

The Danger of Being Right¹

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I will begin the topic by referring to the fact that my father, Rudolf Dreikurs, was very much concerned that the principles of Adlerian psychology should be applied to all areas of human relationships. He viewed the Adlerian principles as being applicable to all human relationships: the family, the school, the workplace, and international relationships between countries. I remember many times, when conflicts between nations occurred, he would say “if only the politicians had studied Adlerian psychology.

Adlerian Psychology views problems from a social perspective. The fundamental motivation of all humans is social. Every individual, by the fact that we are a part of a species that is social by nature, wants to and needs to belong. That belonging is to the human society, the human group. The contemporary problems of crime, suicide, psychosis, or war would not be present in a society in which people accept each other as equals, in which everyone can feel belonging.

When Adler saw the terrible condition of Europe just prior to World War II, he wrote more and more of the need for humans to bind together, to accept each other and support each other as equals in the world community (Adler, 1937). Instead of people pushing each other down, and competitively engendering feelings of inferiority which then lead to striving to be superior, humans could live together in cooperation. After Adler’s death in 1937, Dreikurs continued to speak out on the need for people around the world to learn and apply Adler’s ideas

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and methods. Dreikurs was convinced that if people learned Adlerian knowledge and skills, the kinds of conflicts and acts of power and revenge, seen around the globe, would not occur.

Dreikurs firmly believed that the problems of our time were not due so much to humans not wanting to live together in cooperation, but rather that they do now know how. Like Adler, Dreikurs was convinced that living in cooperation requires skills that can be learned. He began ICASSI many years ago, primarily so that people around the world can learn these skills.

Dreikurs viewed it as necessary that once we learn these skills we teach it to others. It is not enough to solve our own problems. Each one needs to go out into the community and teach Adlerian principles and skills to other people, because that is the only way that this knowledge can be spread. Dreikurs believed it is not enough just to counsel and help an individual; we need to help all of society.

It was in the context of these thoughts and in the knowledge that I would speak on the topic of “The Danger of Being Right,” that I went home from last year’s ICASSI. When I opened a newspaper on the airplane last August, there was, unfortunately, a great deal occurring in the news that provided information for my talk. I will give you a few illustrations from the International Herald Tribune of August 3rd, 1987.

In one example, the Islamic Jihad group sent a videotape of two French hostages that were thought to be prisoners in Lebanon. In a typewritten note, the group said that the French hostages could not be released until the demands of the group were met. Listen to what the note said: “The French government is not moving to solve this issue in the right way.” I’m quoting, “in the right way.” The group described how it is not right because the government is doing what the devil of America wants, and so on. The point of this item for the present is not who they were

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blaming, but their statement, that it is not being solved in the right way. A second article described a terrible killing in Mecca. The Saudi Arabians blamed Iran, Iran blamed Saudi Arabia and many, many people were killed, because from the point of view of each one, that one was right and the other was wrong, In a third article, Palestinian guerrillas in Israel show the commander of a Israeli military police. I don't have to go on. I give you three examples of three different groups, who in the name of being right killed each other, were convinced they could kill more, and that this is justified because they were right.

What I presented from news items of August 1987 involved power and revenge: "if you do not do what I want--and what I want is the right way--I will punish you. I will punish you." We can see that the same mistakes occur when people among nations cannot solve their problems through Adlerian principle and methods.

Let us now turn attention to a more general question: What do we mean by being right?

Absolutes versus Probabilities

In its extreme, "being right" means that we have some absolute truth. It certainly does not allow the possibility for change. It does not allow dialogue and discussion, because if you are right, there is no point in discussing anything further. From the Adlerian point of view, it is the extreme of an authoritarian way of thinking.

In modern times and science, scientists acknowledge that there is no absolute right. Modern science talks in terms of probabilities, not absolutes. Dreikurs himself would say "this may not be right. We are only dealing with probabilities." This was a very important part of Adler's writings. Adler insisted that whatever truth his psychology had, it was always a relative

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truth, not an absolute truth. An important part of Adler's democratic approach was that when he worked with clients, he did not say to them "this is so," but only "it could be so."

Adler had a wonderful expression, which is not correctly understood. One can find it in Adler's 1933 book, The Meaning of Life (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956) The expression in German is "Alles kann auch anders sein" and in English it is "everything could also be different." Sometimes this is not used correctly by modern Adlerians who apply the expression differently than Adler intended. What Adler meant by the statement is that any interpretation we give to a client, or to a child, is always a probability statement. What the expression means is that if I, as a therapist, explain something to a patient, it could also be a different explanation, it could also be another way.

When Dreikurs would interview a child or a parent, that is, persons of any age, he would always first ask permission "May I tell you what I think?" Then when he gave his thought, it was always, "Could it be?" and he would suggest one idea. That is, if the person indicated, "no, this is not the case," Dreikurs, like Adler, would offer another hypothesis or explanation. This was done because finding an explanation for the individual's problems, for identifying the goals, was a cooperative, shared process.

It is important to note that Adlerians are not afraid of making guesses or hypotheses, since we do not have to have absolute right in what we say. In 1933 Adler wrote (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956): "I believe that I am not bound by any strict rule or prejudice but prefer to subscribe to the principle: Everything can also be different (Alles kann auch anders sein). The uniqueness of the individual cannot be expressed in a short formula, and general rules -- even those laid down by Individual Psychology, of my own creation" (p.194). He went on to say that

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even his own rules, his own ideas, need to be modified in terms of the uniqueness of each individual.

Another way of looking at what is meant by being right is related to the first point, regarding absolute rather than relative right. The second point is the assumption that there is some kind of objective truth. From an Adlerian perspective that is not fully acceptable, since Adlerian theory postulates that all human understanding, all of our knowledge, is subjective. Our knowledge is filtered through our own person processes. This means that at any given time, many points of view exist. Whatever we might say is true represents some kind of consensus that spans, or cuts across, many individual subjectivities. We may have fairly objective knowledge, but it represents a communal process in which many individuals' subjectivity is abstracted and coalesced, and the core of agreement remains.

A third meaning that concerns being right is the implication of superiority: the one who is wrong is inferior. This third point to consider in regard to being right is that “to be right is to be superior.” The phrase “being right” suggests that “what I think is more right than what you think.”

When we respect each other as equal we are willing to consider that we may both be right. However, that clearly suggests that there is no single, absolute right. Being right in an absolute way is an exclusive property that cannot be shared. If one has relative concepts of being right, then it is surely possible for five or twenty people all to be right. Moreover, if we not identify being right with being superior, it is also possible to accept the idea that we may all be wrong. When we take “being right” away from the concept of superiority and put the concept of “right” in the model of human relationships based on equality and mutual respect, then it is

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possible for all of us to have at least some aspect right and to have at least some aspect not right. Then it has nothing to do with our being more superior or less superior.

A fourth point is that being right very often reflects vanity. From the point of view of vanity, some of us would like to be more sexy than others. Some of us would like to be stronger and physically more powerful. In that same sense, some of us want to be more right than others, and we justify all of our power, retaliation, and poor human relationships on the basis of being right.

Dreikurs used this idea when he would give a lecture to a public group. He would say that being more intelligent does not give you more status. Many in the audience were very upset, because in a society where being right gives people more status, the concept -- that a person who is not as intelligent nevertheless has equality of worth with a more intelligent person -- did not fit into people's beliefs. "Being more right" (due to being more intelligent) in the public's view also meant "having more right." Note that "having a right" is a different meaning for the word "right." "Having a right" refers to privilege and status, and people generally believed "right and smart" should be superior to "wrong and dumb." It was many years before Dreikurs could get the public listeners to understand that in the sense of every person being valued, respected, and having a fundamental worth, this is the equal right of all individuals, no matter how intelligent they were.

The concept that only those who are right have more rights is as dangerous as is the concept that those who have more power and strength should have more rights. From both points of view, the child inevitably must be inferior. The child certainly does not know as much as the adult, is not as intelligent from the point of view of knowledge; and he or she certainly does not

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have as much strength and power. A system of human relationships which is built on the concept that only those who know right have a right, is as un-Adlerian and undemocratic as a system built on the concept that only those who have strength and power have rights. It is interesting to note that many intellectuals insist that a social system based on inequality of strength and physical power is unfair, but they are perfectly willing to insist that a system based on an inequality of knowledge and being right is ok, hat the people who have the greater knowledge should be superior.

From the point of view of **Gemeinschaftsgefühl** -- that we are all of value and belong to the human society, that we all have a right to human dignity, to being heard and listened to, to receiving respect and equality -- inequality of any kind along these lines becomes a violation of what Adler called “the iron-clad logic of social living.” When we accept the Adlerian principle of group problem solving, democratic discussion of alternatives, looking at many points of view in order to be sure that we respect the rights of the individual as well as the rights of the group, then we do not have a tendency to use “being right” as an excuse of “having more rights than others.” Within the concept of social equality, the danger of being right is minimized.

The Democratic Process

Let us now consider the reverse of the question discussed so far. That is if being right has some negative aspects, what are the alternatives? Some people think that we have to adopt a laissez-faire system. Since nothing is ever objectively right we should not have rules, we should not have order. Everybody should just do what he wants. For example, science, which in a sense prides itself on “being right,” has been challenged by some of our citizens today because they see the danger that can come from being right. At least in the United States, we are witnessing a very

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strong anti-scientific movement in our population. For example, you might have heard that the president of the USA and his wife were guided by astrology, which fits the pattern of some contemporary beliefs although, admittedly, many people were not pleased. The period of the 1960s in the United States was the period of a kind of people's revolution. "Give the people their right" was a belief, and it included a populist attempt to overthrow science and scientific explanations. The 1960s was a time when new courses were introduced at the universities, on witches and devils. In an effort to move toward what people perceived to be democracy, many individuals were will to conceive of widely different truths, including witches, devils, and astrology. It was popular to adopt points of view that did not fit scientific thinking.

This is unfortunate. It reflects the kind of problem Dreikurs spoke about, when in our attempt to undo authoritarian thinking, we mistakenly move to a laissez-faire thinking and believe in democracy. It is true that science can be authoritarian, that the scientist says "only I am right," and that scientists do not allow alternative explanations. However, just like in the family, when the parents say, "I am right and there are no alternatives allowed," in order to undo authoritarian thinking we do not have to go to a laissez-faire system. The democratic solution does not get rid of order. It does not get rid of rules. It simply treats them in a different way than the authoritarian system does.

An authoritarian science can be replaced by a democratic science. This is probably much more helpful for a society than a laissez-faire approach to science, in which everybody thinks he or she knows better than a scientific answer, or in which people believe that one does not need science at all. In a family, when we try to find solutions to problems we do not, each of us, just say what we think and then take a vote. We discuss it. We try to understand what the various

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points of view are. And we try to come up with solutions which work best for each person and the family as a whole. In science, also, we cannot take a vote and ask a hundred million people to vote on what they think is right about the cosmos, engineering, or medicine. We need to have a discussion and verifiable evidence. Popular votes do not make right, either. In a democracy we make decisions based on knowledge and understanding. We do not reject expertise or evidence merely because we reject an authoritarian approach.

A Populist solution may be just as dangerous as an authoritarian one, if it does not allow dialogue. We can replace an authoritarian approach to knowledge and to understanding, but we need not in the process throw out knowledge, understanding, and wisdom.

The problems that I have pointed out show that democratic solutions demand a great deal from all of us. We do not look for a populist pragmatism. Rather, the responsibility lies with all participants to help find solutions that are effective. In democratizing our thinking we need to replace absolutes with relative statements, and to know that what is right for the moment may not be right tomorrow.

What is right for one group may not be right for another group. We need to remember that Adler (1933/1979) talked of **Gemeinschaftsgefühl** in terms of the whole human species, in evolution and in terms of a long-term future: “*mankind_sub specie aeternitatis*” (pg.40). Thus, what might be right for one group may not be right for another group, and our concern for **Gemeinschaftsgefühl** means we have to try to work toward solutions which serve all mankind.

When we are concerned with relative right we are concerned with the needs of the situation. This requires sensitivity and understanding of many points of view. A solution which may be right in one situation may be completely inappropriate in another one, and we need to

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learn to tell the difference. When we focus on relative right we seek to understand each situation in its wholeness, to learn to make suggestions for what is right based on the whole situation of the moment. Adler's emphasis on holism, on the integration and unity of the whole, means that what is right in one situation may be wrong in another because it is a different whole. It is a different totality. When we think holistically we know that we need to find solutions in many situations, that are often different from each other. When we think in terms of "mankind sub specie aeternitatis" we will not let group pressure or popular vote decide what is right, because in the name of group pressure individuals hang people, shoot people, and do all kinds of things that violate the rights of human dignity. When we recognize the creativity of the human society and the decency of human beings, this allows us to find solutions; we will have the courage to try, because we basically have the courage to not be right. We can have the courage to be imperfect because we do not have to be right: Our goal is to meet the needs of the situation, now and for the future, by respecting others and valuing human dignity.

Summary

Social equality is the only assurance for stability in social life. This pertains to the danger of being right, for if we use being right as a basis for establishing superiority, then this only adds to the instability of social life. Any effort at superiority will do that. Thus we have power conflicts between countries and we have paranoia, depression, and suicide in individuals who seek to be right by pushing others down. A relative approach to right means that we respect alternatives. We allow for many points of view and attempt solutions that are most likely to fit the situation.

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Science represents verification and communal knowledge within order and rules, and we can have alternatives within science. When we use as guidelines the welfare of the human race, the human species, then solutions become clearer.

We can develop Social Interest and Adlerian skills. We can learn cooperation, problem solving in groups, meeting the needs of the situation, and respecting each other's subjectivity. Adler's psychology is a goal-directed psychology, which means it is always oriented in terms of the future. We move in a direction that is forward into time. A solution that we find to work for now needs to protect the future, as well.

If we feel responsible for the human species, not just for society today but for 10, 100, and 1000 years from now, then we train our children, our friends, ourselves, to think of solutions that will help human welfare not just today but tomorrow. We always move towards a goal in the future, and if in solving problems today we help mankind tomorrow, we are being responsible in terms of Adler's concept "sub specie aeternitatis."

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