Golden Rule is about as close to a universal ambition as I can think of. The Golden Rule is an attainable method for living with community feeling. It may be the inevitable way for a socially interested person to live. Social interest, in this formulation, is a prerequisite for living by the Golden Rule. The Golden Rule is the standard for socially interested living—the Golden Rule is the standard of the iron logic of social living.

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