

TEO, ISSN 2247-4382
100 (3), pp. 157-176, 2024

The Inferiority Complex between Alfred Adler's Individual Psychology and the Pathologies of Pride in Patristic Thought

Ioan-Simion HODEAN

Ioan-Simion HODEAN

"Aurel Vlaicu" University of Arad, Romania
Email: hodean.ioan@gmail.com

Abstract

The feelings of inferiority are present in everyday life. This paper presents Alfred Adler's individual psychology school conception regarding the inferiority complex and its meaning for the economy of life. In addition, his conception is evaluated from the Christian-orthodox perspective regarding the sin of pride, the sin of fear and the sin of sadness. To understand it, concepts like self-esteem, self-love, the "love-hate thyself" paradox are explained through both perspectives.

Keywords

Inferiority complex, Alfred Adler, orthodoxy, pride, self-esteem

I. The Concept of Inferiority Complex

The concept of the inferiority complex has become a widely used framework for interpreting human behavior, as it can be attributed to almost anyone. Inferiority is a relative concept, and every individual has at least one area in which they are—or feel—inferior to others, whether due to age, gender, physical attributes, intelligence, race, social class, or education. Anything can be a source of inferiority, just as nothing inherently provokes

feelings of superiority; it all depends on the conscious or unconscious attitude the individual associates with it. This is the assertion of the school of individual psychology, led by its prominent figure, Alfred Adler. The inferiority complex consists of a feeling of helplessness and depressing incapacity, which can manifest either through withdrawal and resignation or through energetic actions aimed at overcoming the perceived deficiency or achieving self-realization in a different topic/area¹. Furthermore, there is a distinction between a complex and an emotional shock. A complex does not arise from a violent emotion or a “knockout blow”; instead, it is formed of quiet suffering, unfulfilled desires, and sometimes unrecognized aspirations. In Adlerian psychology, the feeling of inferiority appears to serve as a primary engine—a pivot around which all psychic movements revolve, a force that conditions all actions, thoughts, talents, happiness or sadness².

I.1. The roots of the Inferiority Complex

We know that Adler drew inspiration from Nietzsche’s philosophy. Feelings of inferiority stifle the patient’s will to power. Inferiority is both the cause and the source of illness, not merely a symptom. Nietzsche states: “Man does not seek pleasure and does not avoid displeasure: it is clear what illustrious prejudice I am contradicting here. Pleasure and displeasure are mere consequences, a simple side phenomenon. What man wants, what every part of a living organism desires, is an increase in power”³. The will to power arises from a sense of general inferiority in life. A person may feel incapable of achieving their goals, becoming who they aspire to be, or gaining the recognition they desire. He lacks the object of his longing. The demands of the system we seek to build compel us to recognize that every aspiration for power is rooted in a feeling of weakness, of inferiority. Inferiority in life stems from the need for a sense of community and the physical fragility of childhood. Thus, one aspect of emotions pertains to the same feeling of inferiority, a sense of inadequacy (*Gefühl der*

¹ Paul POPESCU – NEVEANU, *Dicționar de psihologie*, Editura Albatros, București, 1978, p. 349.

² Oliver BRACHFELD, *Inferiority Feelings*, Routledge, London, 2001, p. 92.

³ Friedrich NIETZSCHE, *Voința de putere*, Editura Aion, București, 1999, p. 442.

Unzulänglichkeit), which compels its bearer to muster all their strength and engage in efforts greater than usual⁴. If this state of dependence gives the impression that one will barely manage to live, we must acknowledge that at the beginning of every psychological life lies a profound feeling of inferiority:

“Who could seriously doubt that the human individual, so deprived by nature, is endowed, as if by divine grace, with a powerful sense of inferiority that drives them toward a superior state, toward security, toward the effort to triumph? This extraordinary rebellion against an innate sense of inferiority, which underpins human development, manifests in every infant and child”⁵.

This inferiority toward life, which activates human forces toward compensation, includes several elements that require analysis. Self-image and self-esteem are essential factors in character formation. The central point of reference lies in the confrontation between the ideal self (how one imagines or believes they should be) and the real self (how they truly are). When these do not align, the preconditions for a neurosis are set. If the real self-image is inferior to the ideal, feelings of devaluation and inferiority emerge. Reconciliation with oneself stems from harmonizing the actual perception of the self with the ideal image⁶. Low self-esteem

⁴ Alfred ADLER, *Cunoașterea omului*, Editura Iri, București, 1996, pp. 251-254.

⁵ Alfred ADLER, *Sensul vieții*, Editura Iri, București, 1995, p. 54. Heidbreder attempted to write a study about the normal inferiority complex. Starting from Adler's definition of the inferiority complex, she constructed a value scale consisting of 137 traits that would be characteristic of an inferiority complex. The subjects were asked to indicate the degree to which they possess each trait. Heidbreder pointed out that the inferiority complex is something present in different individuals, to varying degrees, with no one person having all the characteristics or none of them. This attempt to measure Adler's notion of the normal inferiority complex leads to attributing the feeling of inferiority as a quality of normality, suggesting that it is an inherent, natural, and even beneficial structure of the human condition—since it would stimulate overproduction in any field.

⁶ Pr. Eugen JURCA, “Rușinea în analiza existențială și logoterapie și în sacramentul reconcilierii”, in: *Altarul Banatului*, 4-6/2004, p. 64, n.10.

increases the risk of failure, further deepening a gloomy view of oneself; this vicious circle, once established, becomes difficult to dismantle⁷. No human being can live without a sense of self-worth. Losing the ability to evaluate oneself strips life of its value. The factors influencing fluctuations in self-esteem include purely physiological such as fatigue, hunger, illness, psychological such as fear, terror, anxiety, surprises, discouragement, anger, vengeance—often compensating for feelings of inferiority—caused by a decline in self-esteem. Other factors are due to social and political circumstances: poverty, the feeling of exploitation, dependence on an employer, unfair treatment; last type, sociological, include the absence of a minimum sense of security, or changes in one's psychological or social environment⁸.

The drive for self-affirmation becomes structured into a desire for recognition and power. Anyone without mental health issues possesses sufficient initiative, self-encouragement, and self-affirmation, which, if correctly stimulated and trained, can develop into leadership qualities. Besides internal weaknesses, several external catalysts trigger the formation of such a complex. Firstly, there is the deficient education provided by parents at an early age. A profound sense of inferiority cultivated in children this way may exacerbate given certain peculiarities of life. For instance, the habit of not taking children seriously, instilling the idea that they are insignificant, without rights, must never come before adults, and must always *know their place*. Although the will to power is present and manifest, it does not necessarily lead to inferiority; it depends on how parents address the issue. From the very first days of life, the child's tendency to place themselves in the foreground, to coercively attract the parents' attention, is observed. These are the first signs of humanity's emerging ambition to assert itself, which develops under the influence of feelings of inferiority, compelling the child to fix a goal with which to manifest superiority over their environment:

“As for the issue of how the aspiration for power—this unparalleled evil of human society—can be remedied and

⁷ Petru ILUȚ, *Sinele și cunoașterea lui. Teme actuale de psihosociologie*, Editura Polirom, Iași, 2001, p. 24.

⁸ Oliver BRACHFELD, *Inferiority Feelings*, pp. 133-134.

converted into the most profitable direction, the difficulty lies in the fact that at the stage when this aspiration emerges, it is hard to reason with the child. Only later does it become possible to clarify and intervene in a misdirected development to improve it. Living with the child, however, offers such an opportunity if we persist in fostering the development of the social sense of community that exists in every child, so that the aspiration for power does not become predominant. Another difficulty is that many children do not openly discuss their aspiration for power; instead, they hide it and attempt to implement it covertly, under the guise of goodwill and affectionate behavior. Directed education arises from the conscious or unconscious impulse to help the child overcome their insecurity, to equip them with skills and knowledge, with understanding and appropriate affection for others. All these measures, no matter their source, are primarily attempts to create new paths for the child to escape their sense of insecurity and inferiority as they grow. What happens within the child follows the trajectory outlined by their character traits and reflects their psyche. The degree of effectiveness of the feeling of insecurity and inferiority depends, in large part, on the child's conception (*Auffassung*)⁹.

A parent's strong personality can unintentionally instill an inferiority complex in one or more children in the family. In fact, whenever self-affirmation exists within a social relationship, individuals with a reticent disposition are prone to being subjugated, undervaluing themselves, and developing an inferiority complex. This, in turn, can lead to a false state of being a follower rather than a leader. Generally, groups of individuals marked by somatic deficiencies exhibit a sense of inferiority¹⁰. However, this is not limited to somatic issues; any deficiency—intellectual, moral, psychological, or physical—can place someone in a subordinate position to others. Furthermore, “the complex social conditions are quite favorable

⁹ Alfred ADLER, *Cunoașterea omului*, p. 99.

¹⁰ H.F. FATERSON, “Infèriorité organique et attitude d'infèriorité”, in: *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, II, 1, 1931, pp. 86-101.

to the development of the feeling of helplessness... the role of adulthood in bourgeois society, one's own inability to face forces they cannot control or even recognize, deprives them of any real and effective autonomy... the parents' feeling of inferiority often results in a form of inadequate education"¹¹.

The difference between humans and animals does not stem from anatomical differences but rather from a spiritual structure. For instance, animals experience fear as a signal for bodily safety. Humans, however, also experience anxiety, which undermines their self-assurance and creates an actual inferiority complex. Anxiety is an adaptive deficiency, a biological shortfall. It raises within humans an unceasing question about existence, the ability to live without answers, and a sense of lack and timidity from the very start of taking possession of their own life¹². It seems that anxiety, caused by harsher social conditions, strikes at one's self-confidence—confidence that would otherwise suppress the drive for self-assertion.

I.2. Symptoms of the Inferiority Complex

This complex solidifies in various ways and manifests as self-assessment (*Selbsteinschätzung*). The individual seeks balance and compensation for their feeling of inferiority and, accordingly, adjusts their goals¹³. Key factors in this process include body image, the ideal image and the counter-ideal. Self-assessment results from the interplay of these three factors, typically in a natural order. However, this discussion focuses on the pathological perspective. Instability in self-esteem arises when a *normal* person faces a problem, they feel incapable of solving. Oscillations in self-esteem before confronting a problem are directly related to the level of maturity attained by the individual¹⁴. Two different attitudes can be identified: people who acknowledge their real feelings of inferiority and work to remedy them as much as possible and the second group of people whose feelings of inferiority may or may not be real but who refuse to accept them. Upon closer examination of this latter attitude, two

¹¹ *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, No. I, Paris, Alcan, 1937, Oliver BRACHFELD, *Inferiority Feelings*, pp. 27-28.

¹² Gheorghe COMAN, *Sociologie*, Editura Pim, Iași, 2013, p. 173.

¹³ Alfred ADLER, *Cunoașterea omului*, p. 100.

¹⁴ Oliver BRACHFELD, *Inferiority Feelings*, p. 129.

distinct conflicts emerge: a pride conflict - where the individual refuses to acknowledge the moral or physical defect observed by a part of themselves; also, a jealousy conflict—where the individual envies those unburdened by similar feelings of inferiority¹⁵.

Thus, we encounter an inferiority complex leading to apparent introversion that transforms the soul into a furnace of resentment (the jealousy conflict), and an inferiority complex fiercely manifested outwardly, disguised as superiority (the pride conflict). I believe these varied expressions result from the integration of malice into the human personality; because temperament differs from one person to another, the ways this inner division manifests are diverse. Typically, they interweave in an indescribable manner¹⁶.

There are feelings of inferiority toward others, dissatisfaction with others, accompanied by envy over what they possess. Thus, feelings of inferiority are not an isolated character trait but are associated with a life attitude. We see an essential fact: the inferiority complex is not merely a personal characteristic but a fundamental factor shaping an individual's entire life. If the feeling of inferiority is particularly overwhelming, there is a danger that, due to the fear of remaining handicapped for life, the child will no longer be satisfied with a simple compensation, but will go further (overcompensation). The aspiration for power and superiority will become exacerbated and will reach pathological levels. Such children will not be satisfied with the usual conditions of their lives. In accordance with their ambitious goal, they will embark on grandiose, astonishing actions. A situation of inferiority can develop a general attitude of crushing, depression, and passivity: the subject retreats into inertia or low-level activities. This includes defense mechanisms such as isolation and regression, which require further exploration¹⁷.

¹⁵ RAYMOND DE SAUSSURE, "Les sentiments d'infériorité", in: *Annales medico-psychologiques*, no. 2, Paris, 1935, pp. 557-558.

¹⁶ "Let us assume that a man whose vanity is plainly visible does not hold himself in high regard, a fact he is often unaware of. Certainly, there are people conscious of the fact that this self-appraisal is the starting point of their vanity"; Alfred ADLER, *Cunoașterea omului*, p. 195.

¹⁷ Roger PERRON, "Problèmes de personnalité chez les débiles mentaux", in: *Enfance*, 4-5/13, 1960, pp. 401-404.

Contempt and denigration, which such people exaggerate, in the case of this character trait, are the expression of an extremely widespread phenomenon, the tendency of self-devaluation. This shows what the vain person's attacks are really aimed at: the value, the importance of others. They try to achieve a sense of superiority by bringing others down. Recognizing someone else's value has the effect of a personal offense on them. We can also distinguish here a deeply rooted sense of weakness in the vain person's being. We should keep in mind this saying: "Laughing a lot at the flaws of others is a sign of fear"¹⁸. The feeling of inferiority dominates the psychic life and is clearly evident in the sense of imperfection, unfulfillment, and in the constant aspirations of individuals and humanity. Their feeling of inferiority seeks personal compensation in the belief that everyone else is worthless. That general form, which essentially manifests in the fact that someone is not concerned with bringing joy to others, that they hesitate to sacrifice themselves for the community or for a specific person, that they build a kind of wall around themselves, only to safeguard their poor treasures, shows how everything here is exclusively directed toward the aspiration for power and superiority. Another way of proceeding, suspiciously related to the feeling of inferiority, different from the 'hesitant attitude', can be observed in the avoidance of a life problem, an avoidance that can be total or partial. Total, as in psychosis, suicide, ordinary crime, or ordinary perversion; partial, as in alcoholism or other vices. The inferiority complex, that is, the permanent manifestation of the consequences of the feeling of inferiority, the persistence in this feeling, is explained by the great deficiencies in the sense of social communion¹⁹.

The absence of the sense of social communion and the exacerbated feeling of inferiority, both closely related, are clearly manifested from this stage of childhood, often alongside all the character traits, as forms of expression of a life in an allegedly hostile environment: hypersensitivity, impatience, irritability, cowardice, caution, and greed, the latter as a claim, as if everything should belong to the child. The difficult problems of life, dangers, needs, disappointments, worries, losses, especially the loss of loved ones, and social pressures of all kinds, should be viewed through

¹⁸ Thomas HOBBS, *Leviathan*, London, p. 36.

¹⁹ Alfred ADLER, *Sensul vieții*, p. 62.

the lens of the feeling of inferiority, often as emotions and dispositions commonly known, such as fear, sorrow, despair, shame, shyness, embarrassment, disgust, etc. The realm of thought, fully aligned with the goal of salvation through escape, generates ideas about withdrawal. The emotional realm, to the extent that we manage to understand it, reflects the state of insecurity and inferiority, reinforcing the impulse toward escape. The human feeling of inferiority, which otherwise manifests in the efforts of progress, becomes even clearer in life's storms and especially in major crossroads. The aspiration toward superiority produces its effect by keeping the individual on the path of retreat from the social problem or by imposing an evasion (*Ausbiegung*). The fixation in its opposition through the terms *yes, but* (*Ja, aber*) imposes an opinion that takes into account the *but* rather than the *yes*, and their ideal world charms them so much that they are concerned exclusively or primarily with the results of the shock. This is even more true as we are always dealing with an individual who, since childhood, lacking a genuine sense of social communion, has been almost exclusively concerned with themselves. Even humility, servility, lack of independence, laziness, and masochistic traits—clear signs of a sense of inferiority—give rise to feelings of relief or even privilege. It is easy to understand that all of these reflect a protest against an active resolution of life's problems in the way society promotes. They also represent cunning attempts to evade defeat by appealing to the sense of social communion—a feeling that, as their entire lifestyle reveals, is foreign to neurotics.

Similarly, emotional outbursts such as anger, thirst for revenge, sorrow, enthusiasm, habitual loud laughter, the inability to listen to someone or look them in the eye, diverting a conversation toward oneself, and habitual enthusiasm in often inappropriate situations for such displays very often reveal a sense of inferiority that evolves into a superiority complex. Analyzed from the fixed perspective of the ideal sense of social communion, any deviation appears as a cunning attempt aimed at achieving personal superiority over life, perceiving it as a convenience, a privilege, or an advantage over others. Even when they suffer, as in neurosis, they are entirely entangled in the threads of their privileged position, of their suffering, without understanding that the path of affliction should lead

them toward resolving life's problems. The greater their suffering, the less troubled they are and the further they drift from the true meaning of life²⁰.

I.3. Healing – Between Compensation and Communion

There is only one universally valid remedy: the development of the sense of social communion, and on a greater scale—the cultivation of the sense of humanity's cosmic connection. The extent to which these three great problems of human life are resolved—the relationship with others, the relationship with the opposite sex, and the relationship with time—determines the extent of one's mental health. Somatic inferiority can serve as a starting point for a process of compensation that enables the individual to progress. However, this does not mean that every feeling of inferiority leads to practical, useful achievements. On the contrary, it is more the exception than the rule. Nevertheless, it is possible—compensation can be either real or fictitious, meaning it can be beneficial to society or entirely useless. Thus, as a lesser method of healing, we have compensation; this is because, in the face of inferiority, complete healing is not achievable. The modes of compensation include:

- Pure somatic compensation – For example, the loss of a kidney after surgery leads to the remaining kidney developing further to function for both.
- Somatic over-compensation – A wound heals through an overproduction of cells.
- Sensory compensation – Blindness, for instance, cannot be compensated by the same organ. Instead, another sensory organ develops to compensate for the loss.
- Sub-compensation – The individual gives up on the “game”, becoming discouraged²¹.

As a method of healing, we have the acceptance by the community of the individual who feels inferior. The duty of individual psychology is to prepare this person to reintegrate into communion with others. The question that arises here is: Does community acceptance truly heal, or does it merely prevent opportunities for the same hidden ailment to manifest?

²⁰ Alfred ADLER, *Sensul vieții*, p. 65.

²¹ Oliver BRACHFELD, *Inferiority Feelings*, pp. 149-152.

II. An anthropological-theological proposal of inferiority

It must not be forgotten that, with the fall into sin and the corruption of man in all his functions and dimensions, we enter a world subjected to death in all its forms. Thus, keeping in mind and remembering the image of the world from which he fell, man will feel a general sense of inferiority. Saint Athanasius the Great writes that “by emptying themselves of the thought of God and turning to that which is not, once they have separated from God, Who is, men have also emptied themselves of existence”²². Irenaeus of Lyons says: “and if the Spirit is not with the soul, then it is truly according to the nature of animals, being bodily, and it will be an imperfect being”²³. Gregory Palamas continues this train of thought: “just as the departure of the soul from the body and its separation from it is the death of the body, so also the departure of the soul from God and its separation from Him is the death of the soul”²⁴. Although he believes he is alive, in fact, man is a living corpse²⁵. Adler’s concept of inferiority deepens when viewed in light of life’s challenges: a lack of communion with others, physical frailty, insufficiency, and incompleteness. Heidbreder’s view of universal inferiority as ‘normal’ contrasts with the patristic notion of existential inferiority in spiritually alienated humanity. While Heidbreder called it normal, we will call it impassible, because there is no creation that does not feel the fall as a sub-state of being. For man, the most important thing is to understand the sinful sources of his mental state, to deeply acknowledge his helplessness, to despise the demonic sins of pride, vanity, anger, idleness, lying, fornication, and to desire change, to return to the Lord with sincere repentance. Through the garments of skin, God delays the decisive answer: to choose life or the abyss of death, allowing empirical subsistence. Thus, in joy, man forgets about himself; in distress,

²² Sf. ATANASIE CEL MARE, *Tratat despre întruparea Cuvântului*, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 15, transl. Pr. Dumitru Stăniloae, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1987, p. 94.

²³ Sf. IRINEU DE LYON, *Contra ereziilor*, vol. 2, Editura Teologie pentru azi, București, 2007, p. 352.

²⁴ Sf. GRIGORIE PALAMA, *Omilii*, vol. 1, Editura Anastasia, București, 2012, p. 185.

²⁵ Jean-Claude LARCHET, *Terapeutică bolilor spirituale*, transl. Marinela Bojin, Editura Sophia, București, 2001, p. 38.

he turns his thoughts, willingly or unwillingly, toward himself, becoming more and more aware of his sinfulness. If this does not happen, if sorrow is ‘for the sake of sorrow’ and repentance is replaced by a self-cannibalistic neurotism which offers the soul nothing but destruction - it is clear that a falsification has occurred. Such false sorrow is a sinful passion²⁶.

This sorrow of the world, which brings death (2 Cor 7, 10), is the opposite of **metanoia**, which means the transposition of the **nous** (mind) into the metaphysical, into that which transcends us; it is the blocking of the mind in the immanent. It brings death because it resembles the state of hell, where there is no remembrance of God. The saint (the perfected Christian) approaches the world differently: “For the soul that sees the Creator, all of creation is exceedingly small!... Everything that was created has diminished before him, because through the light of contemplation, the inner mind has expanded to such an extent that it has risen above the world”²⁷. Everything depends on the attitude with which we approach the world; it can become a space of blessing or a cause of depression. Depression is a unique signal of the soul, through which it reveals its miserable state – but it is not a cry for sins, rather the torment of an unrepentant soul, to which the demons whisper: “Everything is going wrong, you have no reason to hope anymore...”²⁸. For He who is truly is the true life and He is beyond comprehension. Therefore, if the life-giving nature is above knowledge, what is encompassed is by no means life. And what is not life does not have a nature capable of giving life. Thus, lacking the spiritual dimension, we are not exempt from the scourges of the feeling of inferiority.

II.1. The self-image of the Adamic man

In this part of the paper we’ll refer to the inner conflict as a result of the Adamic fall and a generator of neuroses. Neurosis develops when a person, due to various circumstances, cannot find the proper way out of

²⁶ Dmitri AVDEEV, *Depresia ca patimă și ca boală*, transl. Adrian Tănăsescu-Vlas, Editura Sophia, București, 2008, p. 26-27.

²⁷ SF. GRIGORIE CEL MARE, “Viața Sfântului Benedict din Nursia”, in: *Sf. Benedict din Nursia. Rânduiețile vieții monahale*. Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, București, 2012, p. 221.

²⁸ Dmitri AVDEEV, *Depresia ca patimă și ca boală*, pp. 25-26.

a complicated situation, cannot resolve an important psychological issue, or cannot endure a tragedy²⁹. The pathology of the will has presented the Adlerian perspective: neurosis arises when there is a mismatch between the ideal self-image and the real self-image. This generates feelings of devaluation and inferiority. The solution is their reconciliation. Although it would be natural for the real image to rise to the level of the ideal image, unfortunately, the opposite happens: the ideal image is lowered as much as possible to reduce the conflict. Neuroses are rightly called the chronic form of passions. At the deep root of neurotic symptoms lies the scarcity of love in the human heart, and where there is no love - neglect, hostility, intolerance, irritability, envy, and fear sprout from the heart. The neurosis of inferiority originates from the chronic passions not addressed by man; although the Church Fathers do not speak about the inferiority complex, if we analyze its manifestations (which we will do shortly), we mostly find the passions of sadness, acedia, and envy. Adler wrote that psychoneuroses are nothing but a product of self-love, ambition, and vanity, ultimately serving to protect the individual from too harsh a contact with life and its demands. In response to this perspective, we say that the main factor behind depression is not stress and unpleasant experiences, but the human personality, specifically the internally disorganized personality. As the root of all evil, sin leads to neurotic disturbances. Thus, the one who is saddened flees from people as if they are the cause of his turmoil, not understanding that the cause of his suffering lies within himself. From the inner conflict, there further develops – in the realm of affective pathology – an specific return to the domination of instincts over ration. According to Galatians 5, 16-24 and Romans 8, 5, in the Adamic man there is a struggle between the spirit and the flesh³⁰.

Another element is the self-image. Self-image or self-esteem is shaped through the lens of one's life conception. The Adlerian school suggested that it becomes a source of inferiority if the real self-image is not

²⁹ Dmitri AVDEEV, *Când sufletul este bolnav*, transl. Adrian Tănăsescu-Vlas, Editura Sophia, București, 2005, p. 60.

³⁰ The spirit takes on the role of the "good" heart, while the body, thickened through the Fall, is assigned the role of the "evil" heart.

aligned with the ideal one. It then lists physiological, psychological, and sociological factors, ending with the apologia of self-assertion. Archbishop Chrysostom accurately scans the situation: “One of the principles of social psychology is that we join others to gain information about ourselves, to highlight the image we have of ourselves, and to adhere to certain social conventions. This type of love serves the self”³¹. And thus, the issue of self-image is opened: self-love, self-hatred, ideal image, etc. – all of these make up what we call self-image. In the Edenic order, there was *philautia* (love of self)³² as a virtue: man loved himself because he reflected God within himself. At the moment when he becomes autonomous³³ through pride, he falls from the light of God. But what is pride? It is *hyperphania* – a hyper-manifestation, an excessive revelation. But *hyper* does not mean in a positive sense, but in an excessive one. It comes as the opposite of theophany or epiphany. Man, by his very nature, is theophanic: he is the image of God and reflects God within himself. Through pride, the object being reflected shifts toward the self; but, deprived of its vital energy, it becomes distorted. Thus, the Adamic order is established: *philautia*, self-love – but a broken self, no longer illuminated by that divine alter-Self. Nikita Stithatos states that “being dominated by self-love, all their care is directed toward the health and pleasure of the body”³⁴. It is fundamentally linked to pleasure; it played a decisive role in the process of mankind’s fall, along with the forgetting of God, which both increases it and is increased by it³⁵. This gives birth to all forms of sin and passion. However, the rationality of his nature does not allow for an unlimited opacity; the Holy Fathers show that by loving oneself, one actually hates oneself. This is because he loves another from himself, and not the one according to truth. Man loves himself poorly because he sees himself in a distorted way. And most often, this is why he feels worthless and devoid of any value, because

³¹ † HRISOSTOM DE ETNA, *Elemente de psihologie pastoral ortodoxă*, Editura Biserica Ortodoxă, Galați, 2003, pp. 24-25.

³² Self-love.

³³ *Autonomos* – setting thy own rules of living.

³⁴ Sf. NICHITA STITHATUL, *Cele 300 de capete despre făptuire, despre fire și despre cunoștință*, coll. *Filocalia*, vol. 6, transl. Pr. Dumitru Stăniloae, Editura Humanitas, București, 2008, pp. 224-225.

³⁵ Jean-Claude LARCHET, *Terapeutica bolilor spirituale*, p. 125.

he relates to a deceptive self-image³⁶. Here we see the application of the the *two hearts*, the two *selves*; we consider the psychological perspective insufficient because it overlooks the positive dimension of the self, the “good” heart, the “God-loving” one, even unconsciously (the natural tendency of God-loving). Ignoring this part leads to the deterioration of relationships with others. While the feeling of communion is natural, and Adler recognized it as necessary, it becomes perverted by self-love (*philautia*). The person does not experience authentic relationships with others, but rather superficial relationships, full of ignorance, disregard, and insensitivity. Furthermore, since they seek pleasure in an unrestrained way, their focus remains solely on self-affirmation and personal gain. In this pursuit, others become rivals upon whom they pour out their aggression. Indeed, we can recognize here the idea of the will to power. Haven't we found a viable source for it? Pleasure itself is the driving force behind aggression. The will to power, as described by Nietzsche, emphasizes the individual's striving to assert and enhance their power over others, often driven by a desire for pleasure, dominance, and self-affirmation. In the context of *philautia* and the distortion of relationships, this will to power manifests as an aggressive pursuit of self-interest, where others are seen as rivals to be overcome, rather than fellow beings to commune with. Thus, the quest for pleasure becomes a means to assert dominance, leading to a destructive cycle of aggression and alienation.

However, due to the intricacies of the inferiority complex, we see that an artifice takes place; although one seeks self-affirmation, others serve as a standard for the self. How is it that, despite hating them, others have an overwhelming influence on the individual? This has a natural foundation; John Chrysostom observes that “in order to love yourself in a holy way, you must love your brother”³⁷. And by loving and being loved, inevitably deep impressions are exchanged between them. Losing the foundation of love, one still retains the need for confirmation from others. This relationship

³⁶ Jean-Claude LARCHET, *Inconștientul spiritual. Adâncul neștiut al inimii*, transl. Marinela Bojin, Editura Sophia, București, 2009, p. 250.

³⁷ Sf. IOAN GURĂ DE AUR, “Omilia la II Timotei”, in: *Ioan Chrysostom. Explicarea Epistolelor Pastorale*, Editura Socec, București, 1911, p. 236.

resembles that between love and duty, where duty is a minimal and forced form of love. Dmitri Avdeev observes:

“By not accepting and not loving oneself as one should, a person compensates for this by experiencing nervous crises, inner unrest, and aggressiveness. For example, sometimes one is amazed at how adolescent acne or something similar can deeply affect a person’s soul. Of course, it is not the acne itself that mutilates the soul, but the individual is absolutely convinced that it is the main problem, the center, and the cause of their unhappiness. This gives rise to what are called inferiority complexes, which simply ravage the souls of those affected by them”³⁸.

Regarding the ideal image, according to the psychological theories mentioned, it is imposed by society. However, this does not mean that it is the correct one from a theological standpoint. We saw the purpose of man when we talked about the meaning of life; the ideal image from a theological perspective can only be derived from this. It merges with his profound vocation: to be deified. Through the Fall, by turning toward creation as an ontological source, “rejecting the thought of good, they began to think and conceive things that are not”³⁹. The concept of image in Christian anthropology involves a type — man — and a prototype — the Incarnate Logos. The Christian ideal image is Christ, the God-Man. Any other ideal image is the object or person that is idolized. However, this ideal image in the fallen man is deeply tied to pride; it takes a central place in the nous, which is subjected to the Fall. What was meant to be the temple and house, the dwelling place of God, is replaced by the self; but by a false self, an imagined self⁴⁰. It is an attribution of vocation and meaning to oneself alone. But, in the spiritual order, we already have a vocation, a goal, and a meaning toward which we are heading. Here, the element of

³⁸ Dmitri AVDEEV, *Depresia ca patimă și ca boală*, pp. 109-110.

³⁹ Sf. ATANASIE CEL MARE, *Cuvânt împotriva elinilor*, p. 38.

⁴⁰ Arhim. Simeon KRAIOPOULOS, *Te cunoști pe tine însuși?*, transl. Pr. Constantin Coman, Editura Bizantină, București, 2008, p. 166.

egoism comes into play. In spiritual literature, this is called vanity, because it can even perform acts of Christian asceticism, but not motivated by its “good” heart, but rather by its “evil” heart, its dark peripheral zone — and thus it remains unsuccessful. Pride is so widespread in Christian ascetics that John Climacus writes: “in all things, the sun shines abundantly. And all endeavors rejoice in vanity”⁴¹. Any action that preserves the ego of the old man is in vain. Isaac the Syrian says that “those who are moved by vanity and anger become disturbed without judgment⁴²” - they lose their power of discernment. In other words, they live in a phantasmagoric world.

This is self-affirmation: a search for the glory of the world — an attempt to substitute the heavenly glory (to which man was destined) lost through sin. Dorotheus of Gaza states that “those who desire glory are like a naked man who always seeks a small patch or anything else to cover his ugliness. Similarly, the one who is lacking in virtues seeks the glory of men”⁴³. Self-affirmation attaches itself like a parasite to God’s work of glorifying humanity; in other words, God places in a person’s destiny the one who fits into their spiritual vocation. By removing God from the equation, the individual assumes, alongside the role of the main character, the role of the providence, deliberating over their own existence.

II.2. Psychosomatic Deficiency vs. Spiritual Deficiency

Following the will for self-affirmation, anything placed in a secondary position is seen as a source (rather than a cause) of inferiority. From somatic deficiencies (such as locomotor disabilities, a deformed stature, a missing eye, or even more trivial deficiencies like a deeper or shriller voice, or a crooked nose) to intellectual or moral shortcomings—these all enter into this power struggle. Raymond de Saussure aptly pointed out: it is a conflict of self-love. The fundamental issue is **filautia**, or self-love,

⁴¹ Sf. IOAN SCĂRARUL, *Scara dumnezeiescului urcuș*, coll. *Filocalia*, vol. 9, transl. Pr. Dumitru Stăniloae, Editura Humanitas, București, 2011, p. 241.

⁴² Sf. ISAAC SIRUL, *Cuvinte despre nevoiță*, coll. *Filocalia*, vol. 10, transl. Pr. Dumitru Stăniloae, Editura Humanitas, București, 2008, p. 52.

⁴³ Sf. DOROTEI DE GAZA, *Învățăături de suflet folositoare*, Editura Bunavestire, Bacău, 1997, p. 440.

which we previously detailed. A question arises: how does it happen that, by loving oneself (in an exaggerated way), one ends up hating one's body? One hates oneself to the point of being dissatisfied with how they look or with their psychosomatic constitution? The answer is rooted in a deeper, spiritual understanding. Here, we will limit ourselves to explaining, from the ascetic spiritual perspective, how one understands their body and the Christian perspective on this issue. In the primordial human, the body was an integral part of the human being, holding equal dignity with the soul. Both are co-dependent: the body without the soul cannot achieve anything, nor can the soul without the body⁴⁴. The body was not for man an instrument of pleasure, nor a means to dominate the created beings or to enjoy the pleasures of the world. The close connection between the soul and the body is given by the fact that the soul is not confined to a specific place in the body but is present everywhere. The fallen man experiences a state of disintegration between his soul and body; this disintegration sheds light on our issue. The soul, subject to the impulses of the body, is bound to it in a new way, to the point that it can become enslaved by the body—a lower state that leads to actions and a sense of soul inferiority. From another perspective, the body becomes, to some extent, external and foreign to the soul. Not identifying with the body anymore (meaning the soul no longer feels closely connected to it), any quality or defect of the body will no longer produce the same sense of harmony between soul and body as in the primordial state. Thus, it doesn't matter whether the defect is major or minor, real or imagined—the conflict already exists; only the question of time remains: how long can the person's personality hold up before it fractures? In the Christian understanding of a passion, the person manifests an endless thirst that seeks to be satisfied, but cannot find satisfaction. The objects that passions seek cannot fulfill them because they are finite and do not correspond to the boundless thirst of the passions. The infinite thirst of passions in itself can be explained by the fact that human beings, having a spiritual foundation, have a tendency toward the infinite, which also manifests in passions. But in passions, this tendency

⁴⁴ Jean-Claude LARCHET, *Semnificația trupului în Ortodoxie*, transl. Marinela Bojin, Editura Basilica, București, 2010, pp. 22-48.

is turned away from the authentic infinite, which is spiritual, toward the world, which offers only the illusion of infinity. Instead of being content with participation in the infinity of God, the human being sought to become the center of infinity itself—deceived by the thirst for infinity inherent to his nature⁴⁵. In other words, the vital energy by which a person is directed towards God changes its source from God to the self. This is the mystery of the “good” heart and the “evil” heart: in its positive dimension, it seeks life endlessly; but as a negative, dark polarity, it limits itself to the self. And the self (both body and psyche) cannot replace divine life, as it itself needs it. As long as it is in God, the source of its life, the body is permeated by the spirit and is in its rightful place. When it separates from Him, it is torn within itself, and everything it experiences leads to dissatisfaction and a sense of inferiority.

III. Conclusions

This theological reflection positions the inferiority complex as a manifestation of pride, intricately linked to the passions of fear and sadness. It underscores the paradox of the fallen human state: in seeking self-love, one succumbs to self-loathing; in striving for understanding, one delves deeper into ignorance. Such neuroses, nourished by vanity, highlight the spiritual void in modern human experience. Humility emerges as the antidote, bringing peace and harmony to the soul by reorienting the self toward God and the divine image within. The inferiority complex, as explored through both Adlerian psychology and Patristic thought, reflects the tension between self-perception and divine truth. While neuroses thrive on the instability of self-imagining, the saintly consciousness anchors itself in the objective reality of Christ's presence. This presence, far from diminishing the self, reveals moral inadequacies without fostering the pathologies of inferiority. It calls humanity to a higher understanding—one where self-awareness grows in communion with God rather than in isolation or self-distortion.

⁴⁵ Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Ascetica și mistica ortodoxă*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2002, pp. 73-75.

In conclusion, the interplay between psychology and theology offers a path for healing: the cultivation of humility and the restoration of the self in communion with God and others. By redirecting the human longing for self-affirmation toward divine love and cosmic connection, individuals may overcome the destructive cycle of pride and inferiority, finding peace in their true spiritual purpose.