

---

## Theory and History

---

# Another View of J. L. Moreno's Relationship to Sigmund Freud and Psychoanalysis

**John Nolte, PhD\***

*National Psychodrama Training Center*

**\*Corresponding Author:** John Nolte: [jhn.nolte@gmail.com](mailto:jhn.nolte@gmail.com)

---

This article questions the contention of Nikolaos Takis (2020) that J. L. Moreno had positive feelings toward Sigmund Freud, the result of transference of Moreno's feelings toward his father to Freud. Takis argues that Moreno sought approval from Freud that he had not received from his father. I find Moreno's comments indicate little, if any, ambivalence of feelings toward Freud or psychoanalysis. Moreno considered psychoanalysis an attack upon genius from the rear and dangerous to society. I discuss the philosophical basis for Moreno's thoughts in this respect. This paper is pertinent with respect to Morenean philosophy and history.

---

**KEYWORDS:** J. L. Moreno; Sigmund Freud; positive transference; psychoanalysis

## INTRODUCTION

A few years ago, Dr. Nikolaos Takis published an article entitled "Reflections on Moreno's ambivalent view on Sigmund Freud and psychoanalysis" (2020). I was surprised by the title chosen by Takis. Having known and learned psychodrama at the Moreno Institute with J. L. Moreno and Zerka Moreno, I had never considered Moreno to be very ambivalent toward Freud. I knew that Moreno had defended Freud as a capable scientist but saw this as simply giving credit where credit is due, not as reflecting admiration or positive feelings as Takis appears to do. Freud had clearly established his scientific prowess long before he had created psychoanalysis. Moreno was aware of that and considered Freud to be a good observer of human behavior. He also felt that Freud had spoiled his observations by conflating them with his metaphysics.

Takis, who identified himself as both a psychodramatist and a psychoanalyst, sought to explore the relationship between Moreno and Freud using the creative approach of identifying transference of feelings that Moreno had toward his

father upon Freud. Takis writes, “The main hypothesis is that those encounters [between Moreno and Sigmund Freud and his disciples] functioned as a blank screen on which Jacob Levy’s relationship to his father was projected and re-enacted” (2020, p. 9). Takis’ article asserting that Moreno had ambivalent feelings toward Freud and psychoanalysis indicates that there is a lack of understanding within the psychodramatic collective about the relationship between these two creators of methods which each hoped to be a boon to mankind. Takis’ claim that Moreno had a positive transference to Freud requires an explanation of why Moreno was so intensely critical of psychoanalysis rather than simply regarding it as a competing method of psychotherapy.

Moreno was undoubtedly exposed to negative attitudes toward psychoanalysis long before his one vis-à-vis encounter with Freud. Freud’s views on sexuality had shocked the sensibilities of the Viennese who were as prudish as Victorian England, resulting in *Totschweigentaktik*, a conspiracy of silence resulting in Freud’s name not being mentioned publicly or in writing (Janik & Toulmin, 1978). *Totschweigentaktik*, of course, ensured that Freud and his scandalous sexual ideas would be widely discussed privately in hushed tones throughout Vienna and become very familiar to all Viennese. Moreno would also hear disparaging things about psychoanalysis and its originator from faculty members who with few exceptions rejected Freudian ideas. One of those exceptions, however, was Otto Pötl, chief clinician at prominent professor Wagner von Jauregg’s psychiatric clinic, under whom Moreno worked during his second year of medical school. According to Moreno (1989), he became quite close to Pötl who admired Freud and had a deep understanding of Freudian thinking. Pötl is likely responsible for Moreno’s own considerable grasp of psychoanalytic theory. Nonetheless, Moreno clearly states in *Preludes to the Sociometric Method* (1953a) that from the time that he was a medical student, Freud and psychoanalysis “left me cold” (p. xxvii).

Moreno was still a student when he had his one vis-à-vis encounter with Freud, retold in the article by Takis, the well-known exchange in which Freud asked Moreno about Moreno’s ambitions and Moreno replied by contrasting Freud’s pessimistic inward-looking approach with his, Moreno’s, positive outgoing perspective on life and helping people. It was an extremely brash, even disrespectful, confrontation of a professor by a student, especially in that era and place. This can hardly be considered an attempt to gain the professor’s positive regard. Moreno remained unceasingly critical of both Freud and psychoanalysis throughout his life.

Moreno’s criticisms of Freud and psychoanalysis have often been relegated to Morenean envy of Freud whose much broader exposure, success, and influence which psychoanalysis has had, not only in the field of mental health but also in social sciences, literature, and upon the world at large compared to that which Moreno’s own work has achieved. While Moreno was certainly not above feelings of envy and may very well have been envious of Freud’s fame and success, he had a much more serious complaint to make about Freudian thought. He was convinced that psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic theory was not only

faulty in conceptualization but that it was actually deleterious to human society. Psychoanalysis has “a negative bias which gives a sour taste to all the appetites and aspirations of man” (1953a, p. liii), he wrote, adding:

Even sexuality, which owes him its permanent elevation to a respectable and powerful agent, he studied in its negative rather than in its positive aspects. It was not the sexual actor and his warm up towards orgasm, it was not sexual intercourse and the interaction of two in its positive unfoldment, but rather the miscarriages of sex, its deviations and displacements, its pathology rather than its normality, to which he gave his attention. (p. liii)

### **THE GENESIS OF EACH METHOD**

Sigmund Freud became a scientist thanks to eminent teachers including Ernst Brücke, one of the founders of modern physiology, Darwinist professor Carl Claus, and giants of medical science, Theodore Meynert, chief of the psychiatric clinic of the University of Vienna, Hermann Nothnagel, professor of internal medicine, as well as Jean-Martin Charcot with whom he studied at the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris. His contact with these great medical scientists inspired him to become a great scholar himself and provided him with models for that role. Freud readily absorbed their philosophical perspective along with their other lessons.

Freud's dreams of an appointment to the University of Vienna as a research scientist were shattered when he realized that antisemitism would prevent that from happening. Eager to marry his fiancé, Martha Bernays, Freud reluctantly opted to set up practice as a neurological consultant. His experience with Charcot had kindled an interest in hysteria which was considered a neurological illness at the time. After Freud's friend and mentor, Joseph Breuer, discussed his hypnotic treatment of a hysterical patient with Freud, Freud applied “Breuer's cathartic method” to a number of patients with great apparent success. Freud, who did not like hypnosis, then substituted free association and psychoanalysis became the result.

Moreno's first worldview was inspired by his preoccupation with God as Creator of the universe. Moreno referred to his early years as the religious phase of his life followed by the scientific phase. “It should be remembered that psychoanalysis grew out of the neuropsychiatric world of Charcot and Breuer, whereas the origins of my work go back to the primitive religions and my objective was promulgation of a new cultural and social order” (Moreno, 2019, p. 188). He has declared that all of his innovative ideas stem from the religious phase and were given a rational basis in his scientific phase. There was a transition phase which probably began with his admission to the University of Vienna where he studied medicine. As a student, he formed the Religion of Encounter with four other students. The group was busy in supporting poor emigrants of the Austro-Hungarian Empire who were seeking to leave for other countries. Moreno was also engaging with children on the streets and in the

parks of Vienna where the concept of spontaneity began forming in his mind. He organized the prostitutes of Vienna into small self-help groups during his University years, later claiming this to have been the original group therapy. Moreno was simultaneously studying the science necessary for medical school. His first scientific study may well have been the discovery of sociometry in the refugee village at Metterndorf. The religious phase came to a climax with the mystical experience that resulted in the book, *Das Testamint des Vaters* (1920), translated as *Words of the Father* (1941).

At this time, Moreno was also practicing a scientific profession as a physician in the village of Voslau and organizing the *Stegrieftheater* (The Spontaneity Theater). This served as a scientific laboratory of spontaneity as well as a theatrical entertainment and an attempt to stimulate widespread interest in spontaneity.

Moreno was disappointed with the response to both the spontaneity theater and his book with the same name. There was interest but far less than he had anticipated. He was determined to try it in a different country and emigrated to America. Moreno was disappointed again. He found interest in the endeavor but insufficient to support it economically. He retreated, turning “*temporarily to the therapeutic theater, a strategic decision which probably saved the psychodramatic movement from oblivion*” (1947, p.7, italics in the original). Moreno established a sanitarium in Beacon, NY, and developed the therapeutic function of psychodrama. He began teaching the psychodrama method to others in 1940.

### **MORENO'S QUARREL WITH PSYCHOANALYSIS**

Moreno made two things clear about his criticism of Freud and psychoanalysis. First, his critique was directed toward Freud, the system builder rather than against Freud the scientist; and secondly, “By psychoanalytic system I mean all systems of analytic character” (1953a, p. li). He included analysis by Jungian Adler, Klein, and others who split off from Freud. Today, systems of analytic character would include most of the dozens of psychotherapies that have emerged. Moreno targeted psychoanalysis. He said, “because it was the farthest developed and the most influential” (p. li). That Moreno was including all analytic methods in his criticism of psychoanalysis has been missed by other commentators on Moreno's criticism of Freud. Most of the dozens of psychotherapies that have emerged over the years are indeed analytical.

Moreno accused psychoanalysis of waging “...a war from the rear against all genius in order to reproach him with his complexes” (1953a, p. xxxiv). For Freud, creativity was an alternative to neurosis, and both involved unconscious sexual urges which the individual could not express through culturally approved behavior. The neurotic individual dealt with the situation by excessive use of the less sophisticated defense mechanisms like repression or denial; the creative individual was able to sublimate the unacceptable desires into useful, socially acceptable works. Thus, a creative act is seen by Freud as a substitute for a sexual act that presumably would have been acted on if it were not for the constraints of civilization. One might suppose, therefore, that the invention of the wheel cost some ancient human beings a large number of orgasms.

Such thinking must have been abhorrent to Moreno and certainly was involved in his devastating commentary on Abraham Brill's address to the American Psychoanalytic Association conference in 1931, in Toronto. Brill's paper was proposed to be a psychoanalysis of Abraham Lincoln's humor. He diagnosed Lincoln as schizomaniac. Moreno, asked by Brill to provide a commentary to his address, was angered by his fellow immigrant attacking a great American hero who could not reply. Pointing out the impossibility of psychoanalyzing a dead person and questioning the ethics of pretending to do so, Moreno suggested that Brill was attempting to enhance his own image by reducing Abraham Lincoln's.

Moreno's ideas about creativity could not have been further from Freud's construction. The writer of *Genesis* got it wrong when he wrote that the world was created in 6 days, Moreno thought. The universe is still being created! And, mankind is a major actor in that creativity. The key to creativity is spontaneity and Moreno's "Canon of spontaneity-creativity" accounts for creative change in all domains, the cosmological, the physical, the biological, and the human. Freud believed differently. "But there is nothing arbitrary or undetermined in the psychic life," Freud wrote (1914, p. 282). Human behavior was absolutely determined in Freud's viewpoint, even overdetermined. Moreno wrote, "There can be, in the development of a person, original moments, truly creative and decisive beginnings without any horror vacui, that is a fear that there is no comfortable past behind it from which it springs" (Moreno, 1946, p. 103). There was a place for a functional, operational determinism, he said, but there are also moments which result in a novel unexpected experience.

The methods of Freud and Moreno began in different ways and were aimed at different goals. "It should be remembered that psychoanalysis grew out of the neuropsychiatric world of Charcot and Breuer, whereas the origins of my work go back to the primitive religions and my objectives were the setting up and promoting of a new cultural order" (Moreno, 1953a, p. xxvii). Psychoanalysis began with Sigmund Freud's attempt to understand the mysterious and irrational symptoms of hysteria through the lens of scientific objectivity. Its objective is analysis and treatment of neurosis. Psychoanalysis focuses on the pathological, neurotic, and perverse. It is inspired by Freud's commitment to science and medicine.

Moreno was not interested in how behavior can be analyzed into its parts but was interested in how it is put together to produce the act (Warner, 1954). Moreno's obsession with creativity was a concern for humankind expressed in the first sentence of his major opus: "A truly therapeutic method must have as its objective the whole of mankind" (1953b, p. 1). He was concerned about the destructive aggression within society, having experienced from the inside the shattering destruction of the oldest and apparently strongest empire on the face of the earth in the aftermath of World War I. Like many other thinkers of the time, he saw the dangers that humankind faced from its own technology, a concern reflected in the science fiction play, *R.U.R.* (Čapek, 1923), in which robots' revolt against humans. Increased spontaneity, the catalyst of creativity, seemed to be the answer. His first attempt to arouse interest in spontaneity was the Theater

of Spontaneity. Only when he decided that this was a failure did he turn to psychodrama. Psychodrama was the last attempt of Moreno to share his insights about spontaneity and creativity with human society. Group psychotherapy, sociometry, and psychodrama stem from Moreno's ambition to improve the human condition by increasing spontaneity.

### AMBIVALENCE?

Takis writes that Moreno sought to impress Freud with his (Moreno's) ideas and reads admiration and respect in Moreno's defense of Freud's scientific abilities. I find little to suggest that Moreno was interested in impressing Freud. I agree that he is respectful of Freud's competence as a scientific observer; however, I find both that respect and admiration rather attenuated by his description of Freud as looking "at man from below; he saw man 'upside down' and from the position from which he looked at man he saw first his sexual organs and his rear. He was profoundly impressed, perhaps over sensitized, and he never turned his attention away from them" (1953a, p. liii).

Takis makes a great deal of Moreno's encounter with Freud. He writes, "Moreno reports that at the end of the lecture he approached Freud inquiring on his work..." (Moreno, 2019, p. 187) This is inaccurate. In the passage, Takis is referring to, Moreno writes, "as the students filed out, he singled me out from the crowd and asked me what I was doing" (2019, p. 187). When Moreno told that story to students (I was one), he said that after the lecture, Freud stood at the door of the lecture room and talked to individual students who caught his eye, "much like a preacher after the sermon," and addressed him, Moreno. *That Freud approached Moreno rather than the other way around makes all the difference in understanding their encounter.* This was not, as Takis suggests, Moreno attempting to influence Freud in Moreno's ideas but possibly Freud attempting to evoke Moreno's interest in Freud's ideas. "It was natural, I guess, for Freud to be looking for new disciples" (Moreno, 2019, p. 187). Takis also states that, "Moreno admitted that he had hoped to impress the famous professor with his ideas" (p. 11). I find nothing in Moreno's writing to support that statement. It is important to remember that Moreno had not yet created sociometry, the Stegreiftheater, or psychodrama when the event took place. He was not comparing psychodrama to psychoanalysis. Takis also says that Moreno did not report Freud's response to him. However, in the first of at least three published accounts of the meeting (Moreno, J. L., Moreno, Z. T., & Moreno, J. D., 1964), Moreno did report Freud's reaction. He says that Freud looked at him as if puzzled and smiled. I have not found any evidence to support the idea that Moreno made any real attempt to impress Freud. I have the impression that Moreno thought Freud was too engrossed in his own system to pay much attention to Moreno's or any other theories.

Takis states that his article is an attempt to integrate psychodrama and psychoanalysis. It is, rather, an analytical study of J. L. Moreno's relationship with Sigmund Freud and suggests that Moreno was not as critical of Freud as Moreno's writings suggest but indeed respected and perhaps admired Freud. It is

a repeat of the offense which Moreno accused Brill of committing by attempting to analyze a man, Lincoln, who is dead and cannot defend himself. Takis accuses Moreno of committing the same offense by offering an analysis of Brill's motivation, apparently oblivious that he has just done the same to Moreno.

However, Takis is not the first to attempt to combine psychodrama and psychoanalysis. Libovivi, Diatrine, & Kestenberg (1953) wrote an article entitled "Applications of psychoanalysis to group psychotherapy and psychodrama therapy in France". It was published in volume of *Group Psychotherapy*. Many others have tried. It is an impossible task because psychoanalysis and psychodrama have different aims. Psychoanalysis grew out of a desire to treat hysteria; psychodrama grew out of a desire to improve "the whole of mankind" (Moreno, 1953b, p. 1).

Other innovators have tried combining psychodrama methods with various schools of psychotherapy. Moreno was gratified with the widespread adoption of his methods. He was disturbed, however, by the attempts to combine psychodrama with other theories, complaining that the philosophy upon his methods were constructed had been left behind on library shelves. He wondered why anyone would opt for a pessimistic philosophy that claimed that the individual was interminably in conflict with civilization and that neurosis was the price of civilization, over Moreno's optimistic one which claimed that civilization was a wonderful creation of humankind and that we could make it even better through increased spontaneity.

## REFERENCES

- Čapek, K. (1923). *R.U.R. (Translators Selver, P. and Playfair, N.)*. New York: Doubleday, Page and Co.
- Freud, S. (1914). *The psychopathology of everyday life*. (Translator A. Brill). New York: McMillan. <https://doi.org/10.1037/10012-000>
- Janik, A., & Toulmin, S. (1973). *Wittgenstein's Vienna*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Libovivi, S., Diatrine, R., & Kestenberg, E. (1953). Applications of psychoanalysis to group psychotherapy and psychodrama therapy in France. *Group Psychotherapy*, 5, 38–50.
- Moreno, J. L. (as Anonymous). (1920). *Das testament des Vaters*. Berlin-Potsdam: Kiepenheuer Verlag.
- Moreno, J. L. (1941). *The words of the father*. Beacon, NY: Beacon House.
- Moreno, J. L. (1946). *Psychodrama, first volume*. Beacon, NY: Beacon House.
- Moreno, J. L. (1947). *The theater of spontaneity*. Beacon, NY: Beacon House
- Stegreiftheater, 1923). *Beacon*, NY: Beacon House.
- Moreno, J. L. (1953a). Preludes to the sociometric movement. In Moreno, J. L. (1953), *Who shall survive?* Beacon, NY: Beacon House, pp. xiii–cviii.
- Moreno, J. L. (1953b). *Who shall survive?* (rev. ed.). Beacon, NY: Beacon House.
- Moreno, J. L. (1989). The autobiography of J. L. Moreno, MD (Abridged). *Group Psychotherapy, Sociometry & Psychodrama*, 42, 15–125.
- Moreno, J. L. (2019). *Autobiography of a genius*. UK: Northwest Psychodrama Association.

- Moreno, J. L., Moreno, Z. T., & Moreno, J. D. (1964). *The first psychodramatic family*. Beacon, NY: Beacon House.
- Takis, N. (2020). Reflections on Moreno's ambivalent view on Sigmund Freud and psychoanalysis. *The Journal of Psychodrama, Sociometry, and Group Psychotherapy*, 67, 9–18.
- Warner, W. J. (1954). Sociology and psychiatry. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 5, pp. 228–237.