

Spirituality: Life Task or Life Process?

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Abstract

In an earlier article the authors critiqued the rationale for increasing the number of the life tasks from three to five (Mansager & Gold, 2000). These findings called for a more specific critique of spirituality as a proposed fifth life task (Mosak & Dreikurs, 1967/2000). By providing an overview of the Mosak-Dreikurs article and appraising their rationales, the authors examine Adler's purported intentions to add a fifth task. An investigation of the texts determines that Adler made neither reference nor allusions to a fifth life task and that the purpose of Mosak and Dreikurs's suggesting a fifth task was to provide a forum for discussing their proposed subtasks within an Adlerian setting.

Over 30 years ago, Dreikurs and Mosak (1966/1977, 1967/1977; Mosak & Dreikurs, 1967/2000) aimed to make room for expanding the life task construct by showing intentional or unintentional flexibility in Adler's construction of his theory. In the first of the articles, Dreikurs and Mosak (1966/1977) identified two purposes for their articles: "to enlarge the presently accepted formulations" and "to indicate the subtle differences of opinion as they appear in the writings of Adler and his associates" (p. 93).

Their investigation of Adler's writing led them to conclude that his tripartite presentation was not set in concrete and that there were more tasks that face the individual than the three originally proposed. They concluded that additional life tasks were called for, suggesting a fourth life task as getting along with oneself and a fifth as finding meaning in one's life (Dreikurs & Mosak, 1966/1977). These were, they argued, "logical derivatives of some cursory statements which Adler . . . made but did not develop fully" (p. 93).

In this article, we summarize the Mosak and Dreikurs article that addressed the proposed fifth life task and provide a critique of its assumptions, rationales, and conclusions. Inferences are drawn regarding whether the transformative experience popularly known as "spirituality" (Schneiders, 1998) is best characterized within the Adlerian frame of reference as a task of life.

Dreikurs and Mosak (1966/1977) argued that "each individual is confronted with the task to relate himself to the Universe, which is becoming more and more clearly an extension of our life on this earth" (p. 98). They asserted that the individual has "always established his relationship with transcendental powers and forces in his religions" (p. 98). But in light of "our

changing concepts of the Universe, of life and of ourselves”—in light of extending “our life experience into the Universe”—they contended that it has become necessary “to re-evaluate concepts and beliefs which were handed down to us throughout the ages . . . to re-evaluate our place on this earth in relatedness to the Universe, to space and time, to eternity” (p. 98). Thus, another task—quite beyond work, association, and love—confronts each individual, according to Dreikurs and Mosak. They proposed that there is a “need to adjust to the problems beyond the mere existence on this earth and to find meaning to our lives, to realize the significance of human existence through transcendental and spiritual involvement” (p. 98).

Summary of “The Fifth Life Task”

Mosak and Dreikurs reiterated their argument in “The Fifth Life Task” (1967/2000), contending that Adler “alluded many times to a spiritual life task, but he never specifically identified it” (p. 257). They suggested several names by which the task could be called. Thereafter, they provided three references to Adler’s use of the term “cosmos” or “spiritual” as support of his intention to identify a fifth task.

Mosak and Dreikurs (1967/2000) contended that psychologists have not dealt with this issue because they feel it typically belongs in the realm of *philosophy* and *theology*. To the contrary, Mosak and Dreikurs maintained that spirituality is rightly the object of *psychological* investigation precisely because one’s “relationship to the tasks of existence” includes “belief, conviction, and behavior” (p. 258). They further emphasized that such concerns are presented in therapy at least as often as “the more mundane life tasks” of work, association, and love (p. 258). And they closed their opening comments by observing that philosophical issues are more and more being brought to psychotherapists for clinical insight.

After their three substantive opening paragraphs, Mosak and Dreikurs use the remaining pages to delineate five subtasks of the existential task: the relationship of the individual to God; what the individual does about religion; the place humanity occupies in the universe; immortality; and the meaning of life.

Critique of “The Fifth Life Task”

Given this overview, Mosak and Dreikurs’s major assumptions and rationales can be examined more closely. Leaving aside their proposed subtasks, their assumptions address two broad areas: identifying the task and listing Adler’s citations by which they support this proposed task.

Identifying the task. Mosak and Dreikurs suggested six different terms could be used to name the presumed task: the spiritual, the existential, the search for meaning, the metaphysical, the metapsychological, and the ontological. These terms are less varied than the length of the list might suggest.

"The spiritual" seems to refer to a supernatural reality in which a person believes. Dreikurs and Mosak (1966/1977) referred to "transcendental powers and forces" to which the person relates by means of religion (p. 98). They suggested that a person can come to "realize the significance of human existence through transcendental and spiritual involvement" (p. 98). In this particular context, a personal god is not mentioned, but by making "the Universe" a proper name, they effectively apotheosized it (p. 98). By tying "transcendental" and "spiritual" so closely together, they left little room for considering transcendence holistically. They instead perpetuated a dualistic conceptualization of spirituality where transcendence means reaching outside the known into another world.

Dreikurs and Mosak's references to "the existential" and to "the search for meaning" appear to be synonymous. For example, they combined the two terms and refer to "the need to adjust to the problems beyond the mere existence on this earth and to find meaning to our lives, to realize the significance of human existence" (1966/1977, p. 98). Later, when discussing "the meaning of life" they make uncited reference to "the meaninglessness of life and man's attendant existential despair" (Mosak & Dreikurs, 1967/2000, p. 261). They confirmed the synonymous nature of the two terms by referring to Frankl (1963), an existentialist and "former Adlerian," as one who has for himself "discovered the meaning" of life (p. 258).

"The metaphysical," as a philosophical term, generally refers to concepts beyond sensuous experience. It can also be "an attempt to characterize existence as a whole" and need not refer to an entity or being (cf. Flew, 1979, p. 229). In this sense, Mosak and Dreikurs (1967/2000) may have intended to identify it more closely with their "existential" concerns. Adler (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964) was forthright about Individual Psychology's use of metaphysics, which he understood to be a part of all human speculation. However, he made no mention of an additional life task even in such specific references.

I must admit that those who find a piece of metaphysics in Individual Psychology are right. . . . Unfortunately, there are many who have an erroneous view of metaphysics, who would like to see everything eliminated from the life of mankind which they cannot comprehend immediately. . . . Every new idea lies beyond immediate experience. . . . Whether you call it speculation or transcendentalism, there is no science which does not have to enter the realm of metaphysics. . . . We are not blessed with the possession of the absolute truth, and on that account we are compelled to form theories for ourselves about our future, about the results of our actions, etc. (p. 35)

Here Adler referred to transcendentalism without referring to a transcendent (read: *supernatural*) reality. Ansbacher and Ansbacher (1964) endorsed this nondualistic understanding of metaphysics by suggesting that “Adler used the term metaphysics in the sense of ontology, as basic assumptions about man” (p. 389, n. 4). Furtmüller (1964), explaining the development of Adler’s concept, *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*, described its development *from* meaning a “preparedness of the individual from the first moments of . . . life to establish . . . cooperating contacts with other people” *to* meaning a “mentally healthy direction for the innate striving toward perfection.” Furtmüller said Adler was consciously aware of moving from biology to metaphysics in this development (p. 388). So, here, too, the reference to metaphysics is to the human condition and not to another reality.

“The metapsychological” appeared in the article only once. Mosak and Dreikurs may have intended to convey that which is beyond the psychological—again, possibly to an entity, or to a personal belief in such. It is an unfortunate choice in that Mosak and Dreikurs do not explain the term. More unfortunate still is the fact that Freud, whom they frequently cited in the article, coined the term “metapsychology” to describe the topographical aspects of his psychoanalytic schema (e.g., id, ego, and superego; cf. Freud, 1915/1957).

“The ontological” does not recur in the article either. It may be synonymous with either “the existential” or “the metaphysical,” all of which get at philosophical concerns. Inasmuch as it can refer to both a branch of metaphysics “concerned with the study of existence itself” (Flew, 1979, p. 255) and “the assumptions about existence underlying any conceptual scheme” (p. 256), it likely relates to their “existential” consideration. Because little context was provided, however, we cannot determine whether Mosak and Dreikurs used the term “ontological” as support for their existential concerns or as an expression of a metaphysical belief in a being beyond-the-physical.

Thus, Mosak and Dreikurs (1967/2000) chose terms for naming their proposed task that either Adler did not mention or that they used in more expansive senses than Adler used them. Three of their five proposed subtasks—the relationship of the individual to God, what the individual does about religion, and the issue of immortality—correspond more or less to a supernatural, transcendental force, supreme being, or a person’s belief in a being beyond-the-physical. We get the impression that Mosak and Dreikurs, in reevaluating religious sentiment in the face of a space-age understanding of the universe, strained to find words other than religious ones.

Citing Adler to support a fifth life task. After suggesting names by which a person’s spiritual activity might be identified, Mosak and Dreikurs offered proof-texts that they contended supported attention to a fifth life task. They acknowledged that even in Adler’s most extended reference to religion and spirituality, “Religion and Individual Psychology” (as cited in Ansbacher &

Ansbacher, 1964), he made no mention of their proposed task. In this monograph on religion, Adler repeatedly addressed the three original tasks with no references to any others. So we may legitimately wonder why Mosak and Dreikurs (1967/2000) insisted that “Adler recognized the existence of [a fifth life task] even though he did not formally include [it] in his theoretical formulations” (p. 263). And for unexplained reasons Mosak and Dreikurs find it “puzzling” that Adler would write a book titled *What Life Should Mean to You* (1931/1980), which they imply alludes to a fifth task, without mention of it as a task at all. Perhaps, it is only puzzling if they were determined to find the allusion prior to examining the evidence. *What Life Should Mean to You* was originally published in English. When Adler’s book, *Der Sinn des Lebens* (1933), literally translated “the meaning of life,” was published in English another title had to be chosen, and *Social Interest: A Challenge to Mankind* (1938/1964) was selected. Notably, in his chapters “The Meaning of Life” and “The Tasks of Life” Adler made no reference to tasks other than the original three.

It is within *What Life Should Mean to You*, in fact, that Adler (1931/1980) set out the rationale for there being *only* three tasks. In opening and closing his book, he explained that these coincided with the three ties humanity experiences within its cosmic setting. “The fact that we live on this planet, in association with human beings equal to ourselves, and divided into two sexes, [results in] the fact that we must solve . . . in a sufficient way . . . the three problems of life which our circumstances set us” (pp. 285–286, see also pp. 5–7 and 239–241). It is a point of further interest that in the three concluding chapters of this book, each of the three original tasks—work (pp. 239–251), association (pp. 252–262), and love (pp. 263–286)—is discussed in terms of religion, the universe, planetary or cosmic settings, without so much as hinting at a fifth task. It would appear that Adler consistently and intentionally considered such concerns *within* the three original tasks.

It must now be determined whether Adler’s specific use of the terms “cosmos” and “spiritual” coincide with the sense that Mosak and Dreikurs gave them. For instance, they first quoted Adler as saying, “By situation we mean his [the individual’s] place in the cosmos.” Ironically, while they dropped the rest of the sentence, they contended that Adler “drops the subject.” Two points should be made in this regard: whether Adler, indeed, made a passing reference to cosmos and drops the theme and whether the term “cosmos” has the connotation Mosak and Dreikurs assigned to it.

The first point is clearly mistaken. Wolfe’s original translation of Adler (1927/1946) is replete with references to cosmos (e.g., pp. 27, 32, 43). In the very chapter which follows the Mosak-Dreikurs reference, Adler titled its first two sections, “The Structure of our Cosmos” (pp. 44–46) and “Elements in the Development of the Cosmic Picture” (pp. 47–57). So why would Mosak and Dreikurs claim Adler dropped the matter? One answer is found by more

closely examining their citations. While none of Adler's references to "cosmos" refer to a dimension beyond the physical, as Mosak and Dreikurs implied, this definition is still more obvious in the omitted references. Rather, for Adler, cosmos refers to the environmental situation in which humanity is situated. The full sentence from which Mosak and Dreikurs (1967/2000) cite reads:

By situation we mean his place in the *cosmos*, and his attitude toward his environment and the problems of life, such as the challenges of occupation, contact, and union with his fellow men, which are inherent in his being. (Adler, 1927/1946, p. 42; italics added)

For Adler this environmental situation is understood to include humans' existence as earth-born beings comprised of two sexes living in association with one another. So, in the first text which Mosak and Dreikurs cited, Adler did not allude to another cosmic task, rather he used cosmos to describe what he later calls "the tie . . . that we are living on the crust of this poor planet, earth, and nowhere else" (Adler, 1931/1980, p. 5). For Adler, this tie gave rise to the need of making a living (the task of work) in the midst of a potentially hostile environment. This was, in fact, the context from which he constructed all three life tasks (see Mansager & Gold, 2000).

The reference of this term to the physical rather than the metaphysical comes out more strongly in Brett's 1998 translation:

By situation, we mean man's place in the *scheme of things* and his attitude toward his environment and the problems of life, such as the challenges of work, friendships, and everyday dealing with his fellow human beings. (Adler, 1927/1998, p. 34; italics added)

Brett captured Adler's understanding that "cosmos" meant the vast setting in which humanity finds itself. Furthermore, because Mosak and Dreikurs (1967/2000) contended that Adler drops the subject (p. 257), it is not surprising that they fail to quote the very next instance of Adler's use of cosmos.

Social feeling remains throughout life . . . circumscribed in some cases, enlarged and broadened in others until it touches not only the members of his own family, but also his clan, his nation, and finally, the whole of humanity. It is possible that it may extend beyond these boundaries and express itself towards animals, plants, lifeless objects, or finally towards the whole cosmos. An understanding of the necessity for dealing with man as a social being is the essential conclusion of our studies. (Adler, 1927/1946, p. 43)

Adler referred to the sociophysical environment in a wholly comprehensive manner. To the degree that a metaphysical or speculative impetus is implied—because humans can only *imagine* themselves connected to the greater whole—Ansbacher and Ansbacher's (1964) note should be kept in mind:

Adler used metaphysics in the sense of basic assumptions about our species. In a translator's note, Wolfe brought Adler's "earth-born" metaphysics into focus (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964, p. 283):

The word "Gemeinschaftsgefühl" . . . connotes the sense of human solidarity, the connectedness of man to man in a cosmic relationship. Wherever the brief phrase "social feeling" has been used therefore, the wider connotation of a "sense of fellowship in the human community" should be borne in mind. (Adler, 1927/1946, pp. 31–32)

So, Wolfe too seems to have understood "cosmic" to mean an individual's setting in the scheme of things and not a supernatural dimension. It refers to the physical structure of all that is—the earth situated within a solar system and that within the universe—with everything contiguous to the whole. Here, Adler already seemed to be acknowledging the human concern about defining oneself within the universe, something Mosak and Dreikurs implied needs to be done by means of a fifth life task.

Mosak and Dreikurs (1967/2000) consider "Adler's most explicit reference" (p. 257) to a fifth task to occur in his last published book, *Social Interest: A Challenge to Mankind* (1938/1964). It should be noted that to make their point, they drew together references to cosmos that are separated in his book by some 30 pages. The next two cited passages are as follows:

1. They [the life tasks] arise from the relationship of man to human society, to the cosmic factors, and to the other sex. (p. 14)
2. Human beings, as products of this earth, could subsist and develop in their cosmic relationship only by union with the community, by making both material and spiritual provisions for it. (p. 43)

This combination of statements seems to indicate that Adler believed that developing a cosmic relationship is desirable. And Mosak and Dreikurs (1967/2000) suggested that a person maintains this relationship by material (i.e., earthly) and spiritual (i.e., other-than-earthly) means. However, this connection is not supported in the fuller context of the quotations.

Three problems are irrevocably set before every individual. These are—the attitude taken up towards our fellow men, vocation, and love. All three are linked with one another by the first; they are not casual questions; they are inevitable. *They arise from the relationship of man to human society, to the cosmic factors, and to the other sex.* Their solution decides the destiny and the welfare of humanity. Man is part of the whole. His value, too depends on his individual solution of these problems. (Adler, 1938/1964, pp. 13–14; italics added)

Here, the reference to "cosmic factors" is related to the three original tasks: "The attitude taken up towards our fellow men" is parallel to "the relationship of man to human society"; "the attitude taken up towards . . . vocation" is parallel to "the relationship of man to . . . the cosmic factors"; and "the

attitude taken up towards . . . love” is parallel to “the relationship of man to the other sex.”

The larger context of the final citation suggests a similar connection:

For a long time now I have been convinced that all the questions of life can be subordinated to the three major problems—the problems of communal life, of work, and of love. As can be easily seen these are no casual questions, but confront us continually, compelling and challenging us, without allowing us any way of escape. For the answer we give to these three questions, by virtue of our style of life, is seen in our whole attitude toward them. . . . Problems like art and religion, which transcend the average solution, share in all three. These three arise from the inseparable bond that of necessity links men together for association, for the provision of livelihood and for the care of offspring. They are problems with which our existence on earth confronts us. *Human beings as products of this earth could subsist and develop in their cosmic relations only by union with the community, by making both material and spiritual provision for it, by sharing in its work, by industry, and by providing for the propagation of the species.* In their evolution they have been physically and mentally equipped for this by their struggle for a better bodily endowment and a better mental development. (Adler, 1938/1964, pp. 42–43; italics added)

Again, the cosmos here refers to the earth-born environment of living on the planet’s crust and having to develop a vocation to provide a living. A parallel structure is also apparent here. “Communal life” and “association” are parallel to the phrase “by union with the community.” “Work” and “provision of livelihood” are parallel to the phrase “by making both material and spiritual provisions for it, by sharing in its work, by industry.” “Love” and “the care of offspring” are parallel to the phrase “by providing for the propagation of the species.”

This sense is even more striking if a more literal translation is applied to the Mosak and Dreikurs quotation. First is the German, followed by a more literal English translation which reads as follows:

Der Mensch als Produkt dieser Erde in seiner kosmischen Beziehung konnte sich nur entwickeln und bestehen in Bindung an die Gemeinschaft, bei körperlicher und seelischer Vorsorge für sie, bei Arbeitsteilung und Fleiß und bei zureichender Vermehrung. (Adler, 1933, p. 28)

[The person—as product of this earth—in his or her cosmic relationship could only develop and continue in binding himself or herself to the community, by physical and mental foresight for it, by a division of labor and hard work, and by adequate procreation.]

Support for using the word “mental” rather than “spiritual” to translate *seelischer* is provided by the existent English translation. As noted in the last sentence of the extended citation above, “better mental development” is the

translation used for "*besserer seelischer Entwicklung*." Still further support is found two paragraphs later where Adler contends that "all other questions have for their object the solution of these three main problems. The subsidiary questions may be concerned . . . with the physical and *mental* training required to meet all these problems" (Adler, 1938/1964, p. 44; italics added). The German adjective rendered "mental" here is *geistige* (Adler, 1933, p. 29). The root word, *Geistig*, can legitimately be translated "spiritual" but has the restricted sense of "mental" or "intellectual." To convey "spiritual" in the sense of "religious" or "sacred" Germans use the word *geistlich*. In a noteworthy reference to "the human spirit" (Adler 1938/1964, p. 269), that is, *der menschliche Geist* (Adler 1933, p. 178), Adler was observing humanity's mental inclination to abstract "form" from any perceived activity. The term *geistlich* does not appear in Adler's German text.

Thus, in the context from which Mosak and Dreikurs draw, Adler made no allusions to additional tasks nor did he provide warrants for suggesting others. He did not advocate making spiritual provisions for a cosmic, non-earthly community, but advocated this-earthly mental foresight regarding the present community and its task of extending into the future. This task of community association is accomplished interdependently as one engages the other tasks of work and love.

The length of the foregoing critique indicates the complexity of contesting even briefly made statements of theory, when those are accepted as authoritative. Mosak and Dreikurs's rationale for their proposed spiritual life task consists only of three concluding paragraphs in "Adler's Three Tasks" and the opening paragraph of "The Fifth Life Task." Length alone, of course, does not prove or disprove a point. Because Dreikurs and Mosak (1966/1977) acknowledged their intention "to enlarge the presently accepted formulations" (p. 93), then it is likely that the remainder of "The Fifth Life Task" is precisely what they believed was most important to convey. They seem to have wanted a context within which to address what they called subtasks: the relationship of the individual to God; what the individual does about religion; the place humanity occupies in the universe; immortality; and the meaning of life. Though space does not permit here, their thoughts deserve serious consideration apart from their dubious attempt at expansion.

Conclusions

Mosak and Dreikurs (1967/2000) determined that "Adlerians should be speaking of five life tasks rather than the conventional three" and that "this can be accomplished without doing violence to Adlerian thought" (p. 263). While we have as yet to address the fourth life task, based on the preceding

critique their conclusions can be considered inaccurate and misleading—especially as they pertain to a fifth life task.

Adler made no allusions to life tasks beyond his original three as careful examination of the texts indicates. Still, he was not unconcerned with existential and spiritual matters. For Adler “the whole concept of human life is a very mysterious one” (Irvin Neufeld as cited in Manaster, Painter, Deutsch, & Overholt, 1977, p. 100). Humans don’t know, after all. Because they are not blessed with absolute knowledge, they can only guess. But, Adler insisted, the importance of the “creative power . . . of human life” must not be forgotten (p. 100). This power is how people cast their guesses in the mold of truth. Specific religious issues, he believed, “transcend the average solution.” Religious and spiritual concerns are among the human problems, which for their proper solution must share “an adequate amount of social feeling . . . in all three life tasks” (Adler, 1938/1964, p. 43). But, for Adler there were no final answers. The answers people arrive at are most important as the bases for further questioning and better adaptation to life on “the crust of this poor planet, earth” (Adler, 1931/1980, p. 5).

Adler’s deep appreciation for human transcendence and the mystery of life, however, precluded their being subsumed into a new problem-type set before humans as earth-born beings living in association as one of two sexes. Rather the striving to survive and even thrive—as posited by one’s “highest effective goal” (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964, p. 277)—is the process of living itself, and nothing less. And while his process is evaluated by how cooperatively a given individual approaches the life tasks of work, association and love, the process of life transcends that evaluation as the whole transcends the parts.

Note

We appreciate the distinction in German terminology’s being brought to our attention by Norman S. Silverman, who credits his awareness to Viktor Frankl.

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