

Choice or chance? – critical practical philosophy insights from Winnicott's persona

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Abstract

There are two parts to the argument of why and how Winnicott's work is mandatory in present circumstances, i.e. in the first decades of the twentieth-century. One is a kernel characteristic of his oeuvre. And the other one justifies the need to strengthen, to disseminate and to amplify the role of psychoanalysis in contemporary societies. This is a here and now, *hic et nunc*, perspective, as an effort to capture and to pinpoint the essence of the essence of what psychoanalysis is about. Consequently, the rationale being followed is that psychoanalysis is mainly considered to be an anthropological and an ethnographic achievement, meaning that psychoanalysis enables and potentiates an entirely new world of possibilities regarding how humans may position themselves in face of their thoughts and feelings and of the systems of belief that are permeated by the societies in which they are immersed.

Key-words: contemporary psychoanalysis; ideal persona; empowering citizens; catalysing change.

1 Introduction

Contemporary psychoanalysis is a body of theory, a therapeutic practice and a life philosophy. Having emerged in the twentieth century, it is the twenty-first century that will adequately explore and develop psychoanalysis full potential.

Winnicott's body of work represents a turning point in both psychoanalytic thinking and in terms of the world views, which work as an under current that condition and determine value systems and strategic options at societal level. The present complex and turbulent times enable a discernment of the foundations of human's existence, namely the capabilities related to language, meaning and learning.

Empowering people, that is the essence of Winnicott's message. And empowerment means self-determination, which is co-responsibility, co-resistance and co-creation.

"It is possible to do the analysis of a suitable patient taking into account almost exclusively that person's personal relation to people, along with the conscious and unconscious phantasies that enrich and complicate the relationships between whole

persons.” (Winnicott, 1945). And Winnicott’s interest in “how the patient’s own phantasy about his inner organisation and its origin in instinctual experience is important as such.” (1945). These accounts give a glimpse of what is central to psychoanalytic work.

2 The persona ideal

The importance of psychoanalysis is revealed by a straightforward task. That is, psychoanalysis exists in order to help to make sense of reality. In contemporary societies, facing complexity, one needs to have faces, multiple faces, i.e. real people to whom one can connect to. One such face is Winnicott.

Persona is an ancient Greek concept linked to the role protagonists took on stage when representing a play in theatre. Persona became an operational and technical term in recent decades in order to indicate the end user of a software development product or the target client of a marketing campaign. These buyer and end user persona are created fictions, which, nevertheless, indicate an approximation of the idealised profile that developers and marketers are aiming to reach.

When referring to Winnicott’s persona, the idea is that his life, personality, achievements and the messages he intentionally and unintentionally left as a heritage creates an ideal role model, which may work as a reference to others. These others include his fellow paediatric physicians, psychoanalysts and health-care professionals; include the mothers and fathers of the children and adolescents he cared for; and include his patients too. What is meant here is that caring for others and caring for oneself is ultimately a human experience, and it is only a question of degree of intensity and of authenticity that may differentiate one situation from another. In other words, Winnicott’s persona is a role model for everyone, for the universal citizen and for the global individual.

In a business context, creating a buyer persona is a powerful marketing methodology.

“Business schools advise marketers to listen to customers.”; “Businesses are beginning to realize that Big Data reveals only part of the customer’s story.”; “The best way to understand what people want is to get to know them”. (Scott, in Revella, 2015).

These comments highlight the need to “know your customer”, as the old adage of marketing itself. This old time truth is being forgotten in the digital age, as is argued by David Meerman Scott at the Forward of Revella’s book.

As a summary description: “Creating buyer personas is the process of conducting one-to-one interviews with customers to get a handle on their mind-sets, understand their purchasing decisions, and build three-dimensional profiles of real buyers.”; “Adele Revella hopscoches over fads and hysteria to prove that asking customers about their decisions – and then systematically analysing their answers – is one of the most powerful strategies around”. (Scott, in Revella, 2015).

Referring to the digital age: “Although it is possible to gather mountains of information on just about anything, no amount of data will help marketers understand customers as well – or as quickly – as simply listening. Interview a customer tomorrow morning, and by tomorrow afternoon you will have robust new knowledge of how your buyers think, without any of the pitfalls that accompany less people-centred approaches.” (Scott, in Revella, 2015).

The advantage of providing “immediately actionable, step-by-step procedures” is that it may lead to “the most crucial element – making use of buyer personas once they have been generated.” It is argued that “this last step is where too many marketing executives fail short. They focus on the goal of creating buyer personas without a clear plan that guarantees a useful outcome” (Scott, in Revella, 2015).

These transdisciplinary influences elucidate how concepts, theories and methods may find new applications in different areas. In this case, the need to capture personality traits that are not possible to be gathered merely through large numbers, as the big data may offer.

3 Contingency and openness to questioning

Choice or chance implies that beyond the contingent, limited and fragile aspects of human life, there are unlimited possibilities that are present to each individual in hers or his lifespan. Language, meaning and learning are intrinsically human processes. As processes, they are continuously in process, undergoing continual change and transformation, mirroring, being the vehicles and instruments for, and embodying change, change that is itself embedded in all reality.

In themselves, these items capture that which humans do well. Expertise in such areas – language, meaning and learning - may adequately describe the open participation process, which may characterise each individual life. In other words, when facing chance events individuals have the intrinsic choice of determining how to react to such chance happenings. Such reaction reveals a pattern and this pattern holds both an individual and collective fingerprint.

Beyond all the conditions and determinations, which fix and crystallise worldviews, there is creativity, imagination and the sometimes-troubling feeling of doubt, of inquiry and questioning. It is this questioning that is the source of all novelty.

Participating in a reality, which is in a continual process of change and is itself a continuous flow, certain patterns help to create freezing stations, as shots, photographs, static images, in a video. In times of crises, the frozen and the moving images do not match and it is necessary to renew the structures and to recodify whatever consists of such worldview.

Again, this is intrinsically a questioning process. And, again, it is both unavoidably an individual and a collective process. In short, whatever makes each singular individual acknowledge something unique and intimate, as the most personal of personal experiences, is also that which may characterise such experience as human and, consequently, as universal.

What makes us go deeper into our own individuality is also that which makes us more faithful to that which means to be human, to be part of the human species. Participation is the process through which one captures how reality is being manifested, as an open process, as something in the face of which an inquiring attitude is crucial, not as a suspicious negative refusal to let go but as an affirmative and positive conviction that something else, some other route, some alternative must exist to whatever is being presented as being dogmatic, absolute and sacred.

The inquiry process is itself the dogma, the absolute and the sacred, taken as something that cannot fail and one cannot do without, because if it is gone, and once it is gone, if one neglects, rejects or ignores it, it is the same as capturing and encapsulating life as an endless repetition of *déjà-vues*, as a repetition of what one hears and sees, as if there is nothing else to it, to life. That is, it is the positive attitude of self-inquiry, which may support human's creative power. And it is human's creativity that captures the cheer power of humans to determine their own destinies.

Inquiring and questioning are critical in adolescent education.

It is interesting to notice the complexity of adolescents' environment. Gilbert (2007) "considers how issues of adolescent development might be brought into conversation with dilemmas in sex education. Here, sex education is larger than information, affirmation or prohibition. In its address to the most intimate aspects of life—love, loss, vulnerability, power, friendship, aggression—sex education is necessarily

entangled in the adolescent's efforts to construct a self, find love outside the family, enjoy one's newly adult body; in short, various relationships that might cautiously be called developmental." (2007).

This author explicitly refers to Winnicott's theoretical constructs:

"Drawing on the work of psychoanalysts Winnicott and Sandler, I argue that, to imagine adolescents as sexual subjects, we need to have a theory of adolescent sexuality, how it differs from and is similar to adult sexuality; and, furthermore, we need to have a patience and curiosity about the ways adult sexuality is inhabited by the memories, fantasies and experiences of adolescence. That is, how can sex education make room for a theory of adolescent development without casting the adolescent in the risky role of not yet adult." (Gilbert, 2007).

4 The test of the real

One central idea is present throughout Winnicott's life's work, which is the idea of empowerment. That is, that each individual, no matter the circumstances, has the capacity to use all of hers or his power in order to promote the best of the best options, exploring the maximum of possibilities available in order to reach the maximum potential of whatever situation, thus promoting a certain idea of common good.

This idea of common good is like a world vision that structures, situates and positions everything else, including what each individual may consider to be her or his best options and expected outcomes. Consequently, self-determination is key to what one may learn from Winnicott's masterful work, and three main concepts may qualify what this self-determination implies under Winnicott's perspective: co-responsibility, co-resistance and co-creation.

These three concepts are closely interconnected and represent different interrelated and mutually dependent aspects, which are present in the process of development of every human being, whatever cultural, geographical or historical context.

Development is understood as an open dynamism, which refers not to the achievement of a certain limit or level, as a functional and instrumental level, but rather to the continuing and never ending process of development of humanity. This process is present in every individual human being, and it is related to the idea of excellence, of an experience of excess and of bewilderment, as happens in a limit situation.

In limit situations all our structuring beliefs and convictions are put to the test and new options emerge that could not have been previously considered. These are situations where one may feel that there is an open process, which may capture growth, progress and evolution, again, as an open dynamism.

This is both an individual and a collective process in the sense that it is lived, identified and felt as a personal event and yet it is something which is universal and connects each individual with whatever significant experience anyone else may have had in the past. In other words, it is humanity itself understood as an intimate and singularly unique process and yet it is also deeply and unavoidably collective and social because no matter how different individuals are among themselves, they all share something, which collectively characterises humanity *per se*.

More importantly, each new era brings into this arena new instances that may characterise whatever it means to be human. This definition, or re-definition of humanity, evolves through the efforts and achievements of individuals, as there is no other way humanity may exist unless as an universal abstraction.

Being an abstract concept, humanity, which means, as all abstractions, that it may only become materialised in concrete reality through individual actions and reifications. To reify is to make real.

Abstractions are important, indeed crucial, as potential for action, i.e. as condensed instances of reification, because no formal and explicit reality may take form unless through the fuzzy, dirty and opaque process of informal and implicit meaning-making, signification, language use and participation in social practices, in communities, communities of action and of meaning, in short, in humanity. To be human is to manifest humanity. And to be human is to participate in humanity, as a given and as an unavoidable mandate of existence.

Winnicott's paramount achievement is to create a body of theory and a sophisticated praxis, which together imply that no one, no individual, may be excluded from the privilege of acknowledging and, indeed, becoming in charge of hers or his capacity to take ownership upon their own individual life. To take ownership and authorship upon one's life's, as an artist and artisan of one's life, is to choose the options that best serve one's individual interests, whilst simultaneously fitting one's deepest convictions, beliefs and worldviews.

Choice or chance is a pendulum game of words, whereabouts the greater and more perfect the choice process, the greater the chances of receiving happy odds in life's gamble. Worldviews are a casino and the best bets go for the visions of the world

that best capture that towards which all human beings are faithful to, which is their deepest convictions, dreams and desires, and it is through such impetus and drives that humans recreate their spectrum of options, extending to the limit the extremes in a way that broadens one's horizons and effectively creates new worlds of possibility, enabling new instances of human action to emerge. That is Winnicott's magnificent lesson. And it is psychoanalysis as a scientific community of practice that holds the mandate to spread the word, the positive message of empowerment, of trust and openness in humankind, as an individual and collective achievement.

Perhaps the easiest forms to acknowledge the presence of chance are Internet relations. Whitty and Carr (2003) analyse courting behaviour.

Their work "draws from psychoanalytic theory, in particular Winnicott's object-relations theory, to propose that cyber-flirting can be a form of play." They "attempt to present a theoretical framework for the conception of cyberspace." (2003). It is interesting to see direct applications of Winnicott's concepts, in particular to areas that did not even exist in his lifetime.

"We emphasize the problems with past researchers' obsessive attention to the absence of the body online, and suggest that new theorizing on Internet relationships needs to consider how the body is re-constructed. We propose that cyberspace can be what Winnicott would describe as a 'potential space' for play, and this particularly applies to online spaces. (Whitty and Carr, 2003)

They "suggest that cyber-flirting may promote psychological growth, but it may also become a destructive and exploitative behaviour directed towards 'others'." (2003).

5 The future of yesterday and the past of tomorrow

In the first decades of the twenty-first century, psychoanalysis represents a powerful milestone as the code-breaker of that which stands behind human's capacity for self-determination. Consequently, psychoanalysts themselves, as individuals, are the real-life manifestation of the wake-up call process of how humans thrive to create a better world and to fight for common good.

If Freud's genius has had some set-backs, namely his relationship to women and to the feminine, the one hundred years' history of evolution of psychoanalytic schools of thought and of psychoanalytic praxis has proven that the unconscious black-box has unleashed powerful mind frames, people whose lives have continued to mark current thought to the present day.

Among these diversified contributions one name stands out – Donald Winnicott - as the ultimate example of the kind of attitude, posture, *savoir-fair* and *joy-de-vivre*, which was delicately carved through acute thinking, deep and transformative learning, a critical and creative mind, and an infinite passion for the other, for how curiously each individual is her and his own self-creator, determining hers and his own forms of existence, in a self-determining way.

In short, Winnicott's paramount contribution to present times is his statement, as a life's statement, as something that is lived through to its ultimate consequences, of the human capacity to create a better world, individually and collectively. The unleashing of human being's creative power, of dealing with personal and historical contingencies, and with better or worse objective circumstantial factors, and, beyond all odds, to become owner and co-creator of hers and his immediate existence, as well as the moulder, designer and constructor of the life's of generations to come, that is what all cultures and all civilizations, without exception, have indeed been the vehicles for.

Each new life inherits a clay vase filled with the contributions of the evolution of humankind. Each new existence has to confront her and himself with the open inquiring process of what it means to be human. Simply put, why do we get up every morning? It is not necessary to consider the meaning of the universe but rather things as simple as what kind of options do I take in my daily life and what do such options tell me about the person I am, the society I live in and the ideals that nurture my joy for living.

Among the most sensitive areas are the place of children in a society and how the most fragile members of a society may be affected by the unresolved taboo like issues, which will hinder and pervert the creative renewal process that each new generation represents. Are the poorest, the handicapped, the unemployed and the marginalised able to offer better opportunities for their children?

Winnicott and his generation lived through some of the most tragic examples of human ability for self-destruction. Being born in the year of 1896, he was eighteen and forty-three years old, respectively, at the outbreak of the two World Wars. Dealing with the most fragile of the fragile and then his direct work with children and their families implied a kaleidoscopic vision into the resilience and awe inspiring capacity of human beings for self-renewal and self-regeneration.

Again, this is as much an individual as a collective process, as it is through the reality test of the real lives of real life individuals like you and me that collective life, society

and humanity is formed. As Edgar Morin argued, the only history there is, is the history of individuals. History, science, technology and the arts are human constructions, which, in turn, co-construct and frame individuals, in a never-ending process.

If psychoanalysis is necessary in the twenty-first century, it is because of its capacity to unleash the most positive and creative powers of humankind. The psychoanalytic body of work of Winnicott embodies and is embedded with one central concept, that of human being's capacity for self-determination. This central instance may take three integrated dimensions: co-responsibility, co-resistance and co-creation.

Assuming, first, co-responsibility, that is, that whatever has happened, is happening and will happen to no matter whom, which I may connect to, somehow, whatever way how, is part of my world, of my life and of my universe, so that I may acknowledge my ownership, responsibility and proactive availability to be in charge of whatever may depend upon my connection to such issue, event, incident, accident, happening, occurrence, instance or emergency.

Assuming, second, that this collective fight for common good, understood as peace making and as community building, is a form of resistance, and as co-resistance because it is both an individual and a participatory process. Co-resistance implies that there is a negation and a denouncing process of making sure that meaning-making avoids demagoguery and intentional misguidance. Paradox, ambiguity and conflict may carry creative and positive tensions, which may be necessary for change to occur, yet resistance is the act of solidly holding one's ground and giving evidence or signalling that the end-game is something else, something different, alternative and yet to be seen.

And third, the act of co-creation, understood as a living statement and a manifesto, as a political mandate enabling every single individual the opportunity to contribute to the construction of collective good, of common good and of enunciation of the kind of dream, utopia and ideal that keeps us at our very best as a living species. In simple terms, integrative models such as the concept of sustainable development captures the links between three pillars of ecological, economic and social development. Winnicott's work creates new models of thought, which go beyond the field of psychoanalysis.

"Perhaps the most important and at the same time most elusive of the ideas introduced by Donald Winnicott is the concept of potential space. Potential space is the general term Winnicott used to refer to an intermediate area of experiencing that

lies between fantasy and reality.” (Ogden, 2014).

It is through this idea of a potential space that other terms are developed, including holding, true and false self and reparation. The structuring of Winnicott’s models is centred in this broad notion of development, growth and empowerment.

Conclusion

The main argument to be considered is the importance of Winnicott’s work for psychoanalysis and for contemporary societies. To make sense of one’s world, to survive turbulence, to make the best on one’s life, to fight for justice and to contribute to common good, is part of an individual and collective journey that each new generation has to go through. Winnicott’s unique intuition is the need to empower people, to make each individual a master of hers or his own life. In other words, to make sure each individual becomes an artist of life, taking this life as a masterpiece.

The issue is not centred in the health or pathology dichotomy but rather on the need to promote constant development and to fully explore the maximum potential each individual being and each unique situation have to offer.

Psychoanalysis helps to bring the best out of each individual, each relationship and context and, as such, it may be considered to be an anthropological and an ethnographic achievement. Psychoanalysis in general and Winnicott’s work in particular bring a breath of hope to humanity. Indeed, it is the breadth and scope to this magistral work that enables the inauguration of a promising journey. It is not magic, neither wonderland, but it is simply the forward positive signalling of trusting life, building self-confidence and creating signifying relationships. Winnicott merely puts into practice and then shares with others the old motto written over the door of the forecourt of the temple of Apollo at Delphos “know thyself”, know yourself.

“Know yourself and you will know the universe of the Gods. Therefore, Shunammite, if you do not know yourself, you will be a beast, a little cow forced to follow her herd.”

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