

Putting on an Act: Dramatic Philosophy and the Problem of Authenticity and Asymmetrical
Reciprocity

Narelle E. Arcidiacono

Abstract

Dramatic Philosophy has the potential to engage communities of inquiry in rigorous dialogue and engagement by dramatizing concepts thus providing ‘as real’ experience and can, with certain caveats, overcome a criticism sometimes leveled at drama as a provocation. The criticism is that drama as a stimulus for philosophical inquiry claims too much, for example the manipulation of empathy and the dilution of authenticity. In defense of drama as a stimulus for deep philosophical reflection I engage with thoughts, which Iris Marion Young¹ expresses in her essay, “Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder, and Enlarged Thought”. And indeed find that dramatic philosophy as a vehicle for developing moral respect is supported by Young’s theories even though she questions the idea of empathy and what we can truly know of each other. I find that she has much in common with Simone de Beauvoir’s understandings of authenticity and the liberty it brings. Beauvoir is committed to the relationship between freedom and authenticity putting it this way in *The Second Sex*: “There is only one way to employ her liberty authentically, and that is to project it through positive action into human society.”² I contend that dramatic representations supports Beauvoir’s position and hence provide powerful stimuli for philosophical engagement.

¹ Young, Iris Marion, *Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder and Enlarge*

² Beauvoir, Simone de. 1956 ed. *The Second Sex*. Trans. H.M. Parshley. Jonathan Cape. London.

First and foremost is it necessary to say that Dramatic Philosophy has little to do with ‘Putting on an Act’ in the superficial sense. It has, however, everything to do with being imaginative, mindful and morally respectful of ones own stories, the stories of others and the stories of the Other. By the Other I mean those whom we may not know, but for whom we have some sense of, and sensibility towards because of our engagement with humanity; for example those who live in abject poverty; asylum seekers who seek protection and are turned away. Dramatic Philosophy has everything to do with the liberating power of asymmetrical reciprocity, allowing as it does for authentic unbridled gift giving and the transformation that comes from the wonder that exists when one gives freely and unencumbered, for example, the gift of a kidney without need of a reciprocal debt. Dramatic Philosophy is sensitive to the needs of the Other without constriction, providing as it does for the problematizing and physicalizing of concepts and scenarios that enable participants to enliven their relation with humanity through both emotion and intellect. This is consistent with John Dewey’s notion that: “If we are willing to conceive education as the process of forming fundamental dispositions, intellectual and emotional, towards nature and fellow man, philosophy may even be defined as the general theory of education.”³

The practice of Dramatic Philosophy relies heavily on transformations in the form of taking on characters and/or roles that provide communities with genuine, dramatically realized

³ Dewey, John. 1966 ed. *Democracy and Education*. Collier-Macmillan. Canada, Ltd., Toronto, Ontario.

Putting on an Act: Dramatic Philosophy and the Problem of Authenticity and Asymmetrical Reciprocity. Re edited 13/07/ 20014

relationships, predicaments and dilemmas. Matthew Lipman identifies the inauthentic participant, and claims “the copyist has no place here”⁴, the task of Dramatic Philosophy being to immerse participants, as far as is possible, in situations that provoke authentic philosophical reflection and rigorous dialogue at a visceral level. Dramatic Philosophy does not rely on imagining ones self in the place of the Other, but instead explores the emotional, social, and intellectual interactions, between oneself and the Other. In other words it does not rely entirely on empathy or reciprocity. The idea is not that the participants walk in the shoes of the Other, but that they view, and interact with the experiences and tales of and with the Other, while engaged in genuine and authentic shared experiences through the dramatization of concepts and stories. Iris Marion Young’s notion of asymmetrical reciprocity assists here as she proposes that one of the difficulties of empathy based reciprocity is that participants in the process will, more than likely, project their own very personal position onto the Other, thus running the risk of misinterpreting the Other and visa versa. That is not to say one shouldn’t and/or can’t be empathetic, it is my view that this is a basic tenet of human existence, only that this process is sometimes clouded by ones personal judgments and projections and therefore may lead to confusion. Simone de Beauvoir is eager to avoid such confusion but acknowledges the complexities of asserting freedom, maintaining authenticity and ensuring one’s existence as a project in good faith writing:

⁴ Lipman, Matthew. 1988 ed. *Philosophy Goes to School*. Temple University Press. Philadelphia.

“There is one way to employ her liberty authentically, and that is to project through positive action in human society.”⁵

Dramatic Philosophy physicalizes the stimuli that is the story and has the intention of moving one’s own and/or others insights positively, and in a respectful manner. My definition of “story”, in this instance, is not necessarily that which is found in a book, but one that is drawn from real experiences that are not appropriated but may be exaggerations of ones own life projections of past and present and into the predicted future. The process assists participants on a journey of self-discovery along side a response to the needs of others. This, in an existential form, equates to the responsibility of the self to fully exploit ones own freedom and liberty, without ever impinging on that or others. Iris Marion Young’s gift of asymmetrical reciprocity provides a considered response to the question of what we can know about the other: “It is not possible to trace how each person’s actions produce specific effects on others because there are too many mediating actions and events. Nevertheless, we have obligations to those who condition and enable our own actions, as they do to us.”⁶

It is with a view to acknowledging the story as vital to the process of inquiry that I proffer the notion of the *Just Story*. Just Stories are not appropriated from others, and this is of paramount importance, but draw on ones own experience, life stories, and the authentic experiences of the storyteller and other participants in the Community of Inquiry. It is the capacity such stories have to generate authentic questions and dialogues that propel them from the realm of “only”

⁵ Beauvoir, Simone de. 1956 ed. *The Second Sex*.

⁶ Young, Iris Marion, *Responsibility and Global Justice; A Social Connection Model**. Social Philosophy & Policy Foundation. Political science. University of Chicargo. Page 105
Putting on an Act: Dramatic Philosophy and the Problem of Authenticity and Asymmetrical Reciprocity. Re edited 13/07/ 20014

stories to justified stories. A *Just Story*, in concert with just dialogue, neither limits one's own freedom nor exploits another's, but assists in the very personal task of pursuing self fulfillment and preserving vitality. In the context of Dramatic Philosophy, these stories and dialogues provide a rich terrain for inquiry and edify vital signs for participants in the process. Dramatic Philosophy has to do with using the tools of drama and philosophy to create provocations through which participants within the community have access to a collective experience.

When engaging with dramatic representations participants have unique opportunities to explore and/or stretch a question in a sensory manner and in so doing bring depth and awareness to elements within in a question. That is to say that drama has the potential, because of its physical nature and visual manifestations, to create 3D models of philosophical concepts, questions, thoughts and/or ideas. Just as we provide opportunities for young children to play in order to discover, develop and adapt their world so too drama provides a suitcase of opportunity from which questions can be unpacked, packed and rearranged.

Dramatic provocations can first and foremost be achieved through various forms of role dramas such as:

1. Comparative Role Drama: each participant takes on two different roles in order to compare the reasoned judgments of each position, in so doing developing philosophical questioning.
2. Experiential Absorption Role Drama: the facilitator takes on the role of the Other and interacts with the community in order to create authentic dialogue for philosophical inquiry.
3. Philosophical Discourse Reactive Role Drama: relies on the participants exploring various roles that arise throughout the experience.

4. Playbuilding a Community of Inquiry: Consolidates philosophical dialogue in a communal performance thereby expanding the understandings to others.

While Dramatic Philosophy requires the same level of determination, skill and self-discipline that a fine performer will put into interpreting a script or librettos for performance, the process does not require philosophy facilitators to be actors. It does however require that facilitators relinquish self-consciousness, and demonstrate qualities of focus and immersion and, above all, humility. Such commitment is needed in order to create, as far as is possible, an authentic experience from which quality questioning and dialogue can grow. The philosophy facilitator will also have an intimate understanding of the philosophical terrain to be explored and shared with the dramatic stimulus. The philosophy facilitator is not an “improviser” nor a “copyist” creating randomly from a set of circumstance, but instead is a well-trained, well-prepared individual committed to a philosophically rigorous processes that seeks wisdom and truth in an environment of intellectual engagement.

People sometimes claim that children are not actually philosophizing when they ‘do’ philosophy, but that they are simply using their imagination. As far as I can see there is nothing that excludes imagination from philosophy or visa versa. Furthermore, examples of student dialogue often show elements of the thinking of various, and perhaps obscure, philosophers whom it is unlikely that students are just copying. The following comments, which come from

5year old students during an inquiry about the future has overtones of Saul Kripke's⁷ 'Possible Worlds' theory.

Luke: In the future, means not right now, later in the afternoon. If you are not impatient it goes faster, and faster.

Tia: The future is another world.

Meki: The future is like different worlds but you don't know what is going to happen there.

Another example of students constructing thoughts that are inline with a particular philosopher is seen in the following Meinongian⁸ style reasoning from a group of 11year olds which is in response to the stimulus "To be or not to be, that is the question", from William Shakespeare's Hamlet.

Jack: I think that things that are in your mind exist mentally.

Elle: The word "be" can mean many things. It is possible to exist or to "be" even if you are dead. People only think a thing exists if they can see, feel and/or touch it. People are very selfish when it comes to believing things.

Meinong's Theory of Objects⁹ attempts to solve the problem of exclusion by providing recognition of objects that are non-existent like "the golden mountain made of gold": Jack thinks that things that are in your mind exist mentally, precisely as Meinong claims.

The following dialogue comes from an 11year old student named Tye. The provocation was Shakspeare's Romeo and Juliet.

⁷ Kripke, S., Craig, Edward, (ed) The Shorter Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Routledge, Taylor Group. 2005. p. 533.

⁸ Ibid. p. 653.

⁹ Ibid. p. 535.

The kid had no friends. He was interested in oil painting and all the other kids criticised him for that. He was very lonely. He felt he had no purpose except to be that “kid on the edge” of the piazza always by himself. He imagined himself to be a big carbon blob on the edge of the earth..... with no purpose, just there. The only thing he had was his boredom, no fun, no interest just boredom. But then along came Benvolio and with their friendship everything changed.

- A. Good morning
 B. Good morning
 A. What's your name?
 B. Benvolio
 A. Amazing, so is mine.
 B. Where were you born?
 A. Verona
 B. Amazing, so was I.
 A. How old are you?
 B. Fourteen
 A. Me to
 b. I think we are mirror images.
 So I've finally found myself, what a relief.

One of the philosophical underpinning in the previous example could be said to be that of Lacan's 'mirror stage', which he claims represents an arrival into the world and is significant for what it reveals and demonstrates about the residual and situational nature of perception.

The above Shakespearian examples demonstrate the most obvious connection between drama and philosophy that is the use of text as a source for developing and exploring a range of questions. Also, we see the impact of philosophy on the process of writing for drama, and visa versa, as in Tye's work, which is mature and perceptive beyond his years.

This connection, though powerful, is however only one of many ways in which drama and philosophy can produce a productive partnership. As we have seen it can be the study and performance of Shakespeare. It can be studying a poem of Pablo Neruda and incorporating the essence of the poem to discover through philosophical engagement into a script developed through rehearsal to performance. Drama either as a subject to be taught or as a tool to be used does not in my world has anything to do with putting on an annual play. It has nothing to do with mouthing words that are the machinations of another's mind. It has nothing to do with the smell of the greasepaint and the roar of the crowd, although whilst considering process it is not enough to say that product is not important if this is simply a convenient subterfuge for poor performance. Dramatic Philosophy has everything to do with exploration and rigorous discourse, engaging with *Just* stories and committing to experiential understanding through authentic interactions. Dramatic Philosophy commits to bringing philosophical stimuli and/or provocation that take account of moral respect and wonder, to children and others, through communities of inquiry.

Finally, let's not forget the incidental role drama and philosophical encounters that happen around us all the time and the power this can have in fostering philosophical exchange. Many years ago, after an inquiry about beauty with a group of 5year old children, a little girl from Iraq and another from Afghanistan were playing dressing up. They had dressed up in sequenced cocktail frocks, black and red respectively. They came to where I was assisting a boy who had, throughout the philosophy session, been struggling with the question "What is beauty?" an earnest and scholarly child from Chile he had been distressed that he had been unable to articulate an analogy for beauty.

On turning and seeing the glittering girls behind him he looked back at me and said with stars in his eyes “Now I know what beauty is.”

At that moment I glimpsed everything that is good in the world.