

# **Community Feeling and Striving for Completeness as an Expression of immediate Experience.**

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Adler's basic concepts of community feeling and striving for perfection or completeness are often taken as ethical norms. Yet in his citations Adler focuses on something immanent to life itself that can be lived, suffered and experienced. In this paper I will present ways of interpreting community feeling and striving for completeness insofar as these concepts represent the immediate experience.

Psychoanalytically oriented Individual Psychologists tend to devaluate Adler's later writings and especially his concept of "Gemeinschaftsgefühl", as being moral philosophy and prevention education. To me, it seems difficult to apply the common meaning of theory versus practice to Adler's approach. All his concepts derive from his own experiences.

After the First World War, his attention turned to the emotional state of the client. To me, it sounds like some sort of personal development, as if Adler were evaluating his own sense of community feeling, especially in the years 1927 to 1933. In this paper, I will concentrate on community feeling as an expression of immediate experience, applying a phenomenological perspective.

Community feeling for Adler (1933a) is the ability for empathy, a “feeling of belonging and embeddedness” (p. 97) and a connection with the cosmos, nature and humankind.

In 1931, Adler comprehended fully the function of early experience. He stated that the client “can make use of nothing else but what he derives from his (earlier) experience”; and “it is impossible to proceed other than by applying earlier experience” (1931c, p. 16). An early recollection in therapy is an immediate experience, arising in the here and now of the therapeutic session. Adler (1929a) continues: “In the interpretations of the therapist, the patient has to recognise and feel his own experience” (p. 74). During the last decades there has been wide-spread discussion in Psychoanalysis about the correct interpretation to give to this notion and whether or not to emphasise the emotional impact of the client’s immediate experience.

### The Concept of Immediate Experience

In the term “immediate experience”, immediate means not mediated by words or concepts. And in this resides the problem: as long as the experience is immediate, it cannot be conceptualised; as soon as the experience can be expressed in words and is conceptualised, it is no longer immediate.

In a seminar, the physicist Hans Peter Dürr (2002) found a metaphor to describe an immediate experience on the brink of consciousness, in contrast to the awareness and subsequent conceptualisation of such experience. The metaphor he used was of being under water and coming out of the water. As long as I am under water, I do not know that I am wet; I only know this when I get out of the water. If I get out very fast, I am still wet and may still know how it was under water. This is the moment of conceptualising something passing by. In this metaphor, coming out of the water corresponds to an immediate experience.

The specialist in infant development Daniel Stern (2004) conceptualised “immediate experience” and called it “present moment” (p. 23). He defined the state of “Being-Present” as a kind of existential affect. The present moment is not the verbal narration of an experience. It is the original and lived experience which provides the raw material for a subsequent verbal recounting. The felt experience of the present moment is all I am aware of, while living in the moment.

Subjectively, the actual psychological content appears to slide unnoticed into awareness or sometimes to jump into awareness without our knowing. The present moment often is hard to grasp because we usually are jumping out of an ongoing experience very fast, in order to gain an objective position, or the perspective of a third person. We try to stick to what we have just experienced by capturing it with words or images. These efforts of instantaneous retrospection try to objectify the experience. And from this distant position we can ask: “Can't it be explained by this or that?” In asking “this”, we are overlooking “that” with each jump we move from one present moment into another. This means we actually jump into the

new experience of reflecting about the passing experience, and that, in fact, is the new experience.

Present moments emerge in intersubjective contact. We can read the intentions of another person and feel in our own body what the other feels. We can directly sense the intentions of another person by observing his or her goal-directed actions. And when the other moves, we feel as if we were feeling the movement in our body as well. So far, this is Daniel Stern's description of the present moment. I would add that immediate experience is the experience of life as movement. To explicate this thesis, I will combine two concepts: Stern's concept of the present moment and Adler's concept of life as movement.

#### Adler's Conceptualisation of Life as Movement

*As early as 1914* Adler addressed the problem that as soon as we start describing them, "dynamic movements have to be captured with static words and images" (1914, p. 30). *In 1926* he asked: "Do we know for certain that all of us are movement, that our life can only be grasped as movement?" (1926a, p. 137, my translation). *In 1932* his answer was: Yes. "We interpret the psyche as that part of life which contains all its moving structures" (1932b, p. 72). Adler continues: "We come close to an understanding only if we conceptualise the psychological expression as movement. We capture the movement, consider it in such a way as if it were a frozen movement, a form in a resting state" (1932c, p. 264, my translation).

And the following year, Adler (1933a) realised that the human mind was “too easily accustomed to translating everything that moves into a form and not to observing the flow, but only the frozen movement which has taken on a solid form” (p. 96). And he stated that from the beginning, “Individual Psychologists have dissolved in movement what we perceive as form. As a result, we believe that to live means to develop” (p. 96).

### The Uniform Movement of the Life Style and the Dissolving of its Rigid Form

I consider our Life Style as a uniform movement, which in its extreme can produce a compulsory repetition. We could not live without habits, without a routine that allows us to perform the same things every day without any effort. We look at the world with our opinions and fixed ideas.

My image of the Life Style as a uniform or repetitive movement is the circle, a circular movement. We move along the line of the circle with an endless repetition of thoughts, feelings and actions. If this movement takes on a rigid form, we call it the vicious circle of neurosis. Subjectively, we follow the unconscious goal of overcoming the difficulties in life. Since our goal is a fiction or an illusion, we will never arrive at the goal and our striving will never end, but will always follow the circular line. What could interrupt this endless striving? Only a new experience, overwhelming in its traumatising impact or in its inspirational intensity, can break up the form and throw us out of the fictive stability of the circular line. We feel without foundation, weak and insecure until a new movement becomes form again, shaping a new circle of Life Style. This new experience is the immediate experience of the present moment. It breaks the old form, dissolves it in movement again.

Stern (2004) described and defined such specific experiences and called them “now moments” and “moments of meeting” (p. 151). “Now moments” arise when the usual therapeutic set-up is disturbed. They require an answer, which is too specific and too personal to fit into our usual ways of relating, and which means that our usual togetherness has become form, a frozen movement. If a “now moment” is answered in an authentic way, the “now moment” becomes a “moment of meeting”. The “moment of meeting” emerges suddenly, accompanied by fear, intense emotions and a break in the usual therapeutic process. The present becomes very intense like in moment of truth. The state of consciousness is expanded. The tension in the relationship loosens. An “open space” is generated, where something new can emerge. So far this is Stern’s description.

Yet at the same time, in the “moment of meeting”, something emerges which I consider to be the basic component of Adler’s notion of “community feeling”. In my view, community feeling is, at its base, the experience of a deep connectedness to the client’s own life, to fellow human beings and to the world. In this moment of meeting, we could say that two circular movements touch each other, overlap and, for a moment, there is a revelation of life, of aliveness together with a new communal feeling. At this experiential level, the emerging community feeling manifests itself as immediate experience of life itself.

Life Experienced in its Tendency Towards More, Towards an Enhancement

*Awareness implies a distance to life.*

In the next part of this article, I will refer to the philosophical theory of life phenomenology according to Michel Henry (1992) and Rolf Kühn (Funke & Kühn, 2005). This theory deals with the problem whereby the appearance of life in our awareness still implies a distance to life, yet we are nevertheless affected by life itself without any such distance. I believe this distance is the transition from an unaware immersion within the felt experience to the awareness and conceptualisation of the experience. Being affected by life is the deepest level of experience where, in the words of Henry, “life takes immediate possession of itself” (Henry, 1992, p. 203).

*Life is inescapably bound to itself.*

As soon as life becomes aware of its “own inner nature” (Henry, *ibid.*, p. 206) as being bound inescapably to life itself, anxiety emerges. This phenomenon was observed by Adler (1931d) in neurosis: “Anxiety is one of the most distinct manifestations of the sense of inferiority” (p. 26).

Adler’s statement that community feeling and sense of belonging “cannot be denied by anyone” (Adler, 1926b, p. 166) and that you cannot escape the Life Tasks (Adler, 1931a, p. 6) corresponds in its deeper sense to the radical theory of life phenomenology stating that you cannot escape life. Stern (2004) has also observed the same phenomenon, that is to say, there is phenomenologically no chance to escape the present (p. 25).

*Life tries to unburden itself from the weight of existence by the production of fictions.*

If life becomes unbearable, it tries to change in order to unburden itself from the weight of its own existence (Kühn, as cited in Funke & Kühn, p. 35). This is achieved through its own efforts, in a never ceasing inner tension. Adler (1933b) also noticed these “pressing feelings of tension of incompleteness” (p. 34, my translation).

How is this change achieved? According to Kühn, (as cited in Funke & Kühn), it is done through the “imagination or the production of fictions, images, comparisons and symbols” (p. 32). Fictions do not exist “without an underlying affect of life presenting itself as unsafeness” (ibid., p. 34), which Adler (1912) also perceived as feelings of “unsafeness” (p. 8). ).

*Fiction can become a pathological error of life.*

The question is how do fictions as expressions of life become pathological? According to Adler (1931b), striving for personal power is nothing but a “distorted striving toward perfection” (second part, p. 203, my translation). Every fiction aims at controlling life. This can be achieved in a healthy or in a neurotic manner, depending on the nature of the fictions, whether or not they are more or less flexible or rigid (Adler, 1912, p. 42; Funke & Kühn, p. 35). This means that the error of life is the futile attempt to transform the subjective life into a “permanence” (ibid., p. 37). In my opinion, this permanence could be seen as “frozen movement” (Adler, 1933a, p. 96).

*The two tendencies of life: 1) to achieve safety, enhancement, supplementation; 2) the production of fictions to overcome difficulties in life*



This means there are two expressions of life: the first is, in the words of Kühn (as cited in Funke & Kühn), the pure “affectivity of life” (p. 34) or, in the words of Adler (1912), a feeling of “unsafeness” (p. 8), and the second is the production of fictions. Yet both expressions of life show a “tendency”, a “teleological element” (Funke & Kühn, p. 39). Adler described this teleological element only for the production of fictions. According to Kühn (ibid.), the inner life also shows a tendency, a tendency to achieve safety, a “feeling of supplementation, though life remains fully itself” (p. 36). Adler used the same expressions as Kühn for this tendency. According to Adler, life is “movement with a direction towards more, towards a supplementation and enhancement, towards a power offering safety, without losing sight of permanent unsafeness” (Adler 1926a, p. 137, my translation).

Though Adler did not develop this train of thought further, to me, his phenomenological expressions seem to be waiting for further conceptualisation. In 1929, Adler called “the community feeling and the imminent striving” for completeness and perfection “the deepest motivating forces of a person's inner life” (1929b, p. 94). I interpret the “imminent striving” as the tendency of life itself towards enhancement and supplementation. This striving should not be understood as an activity of personal will, not as ego-activity, but as the activity of life itself. According to Adler (1933a), this tendency “is inborn as something that belongs to life, a striving, an urge, a development, something without which we simply cannot visualise life” (p. 96).

In life phenomenology (Henry, 1992; Kühn, (2005), Adler’s (1913; 1932a) terms “affect”, “affectivity” or “emotionality” (Adler 1913, p. 116) and “life force” (Adler 1932a, p. 67) are

categories of life. Both represent the foundation for every mastering of life (Funke & Kühn, p. 39), but also the foundation for every distorted striving for a fiction or an illusion.

### Summary

To sum up, I would like to convey my conviction that everything of which we can have knowledge, derives from immediate experience, with the exception of the natural sciences where the results or “what is experienced” are restricted by the design of the experiment. Immediate experience occurs in a brief moment, it passes by and can only be intuitively and retrospectively captured in words. This means that immediate experience is characterised by moment and passing-by or movement. This is why I have combined these two concepts: Stern’s (2004) concept of the *present moment* and Adler’s (1933a) concept of *life as movement*. If I follow Adler’s thoughts about movement and its frozen forms, I realise that in the immediate experience of the present moment, we are affected by the spontaneous, as yet unformed life. The trouble is that we may find explanations shaping the experience of life into a certain form that we already know.

The immediate experience of life is a feeling of connectedness, because life occurs in connection with others since we need each other. This means that community feeling as this feeling of connectedness is a manifestation of the immediate experience of life.

According to the philosophical theory of life phenomenology, life itself shows a teleological element, a tendency for enhancement and supplementation, and we are given the capability to experience this tendency. At the experiential

level, we may talk about the fullness of life or we may talk about somebody who lived his or her life fully and intensively; in these expressions we intuitively feel this tendency for enhancement.

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