

Volume 1

The Neurotic Character

Fundamentals of Individual Psychology & Psychotherapy

Volume 1 of *The Collected Clinical Works of Alfred Adler (CCWAA)* consists of Adler's magnum opus, *The Neurotic Character: Fundamentals of Individual Psychology and Psychotherapy*. The first edition was published in 1912, the second in 1919, the third in 1922, and the fourth in 1927. The version chosen for *CCWAA* is the fourth edition, which reflects Adler's most mature thinking. While the systematic structure of this book is not customary today, it was common in Adler's time for medical textbooks in German-speaking Europe. The book is divided into two main parts: Theoretical Part I and Practical Part II. The Theoretical Part consists of general conceptual background, while the Practical Part contains studies on particular symptoms, syndromes, and neurotic constellations. Adler uses the term "part" instead of "chapter" in this book. So we find Part I-I, I-II, I-III; Part II-I, II-II, II-III, and so on. The six different prefaces, which provide a historical context for the book, are summarized first.

The first preface, **To The Reader** (1911), is signed collectively by "The Directors of The Vienna Society for Free Psychoanalytic Studies," formed in 1911 after the Adlerians left Freud's group. Here Adler makes clear that free and critical study of psychoanalysis is needed, because psychology is a young science that should not close itself off from the freedom to research new solutions. Also, the Individual Psychologists thought it fair and just to be judged only on the basis of their own work.

In the **Original Publisher's Preface** (1912), Adler states, "The aim of the publications of The Vienna Society for Free Psychoanalytic Studies is to apply the empirically obtained results of the psychology of neuroses to the further study of philosophic, psychological, and pedagogical questions." (In this first sentence, Adler describes the nature of all his work: an interconnected system of philosophy, psychology, and pedagogy.) More specifically, he introduces a theory of personality based on observations that reveal "a picture of a series of developments, a microcosm, a symbol of the whole." The direction of behavior "is provided by an unconsciously set and constantly active goal." This goal

is part of the child's "life-plan," created as compensation for "the comparative inferiority of his physical organs and fundamental insecurity about life." The focus of Adler's theory of neuroses will be uncovering this life-plan and goal, rooted in the feeling of inferiority, (sometimes in organ inferiority), "psychic compensations, and security tendencies."

In **Adler's Preface to the First Edition** (1912), he defines Comparative Individual Psychology as an empirical science, dedicated to examining the individual's "fictional idea of personality" as it relates to the neurotic character and neurotic symptoms. "The individual becomes a unified whole in which all parts work together toward a common goal showing a purposive dynamic flowing through every feature of psychic existence, assuming an even clearer expression in the psychology of neuroses and psychoses." Thus, Adler declares his opposition to Freud's fundamental theory of personality and pathology.

In **Adler's Preface to the Second Edition** (1919), he comments on the world war that has occurred between the first and second edition, dramatically illustrating the victory of "the striving for power" over "the logic of human social life, the community feeling." He asserts that this striving for power is a compensation for the inferiority feeling, and defines the purposes of Individual Psychology (IP): "to lead the way in demolishing the striving for personal power and in educating the community."

In **Adler's Preface to the Third Edition** (1922), he vigorously denies "that there is an organic disposition for neurosis," and maintains that all neuroses and psychoses "originate in (the individual's) attitude toward the logic of human coexistence." We may infer that his ideas are the reason that his application to be appointed as a lecturer at the University of Vienna was refused, at this time, preventing him from giving public lectures there to students and physicians. However, this rejection did not diminish his passion for disseminating his ideas "for the common good."

In the short **Adler's Preface to the Fourth Edition** (1927), he argues that IP is based on empirical observations, pointing out that its practical observations have helped to reinforce its status.

In **Theoretical Part I – Introduction**, Adler starts with a statement by the Roman philosopher, Seneca, that “everything depends on opinion.” Neuroses can be understood only in the total context of the human mind, and depend on a fictional final goal, which has “formative, directive and organizing power.” The neurotic goal is a fictional elevation of the feeling of self-worth, the simplest form of which is the “masculine protest.” Safeguarding is a neurotic manifestation of psychic insecurity, the will to be safe and secure under conditions that are experienced as threatening. Neurotic expressions serve as a means to prepare a stance in life, to take a position that guarantees a feeling of superiority. The neurotic character, therefore, serves the individual's fictional purpose. In the practical part of this book, Adler discusses a number of cases in detail to illustrate his theories.

Theoretical Part I-I: The Origin and Development of the Inferiority Feeling and its Effects presents basic concepts in Individual Psychology (IP). Starting with organ inferiority, Adler reviews contemporary literature, referring to other authors who have discussed related concepts. “The neurotic carries this feeling of inferiority with him constantly. Because of this, the development of his analogical reasoning, and his attempts at finding a solution by using his earlier experiences as analogy, are stronger and clearer.” Here we find the concept of the fiction, which easily spreads wider than the original idea. Neurotics typically strive toward a final goal of superiority. Adler comments on a number of compensatory mechanisms that help people strive for superiority, e.g. the tendency to devalue people and things. He also finds an increase in the need for self-worth, which may degenerate into the “will to appearance.” He concludes, “In an apparently hostile world, the interest in one's own person will grow stronger and the interest in others will dwindle.”

Theoretical Part I-II: Psychic Compensation and its Preparation continues the previous chapter's discussion of the inferiority feeling. First inferiority, then compensation. Adler refers to Vaihinger and his theory of fictions: the human mind emerges in the midst of chaotic impressions; one of the primary challenges is to organize all these impressions into meaningful wholes, fictions. Thus, fictions are actually quite normal for survival; we all need them. The fictions are also compensatory means; rather than suffering from feelings of inferiority, we may create fictions of greatness and achievement. These fictions are normal if we use them to achieve real, socially useful goals; if we use them for unreal, socially negative purposes, they are a sign of neurosis.

One example of this dynamic is ambition; it may lead to greatness if the person is capable of real achievements, or to neurosis, if the person is not able to create anything real and valuable. Adler cites other examples as well, such as the dreams that often serve as a cautionary voice, or the sense of guilt that may act as a safeguarding tendency. Neurotic problems are manifestations of the compensatory force released by the inferiority feeling.

In Theoretical Part I-III: The Accentuated Fiction as Guiding Idea in the Neurosis, Adler elaborates on his fundamental idea that: “. . . the child creates a guiding line, a guiding image, a specific, fixed point outside her own person that she is striving after, in the expectation that this is the best way to find her orientation and achieve the gratification of her needs, the avoidance of discomfort and the realization of pleasure.” This guiding fiction (also referred to elsewhere as an “imaginary goal,” “personality ideal,” “fictitious plan of life,” “guiding personality ideal,” “fictitious guiding line,” and “life plan”) helps the child free herself from her inferiority feelings. With neurosis, the primary aim of this guiding fiction is to provide security from failure, from feeling inferior, at any cost. He then talks about specific neurotic syndromes and how they relate to inferiority feelings. This section also contains a diagram created by Adler, demonstrating the various concepts used in IP and some of their connections. The neurotic guiding idea may be accessible to consciousness by means of some particular visual memory. It may reflect some remnants of a childhood experience, or it may be imaginary; if it is imaginary, it is often a reflection of a safeguarding tendency. He explains various manifestations of the neurotic guiding idea, such as ailments, pampering, and greed.

In Practical Part II-I: Greed, Distrust, Envy, Cruelty, Derogatory Criticism of the Neurotic, Neurotic Apperception, Neuroses of Old Age, Changes in the Form and Intensity of the Neurosis, and Organ Jargon, Adler's stated intention is to address those characteristics found in all neurotics: “. . . expressed directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously, by means of purposive thinking and acting, or by an arrangement of symptoms, toward increased possession, toward an expansion of power and influence, toward a depreciation and belittling of others.” Toward this end, he discusses at length the details of several cases, which illustrate his stated intention, as well as the topics in the section title: 1) a philanthropic man, driven to amass wealth, who sought treatment for stammering, depression, and gastro-intestinal trouble; 2) a

man suffering from impotence and suicidal thoughts, who feared women and belittled everyone; 3) an older woman with anxiety, vertigo, nausea, abdominal pain, and severe constipation.

Practical Part II-II: The Neurotic Extension of Limitations through Asceticism, Love, Travel Mania, Crime; Simulation & Neurosis; Inferiority Feeling of the Female Sex; Purpose of the Ideal; Doubt as an Expression of Psychic Hermaphroditism; Masturbation & Neurosis; The “Incest-Complex” as a Symbol of the Desire for Power; The Nature of Delusions deals with the complicated, many-faceted expressions of neuroses. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate “how the compensatory guiding idea, the desire to have everything, may deviate from its straight course in order to stimulate exceptional neurotic and criminal, yet also creative, achievements in order to eventually reach its goal and succeed in elevating the feeling of self-worth.” Adler discusses the stinginess and self-discipline of the neurotic from this point of view. Also, lies, thefts, and other crimes are attempts on the useless side of life to defy life's limitations. He elaborates on the problems of love and sexuality, which may be caused by a striving to create distance from the partner, to be independent and free. In these cases, the person may have strong safeguards against any real intimacy. In particular, girls and women tend to feel inferior in our male-dominated society, which “alters their psychic existence to such an extent that they will betray certain characteristics of the 'masculine protest.’” He points out that ambivalence and vacillation are typical for neurotic individuals. The coherence of neurotic traits, “if perceived correctly, will invariably disclose an image of psychic unity.”

Practical Part II-III: Neurotic Principles; Compassion, Coquetry, Narcissism; Psychic Hermaphroditism; Hallucinatory Safeguarding; Virtue, Conscience, Pedantry, Fanaticism for Truth begins with a definition of neurotic principles. Adler analyzes some final fictions and says, “The more we familiarize ourselves with these (neurotic) ideals, the more we are convinced that they are set up as a fictional standard, to be used to devalue reality by comparison.” The onset of neurosis begins often from the moment when the fear of a decision, a test, a public appearance, marriage, or agoraphobia, requires professional treatment. He discusses one patient who, “shortly before her first public appearance, became ill with piano player's cramp,” and relates her condition to the masculine protest. He has found that many neurotics had doubts and confusion about their sexual role when they were

children. Also, “there is not a better way of judging the reaction of the neurotic psyche than the question concerning the evaluation of the other sex.” The safeguarding tendency, as compensation for the inferiority feeling, permeates most neuroses and may be discerned “in morals, religion, superstition, stirrings of conscience, and feelings of guilt. They all create rigid formulas and principles, of the kind the insecure neurotic loves.” Finally, because every neurotic engages in fantasy and “wishful contemplations about the future, reality and community fade into the background, thus every neurosis also implies an immense waste of time.”

Practical Part II-IV: Depreciation Tendency; Obstnacy & Wildness; Sexual Relations of Neurotics as a Metaphor; Symbolic Emasculation; Feeling of Depreciation; Equality to Men as a Plan of Life; Simulation & Neurosis; Substitution of Masculinity; Impatience, Dissatisfaction, & Reticence continues the discussion of the problems of neurosis, especially the masculine protest. The compulsive striving of neurotics to fulfill their personality ideal with the masculine characteristics they value most highly compels them, because of the obstacles that reality puts in their way, especially the feeling of community, so that they seek to attain a goal of superior value by means of circuitous paths. Here, the neurotic transformation begins. Adler also discusses dynamics of the client-therapist relationship, noting that the disputatiousness and hidden contentiousness the client displays in therapy relate to his general depreciation tendency, which presents the therapist with difficult tactical problems. He offers several case studies, including one woman who suffered from various ailments, including painful migraine headaches. Studying her life-conditions in detail, Adler learns that she is unhappy with her achievements and with her life in general. In the background lurks the idea that she would be happier if she were a man, instead of a woman.

Practical Part II-V: Cruelty, Conscience, Perversion and Neurosis presents traits associated with aggression and its transformations. Adler finds cruelty “as a compensatory superstructure among children whose inferiority feelings force them to develop their personality ideal early, with accompanying traits of obstnacy, irritability, sexual precocity, ambition, envy, greed, and malicious delight in the discomfort of others.” Such children show “an aversion to positive emotions, to tenderness, in their attempts to destroy the community feeling.” They clearly manifest a “lust for power” that often shows in the torturing of animals and other children, and in fantasies of violence and death. “The immediate purpose

of this whipped up cruelty is to prevent the possibilities of weakness, compassion, and love, because they stand in opposition to the masculine guiding line.” Adler concludes by emphasizing that we “should aspire to put an end to the erroneously exaggerated inferiority feeling and the depreciation tendency resulting from it, those two all-important poles of every neurotic, by means of the patient's insight.”

Practical Part II-VI: Above-Beneath, Choice of Profession, Somnambulism, Antithesis in Thought, Elevation of the Personality by Depreciation of Others, Jealousy, Neurotic Assistance, Authority, Thinking in Antitheses and the Masculine Protest, Dilatory Attitude & Marriage, The Attitude Upward as a Symbol of Life, Compulsive Masturbation, Neurotic Striving for Knowledge deals with how these topics interconnect. Adler starts by explaining the core concept, “above-beneath.” This abstraction plays a crucial role in the cultural development of mankind, and may even have led to the upright posture of human beings. “Among children this tendency to be 'above' is unmistakable and often coincidental with a wish to be big.” When the otherwise normal desire to grow up becomes aggressive, we see various manifestations such as disobedience, depreciation, or showing off. Connecting antithetical thinking with the masculine protest, Adler states, “. . . in all experience and striving of the neurotic the masculine protest prevails as an arranging and driving principle,” in the form of false dichotomies such as win-lose, strong-weak, above-below, all-nothing. All thinking and expressive gestures of the neurotic point to the “final purpose, the fictional final goal. The problem consists in recognizing these gestures and symptoms and understanding their objective,” which is always concealed.

Practical Part II-VII: Punctuality, The Will to Be First, Homosexuality & Perversion as a Symbol, Embarrassment & Exhibitionism, Faithfulness & Unfaithfulness, Jealousy, The Neurosis of Conflict begins with showing how the neurotic's attitude about punctuality reveals her way of thinking “that indicates an oppositeness to others.” Punctuality may be used to dominate, by demanding from everyone the same on-time behavior the neurotic demonstrates, or by making others wait. Either way, the neurotic displays her “will to be first.” Although the wish to be first is typical in children, it may influence adult behavior as a means for achieving superiority. We often find the urge to be first in people with inferiority

feelings. Adler ends with, “The frequent cases of sickness, related to compulsion neurosis, I would like to call 'conflict neurosis,'” in that the sufferer is in constant conflict with her environment and the logic of social living. In all neurotics we find “a cowardly avoidance of the true problems of their life. This nourishes their tendency for conflicts because it keeps them occupied, distracted and relieved from their tasks.”

In Practical Part II-VIII: Fear of the Partner, The Ideal in the Neurosis, Insomnia & Compulsive Sleeping, Neurotic Comparison of Man & Woman, Forms of the Fear of Women, Adler connects the neurotic's striving for superiority with his fear of making decisions, and subsequent fear of the other sex. “Within the family, in games, in the way they experience actual and imagined occurrences, both boys and girls begin to prepare for the struggle for superiority at such an early stage that by the time they reach puberty definite favorable or unfavorable predispositions for love and marriage already exist.” The unfavorable predisposition of the neurotic will include “safeguarding tendencies such as mistrust, caution, jealousy, depreciation, looking for imperfections, digressions and subterfuges.” In his demands for love, the partner must “supply what is lacking,” that is, “fulfill the personality ideal that the neurotic has constructed as a compensation.” Normal children also have ideals, but learn to cope with reality. Not the neurotic, who is “chained to his fixed style of life.” The neurotic is incapable of love, “not because he has repressed his sexuality, but because his rigid predispositions lie in the direction of his fiction, in the direction of power and not in that of community.” As a natural consequence of the fear of women, neurotics often move away “from the present and from life,” in the direction of art and literature, where women are often portrayed as dangerous, and love as servitude. Adler makes clear that as long as this depreciation tendency exists, (on the part of either sex), “a cure for the neurosis is out of the question.”

In Practical Part II-IX: Self-reproach, Self-torture, Repentance and Ascetism; Flagellation; Neuroses in Children; Suicide & Suicidal Ideas, Adler expands on the characteristic self-reproach, self-torture, and suicidal ideas of the neurotic. This “self-torture” of fear, anxiety, depression, envy, impatience, and inevitable physical symptoms is the price the neurotic pays for her fictional superiority. She pays this price because of the distance between her impossible goal and her feared inferiority. But even as she suffers, the suffering serves a purpose, which is to prove “she is more heroic than anyone else,” thus deserving

empathy from others, but exempt from showing it herself. Another route to superiority is to do penance, which serves as a “satisfaction of vanity,” moving the penitent from below to above, closer to her god than others, closer to “the fulfillment of her guiding line.” Suicide is one of the strongest means of protest available, “representing an absolute safeguard against depreciation, and a revenge on life itself.” In all his cases of suicide attempts, Adler found signs of organ inferiority, childhood feelings of inferiority and insecurity, and an exaggerated masculine protest. Suicide is a kind of tragic triumph, because in that gesture the individual imagines an ultimate triumph over adversaries, yet does nothing to solve real problems.

Practical Part II-X: The Neurotic's Feeling for Family; Obstnacy and Obedience; Silence & Loquaciousness; The Tendency for Reversal; Replacement of a Characteristic Trait by Means of Safeguards, Expedients, Profession & Ideal relates all these topics to Adler's core concepts of the style of life, guiding fictional ideal, and striving for superiority. The neurotic's exaggerated feeling for the family generally “serves the purpose of confining his own sphere of activity by eliminating the community,” thus depreciating everyone outside the family. The seemingly opposite traits of obstnacy and obedience both allow a person to focus on future victory in order to avoid past defeat. Similarly, both silence (or shyness) and loquaciousness serve the purpose of isolating an individual, distancing him from others and elevating him above others. The neurotic's tendency for reversal reveals his “complete insecurity and caution,” as manifested in attempting to “turn below into above, right into left, front into back, feminine into masculine.” Seemingly antithetical or contradictory traits are the neurotic's “expedients used to attain superiority.” In concluding this final chapter, Adler comments that the Individual Psychologist “must understand not only neurosis and psychosis, but 'normal' life as well, both in its permanent contradictions and in its social sense.” Everything should be judged from the standpoint of social feeling, from the perspective of the fellow-man. But the complexity of the human psyche cannot be captured in a scientific laboratory. “In the end, Individual Psychology is an artistic feat.”

The **Conclusion** is a grand finale, a short summary of the long journey that a serious study of *The Neurotic Character* requires. Adler defines neurosis and psychosis as “attempts at compensation, products of the psyche that are the result of an exaggerated guiding idea of a child with a

very strong inferiority feeling.” The insecurity of these children forces them to focus on “safeguards in their fictional plan of life and to avoid the problems of life.” When they feel threatened with defeat, their neurotic symptoms materialize, obstructing all positive, forward movement. “In the neurotic psyche the guiding fiction (goal) has unlimited power, making use of experiences as it sees fit.”

Thus, it is the task of IP “to comprehend the significance of these patterns, to understand them from their original, analogical structure, as a symbol of the plan of life, as a metaphor.” To fully understand this impetus toward the guiding ideal, the final fictional goal, is to “come to know, compressed in a single point: past, present, future and the intended finale, all at the same time.” The ultimate fate of the neurotic is “a pattern of behavior in conflict with the community feeling, a route of discouragement which makes it impossible to achieve the full ability to live.” Enforced by vanity, “the final purpose of the neurosis is to safeguard the individual for the collision with the tasks of life, with reality, to prevent him from the revelation of the dark secret of his inferiority.”

At the core, IP is a “psychology of position, in contrast to all psychologies of disposition,” because it is based on the position an individual takes toward life.