

Philosophy of Life: J. L. Moreno's Revolutionary Philosophical Underpinnings of Psychodrama, and Group Psychotherapy

Abstract: This paper is a short exposition of the philosophical underpinnings of psychodrama and group psychotherapy, and the inherent difficulties in determining them. The written materials that explain the underlying philosophy of psychodrama are, generally, uncritical, in a philosophical sense, of Moreno's ideas. There is little discussion and no apparent general recognition of where these written materials fit within larger philosophical traditions. Arguments as to which philosophical frameworks could be said underlie psychodrama are presented. This paper proposes that the philosophical underpinnings of psychodrama are still revolutionary, and inadequately explicated. Aspects of the narrative journey the author went through while writing this paper are included.

Key Words: psychodrama, Moreno's philosophy, group psychotherapy

Published in Group: The Journal of the Eastern Group Psychotherapy Society, Volume 36.2, Summer 2012, pp. 135-146. Author Peter Howie. The author would like to acknowledge the assistance and support of Dominick Grundy, editor of GROUP, with final preparation of this article. Peter Howie is PhD Candidate, Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia, peter@moreno.com.au, PO Box 1755, Coorparoo Mail Centre, Coorparoo, Brisbane, Australia

Diving for philosophical underpinnings

Jacob Levy Moreno is known in the area of psychiatry and psychology largely as a result of developing, and promoting the use of various forms of group psychotherapy, from the 1920's until his death in 1974. That he pioneered and established group psychotherapy is, however, not so widely known. Amongst other things, he also developed a series of action-oriented group processes that most often are known under the rubric of psychodrama. Psychodrama, as it is commonly termed and will be referred to in this paper, includes sociometry, sociodrama, role play, role training, and a very wide variety of action techniques. Sociometry has gone on to bigger and better things, becoming integrated with sociology, in the forms of micro-sociology and social network analysis, as well as areas of teaching and social work. Moreno's writings included his theory, rationale and principals for developing such a variety of action-oriented processes, their application in a wide variety of groups and organizations, their underlying philosophy, as well as the vision he had of how they would change the world for the better. A bold, but arguable, proposition could be made that these ideas were the forerunners of such action techniques as Gestalt therapy, family therapy, narrative therapy, art therapy, music therapy, organisational therapies, and action approaches. While the philosophy that he wrote about is less well known, the techniques that Moreno is better known for has been described by Lewin as "the Moreno problem: the fact that nearly all known 'active' techniques were first tried out by Dr. J. L. Moreno in psychodrama, so that it is difficult to come up

with an original idea in this regard” (Berne, 1970: 163-4). This dilemma was a real one, as noted by a number of other leading theorists such as William Schutz and Abraham Maslow (Maslow, 1968; Schutz, 1971)

While these other therapies hold their own cognitive constructs about the purpose and application of each therapy, the concepts that Moreno used to frame, develop and extend the active techniques of psychodrama, are generally applicable to them as well. For instance, spontaneity, a psychodramatic term which can be defined as an unconservable force operating in a person, in the moment, that leads a person to make an adequate response to a given situation or context, can easily fit with drama therapy, music and art therapy and others. In many ways Moreno’s own concepts and constructs go further, or deeper, in explaining these other modalities, and why they work.

While Moreno’s techniques are well known in many places, not so his philosophy, From what Moreno wrote in his book *Who Shall Survive* (1945), and his autobiography (originally published as *Preludes to my Autobiography* and recently republished as his autobiography in 2011), we can see that he wrote that he was aware of this dilemma from early in his career.

My philosophy has been misunderstood. It has been disregarded in many religious and scientific circles. This has not hindered me from continuing to develop techniques whereby my vision of what the world could be might be established in fact. It is curious that these techniques - sociometry, psychodrama, group therapy - created to implement an underlying philosophy of life have been almost universally accepted while the underlying philosophy has been relegated to the dark corners of library shelves or entirely pushed aside (Moreno, 1945; Moreno, 1953 in 2nd Ed. 2011 p.61).

This indicates that Moreno developed psychodrama as a consequence of his philosophy, rather than as a principal effort to develop group processes, therapeutic processes, or techniques, and could be said to distinguish him from many other developers of psychotherapy techniques and processes. One of his oft-quoted statements comes from the beginning of *Who Shall Survive*: “A truly therapeutic procedure cannot have less an objective than the whole of mankind.” (1956, p.1). This can be said to indicate that Moreno’s techniques were developed from a philosophy that was oriented to affecting the whole human race. It is a great irony, that the philosophy that led directly to such creativity, from which a variety of brilliant and potent techniques emerged, should be so neglected. It is arguably the metaphorical equivalent of taking the golden egg and leaving the goose that laid it behind. However, part of this problem derives from Moreno’s writings themselves. Some were originally published in German before he came over to the USA. He adapted these early writings, or reworked them in translation, for a different intellectual milieu. Because he founded his own publishing house—Beacon--, the philosophy and other subsequent ideas were not subjected to sufficient philosophical scrutiny and coherent organization. Finally, Moreno was not one to brook criticism easily; he acknowledged no peers. In fact, he often, with some legitimacy, accused leaders in the field of “stealing” his ideas, making cooperation with others problematic for them. The result of all this is that many of the conceptual assumptions underlying

psychodrama, sociometry, sociodrama, axiodrama, etc., remain unrefined and unintegrated. This paper will not be rediscovering the goose, but it will be arguing that there is indeed a goose that laid golden eggs that is still waiting in Moreno's philosophical writings to be unveiled.

Moreno propounds his ideas, philosophies and conceptual structures in such books as *The Theatre of Spontaneity* (1947), *Psychodrama First Volume* (1946), *Second Volume* (with Moreno, Z.T. 1959), *Third Volume* (with Moreno Z. T. 1969), *Who Shall Survive: Foundations of Sociometry, Group Psychotherapy and Sociodrama* (1945). As I researched what others have already written, I found that there are already very good explications of the history and philosophies associated with it extant. Examples are: *The Handbook of Psychodrama* (Karp et al, 1998), *Foundations of Psychodrama* (Blatner, 2004), *Psychodrama Since Moreno* (Holmes et al, 1994), or *Psychodrama: Advances in Theory and Practice* (Baim et al, 2007).

Adam Blatner, a prodigious writer on aspects of psychodrama and Moreno's methods, broke the question of the philosophy of psychodrama down into four chapters in *The Foundations of Psychodrama* (Chapters 5- 8). These chapters were: *General Philosophical and Theoretical Considerations*; *Moreno's Theology*; *Creativity*; and *Spontaneity* (Blatner, 2004). But even this useful deconstruction required a further reading of subsequent chapters to make full sense of the material. In *Psychodrama Since Moreno*, Sprague (1994) uses a story-telling metaphorical narrative approach as a way of coming to grips with what he states are the underpinnings that Moreno's philosophy provides to psychodrama, and which Sprague also claims that this philosophy is more important than the techniques it birthed. Blatner (2007) uses the concept of meta-theory to integrate and describe Moreno's concepts and philosophy. By meta-theory Blatner means that Moreno does not exclude other methodologies or processes. Moreno's give an over-arching theory of how to deal with them.

The Philosophy of Moreno

Moreno wrote that he had three central ideas (2011). I will argue as though his beliefs and his philosophy are synonymous. Perhaps, after all, a belief is only a simpler form of philosophy. It can also be argued that all philosophy, or any form of knowledge, is belief (Bagnall, 1999).

1) Spontaneity and creativity are the propelling forces in human progress, beyond and independent of libido and socioeconomic motives that are frequently interwoven with spontaneity-creativity, but [this proposition] does deny that spontaneity and creativity are merely a function and derivative of libido or socioeconomic motives.

2) Love and mutual sharing are powerful, indispensable working principles in group life. Therefore, it is imperative that we have faith in our fellow man's intentions, a faith which transcends mere obedience arising from physical and legalistic coercion.

3) That a super-dynamic community based upon these principles can be brought to realization through new techniques. (Moreno, 2011, p. 61)

Spontaneity can be defined as a force operating in the moment that leads a person to make an adequate response to a given situation or context, which can also lead to a new response to an old situation. As mentioned earlier, spontaneity for Moreno is un-conservable. It operates in a person in the moment as a readiness to action, and it changes from moment to moment. Moreno's concept of spontaneity included adequacy in relationship to the context in which a person or group is acting. Moreno did not intend a simplistic reduction to "doing your thing" or "acting out," which might better fit colloquial usage, even if the distinction is hard to make in practice. I would argue that Moreno considered spontaneity to be functionally similar to spirit, energy, or life force. In this sense he belonged to a generation that anticipated a new world order in which a decaying Europe was to be replaced by true democracy and a union of nations without war or suffering. Unlike Freud's generation, which was only too aware of human potential for destructive aggression, Moreno's was almost utopian in its belief that people could remake their destiny unfettered by biology or history.

Creativity is according to Moreno, the end result of a warming up process whereby a person increases his or her capacity to be spontaneous (1954). Spontaneity acts through a person as creativity, ranging from the simple novelty, such as a variation on a piece of performed music, through to original and significant developments of ideas in areas of science, philosophy or the arts, the renewing or creating relationships where once there were none, new understandings (such as internal appreciation of self, of others, or of life), or the creation of new art, music, or performance. Moreno was clear that there is a significant difference between the creator and the creation, through both are a product of creativity. He wrote that the creator's evolution is more important than that of the creation (Moreno, 1946). Moreno also wrote that he saw human beings as co-creators along with god, so creativity is no simple concept in his cosmology.

Love and mutual sharing are straightforward terms, and his belief in what we would now call *intersubjectivity* led him to the development of ideas about encounter, groups, sociometry, and eventually group psychotherapy. In these relationships, there are two or more subjectivities, as distinct from a subjectivity (doctor) analyzing an object (patient or patients). The term encounter, often attributed to Martin Buber, made the transition from European philosophy to the English-speaking philosophies; however Moreno, who claimed the term as his, has a richer definition. He defines it roughly and artistically as:

'Encounter' is a rough translation of the German word 'Begegnung'. Actually, Begegnung is difficult to translate. It has attained many connotations which no single Anglo-Saxon word conveys; several English words must be used to express its atmosphere. It means meeting, contact of bodies, confrontation, countering and battling, seeing and perceiving, touching and entering into each other, sharing and loving, communicating with each other in a primary, intuitive manner, by speech or gesture, by kiss and embrace, becoming one — una cum uno. It encompasses not only loving, but also hostile and threatening relationships. It is not only an emotional rapport, like the professional meeting of a physician or therapist and patient, or an intellectual rapport, like teacher and student, or a scientific rapport, like a participant observer and his subject. It

is a meeting on the most intensive level of communication.” (Moreno, 1969, p. 26)

When reading this it becomes much easier to see where he developed the psychotherapeutic and sociological idea of role reversal. More than simply stepping into another person’s shoes, Moreno saw it as important to step into the roles supporting another person’s life, to take their position and see, feel, and think through the other person’s being. He continues:

The participants are not put there by any external authority; they are there because they want to be—representing the extreme authority of the self-chosen path. The encounter is extemporaneous, unstructured, unplanned, unrehearsed—it occurs on the spur of the moment. It is 'in the moment' and 'in the here,' 'hic et nunc.' It is the sum total of interaction between two or more persons, not in the dead past or imagined future, but in the fullness of time—the real, concrete, and complete situation of experience. It is the convergence of emotional, social, and cosmic factors, the experience of identity and total reciprocity.” (Moreno, 1969, p. 26)

Moreno expresses here several strands in his thinking, which were historically appealing in the USA in the late fifties and sixties. First, there is the democratic or power-sharing image -“not put there by any external authority”- which evokes, among other relationships, that of doctor and diagnosed patient where power is unequal. Second is the belief in surplus reality through which people can play out and extend the roles in their lives in the present—characteristically on a bare stage—thus moving beyond the “dead past” to forge a new identity out of an impoverished existence. Third is the value placed on interrelationships, the “total sum of interaction,” which were conceived by him as curative rather than as conducive to mass hysteria or socially sanctioned destruction. In this sense Moreno was closer to Nietzsche than to determinists like Freud, Hegel or Marx.

Moreno’s threefold position above can be seen to underpin group psychotherapy in the sense that people come together to develop their spontaneity and creativity together through mutual encounter and engagement. They heal what needs to be healed, as co-therapists, co-lovers, and co-creators, one for another; they develop new forms of social connectivity, and thus begin to create a super-dynamic community. What is interesting is that Moreno arguably saw that the philosophy came first and that this then informed the development of techniques and processes. The techniques, such as psychodrama, sociodrama, sociometry, and role training were, in effect, a natural outgrowth of such a philosophy. For him, the philosophy was his golden egg laying goose rather than the techniques.

Further philosophical underpinnings of psychodrama.

Moreno postulated many other original ideas that could be considered part of his philosophies connected to the philosophy quoted above. Here is a short list: group psychotherapy, psychodrama, sociometry, spontaneity, creativity, warm up, tele, encounter, co-creating, community, healing the world, spiritual evolution, I-thou, I-god, role theory, role reversal, the primacy of action, sociodrama, social and cultural atom, role playing, surplus reality, axiodrama, and cultural conserve. All of these

could be considered either as concepts, ideas, principles or techniques, all with a range of extrapolations and refinements. In a sense Moreno's thinking anticipated a number of later developments, such as the relational turn taken by psychoanalysis, including the notion of multiplicity of selves espoused by writers such as Bromberg (1996), or mutuality in psychotherapy by Aron (1996) or the co-unconscious proposed by followers of the ideas of S. H. Foulkes in Group Analysis (Fleury & Knobel, 2011). Moreno frequently objected to "cherry picking" from his technical practice, so that, for example, sociometric measurement of groups, role training, or the hot-seat technique were often split off from the body of his work. His insistence on an "all or nothing" approach, whereby those who learned from him were "thieves," had the paradoxical effect of isolating him intellectually toward the end of his career. Nevertheless, many writers and theoreticians have selected pragmatically what they understand, comprehend or most value of Moreno's thought. Certain forms of psychodrama can be said to have the same philosophical underpinnings as Moreno, even if not the whole of Moreno's philosophy, while others might be said to have a more tenuous connection. At its simplest, it is arguable that the philosophy quoted above, can be perceived as incarnate in psychodrama as it is generally practiced around the world today.

The practitioner skew: Heuristics rule!

A heuristic could be called a rule of thumb, or a short cut. Moreno's philosophical ideas found a home with the many who came and learned from him in the USA, principally because the ideas were easily applicable, highly stimulating, and the people training with him in these methods quickly and efficiently developed their own heuristics for application (Blatner, 2004). The methods Moreno taught had the potential to create dramatic effects in groups and clients. Because of this, the early psychodrama practitioners may have had no need to question or critique Moreno's philosophy, instead, finding in him some sort of kindred "practitioner" spirit due to his "action orientation" (Moreno, 2011, p. 63). The powerful experiential learning methods he used to teach the psychodrama techniques required entering into a radical learning process, so different from mainstream training, graduate and post graduate education, which resulted in self expansion, self knowledge and, perhaps, self actualisation (Maslow, 1968; Nolte, 2008). The self development of the people undergoing his training could conceivably have made it difficult to embrace or critique his entire philosophy.

Moreno's methods matured in the 1960's, a time of intellectual and social ferment in the US, England, Australia, France and other Western countries. Blatner is one of the few regular critics of Moreno's writing while being, at the same time, one of his foremost supporters. He argues that Moreno's writing would have been improved had he entered the normal process of academic critiquing, reviewing and editing (Blatner, 2004). One consequence of this is that Moreno's written ideas remain in unrefined form. Certainly, he regularly submitted his ideas for public discussion, and there are numerous examples of his making conference presentations followed by invited guests critiquing what he had presented. There are numerous examples of journal papers where a reviewer has written an intellectual response, and then Moreno finishes with his response to that response. Many of these are republished in book form (Moreno, 1956). However, as a personality, Moreno did not always embrace in practice the openness to others in the cultural sphere that he advocated in principle. So

how much difference the introduction of critique would have made is hard to guess. In their current form the writings of Moreno are somewhat ambiguous. Others plumb his propositions and assertions for metaphorical, spiritual, symbolic, or allegorical meanings. Analysis, research and discussion of what he did mean in his writing would be invaluable.

Where Moreno, his methods, and his ideas fit philosophically

A final problem determining the philosophical underpinnings of psychodrama is that in the modern world there are schools and streams of philosophy with certain ways of seeing the world, people, and seeing how people see the world. These are philosophies such as pragmatism, idealism, realism, positivism, existentialism, phenomenology, skepticism, post-modernism, constructivism, and others. The epistemological question of the philosophical underpinnings of psychodrama requires an attempt to place these underpinnings in one or other of these frameworks.

This is especially important as Moreno developed a new research paradigm more closely related to the subsequent approaches taken by modern sociologists and anthropologists: that of the participant researcher in a group. This immediately placed psychodrama outside the positivist/empiricist tradition, which is part of the enlightenment tradition. The enlightenment tradition, and its offshoot, the positivist approach, refers to the advocacy and support for the rational approach to argument, discourse and discussion as the superior way of intellectual operation and essential for progress, as well as a belief in the improvability of man and woman through this use of rationality, science and education (Anchor, 1967; Rorty, 1982). The positivist tradition believes in a knowable world, in objectivity as way to discover enduring truth, and in minimizing subjectivity (Usher et al, 1997). What follows is a list of philosophical traditions with similarity to Moreno's thought.

Hermeneutics

Moreno's processes place his philosophical underpinnings more neatly in the hermeneutic/interpretive tradition where what is known is a function of both the observer and the observed. Hermeneutic/interpretive approaches focus on human action (which are at the heart of psychodrama enactments) and assume that a human being's actions are the result of a creative response to their context, and are thus meaningful to themselves at the least and can be interpreted and understood by others (Usher et al, 1997). Any observer of a psychodrama group, indeed most psychotherapy groups, would see how this philosophy applies in these settings.

Phenomenology

Moreno championed the value of the subjective experience of a person. This could easily be seen to be part of the phenomenological tradition. The psychodrama stage is used to concretise a person's inner world. And while in the psychodrama enactment there may be auxiliary roles present, these too are part of the inner life of the protagonist, the person whose area of life is being worked through with the psychodramatic enactment. Auxiliary egos are roles taken in a person's enactment by other participants in the group. Meaning, that is the meaning that is applied to one or other aspect of a psychodrama enactment, is related to the protagonist's meaning, and

not to any absolute meaning such as god, ideology, or other absolute frames of reference.

If in the psychodramatic enactment, the protagonist relates his or her experience to god or an ideology, it is still the protagonist's own subjective view of what god or an ideology is, that is of paramount importance. This means there is no problem in psychodrama for a person to believe or not believe in an absolute frame of reference. The frame of reference is theirs, or at least their interpretations of that frame of reference. Similarly, the meaning the other group members take from the psychodrama enactment is their own. Group participants are not required to agree with the protagonist's point of view. As a psychodramatic enactment develops on the stage, the group members can view the drama as a source of learning about life, as something they relate to, as an interesting story, as something to disagree with, from which they are encouraged to freely take and use to their own advantage.

Existentialism

Moreno himself could be seen as part of the existentialist tradition, which itself is not a unified philosophy. The existentialist tradition is broad, but it centers mainly on the search for meaning, on a person's creation of meaning and the importance of having meaning in a world where it is not provided for them. Psychodrama creates a vehicle for individuals to take their place in the world, to craft meaning for themselves. From this it could be argued that psychodrama is a form of existential therapy (Yalom, 1980).

Social constructivism

Social constructivism is a philosophy where students develop or construct their knowledge through their own efforts, through interaction with ideas and interacting with other people, and a learning environment that includes teachers and teachers' ideas (Phillips, 2000). Psychodrama, because it typically occurs in group settings, is socially constructivist. It is perhaps this aspect that can be most easily seen as a philosophical underpinning of psychodrama. As a form of group psychotherapy, it is a hot house of opportunities for a group of individuals to examine their own and others' ideas.

Postmodernism

All that has been written in this section can also be said to be a part of the postmodern tradition. Postmodernism regards knowledge as contextual. As shown on the psychodrama stage, the protagonist's experience is taken directly from life. This experience is open to interpretation by the group in many ways, as evidenced through the variety of post psychodrama enactment sharing. It is individualistic in the sense that learning from one psychodramatic enactment may, or may not, apply to someone else. However, it does apply to that one context. In the post modern tradition, human beings are meaning creators and psychodrama is explicitly and implicitly used to develop new and original meanings (Oudijk, 2007).

Conclusion

It is possible to argue that psychodrama is one of the few psychotherapies that has its own cogent and internally congruent philosophical basis, despite the competing definitions of some Morenian terms. While this means work is yet to be done, it also means that, as alluded to earlier, the goose that laid the golden egg of psychodrama is still out there. Moreno's philosophy of life, which led him and others to create so many forms of human interaction, expression, and development, has yet to take its place amongst the philosophies of the twentieth century. His philosophy is not a philosophy about life, or about nature, or about reality; rather, it is a philosophy about living, which contains a call to action, rather than only contemplation. While it can fit legitimately within other schools of philosophy, it is perhaps still waiting for a more forceful, coherent and cogent articulation. This is a dilemma, because those that are most familiar with the philosophy are also most active in its application, and are still leading the revolution he began. Like Moreno himself, they are actioning that philosophy of life in their communities, their families, with their clients, their groups and their connections in the world.

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