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# *Philosophy of Improvisation: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Theory and Practice*, edited by Susanne Ravn, Simon Høffding, and James McGuirk

BOOK REVIEW

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A book review of Susanne Ravn, Simon Høffding, and James McGuirk, eds., *Philosophy of Improvisation: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Theory and Practice*. London: Routledge, 2021, vii + 218 pp. ISBN 9780367540210.

Improvisation is a hot topic of contemporary philosophical debate. In recent times, since the publication of the monumental *Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*,[1] several interesting essays have been published that address the issue from different perspectives. Some are devoted to improvisation in specific artistic practices;[2] others offer an overview of improvisation in different artistic practices, also proposing analyses concerning the ontology, phenomenology, aesthetics, or ethics of artistic improvisation.[3] Still others offer a more general look at the topic, understanding improvisation as a fundamental resource of human beings, or as a specific property of their behaviour and acting.[4] The edited volume by Susanne Ravn, Simon Høffding, and James McGuirk sets out to study improvisation in both everyday life and the arts,

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1 George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

2 For instance, Gary Peters, *Improvising Improvisation: From out of Philosophy, Music, Dance, and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); Vida L. Midgelow, *The Oxford Handbook of Improvisation in Dance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

3 Alessandro Bertinetto and Marcello Ruta, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy and Improvisation in the Arts* (London: Routledge, 2022); Alessandro Bertinetto, *Aesthetics of Improvisation*, trans. Robert T. Valgenti (Leiden: Brill, 2022).

4 Alessandro Bertinetto and Georg Bertram, '"We Make Up the Rules as We Go Along": Improvisation as an Essential Aspect of Human Practices?', *Open Philosophy* 3 (2020): 202–21; Georg Bertram and Michael Rüsenberg, *Improvisieren! Lob der Ungewissheit* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2021).

understanding it as a particular competence, or range of competences, consisting of acting without being in (complete) control of the process of action and the results of acting themselves.

Whether it is a highly specialized skill, as in the case of sports or artistic practices, or, conversely, the ability to perform ordinary practices of daily life in a routine manner, this particular competence to act without complete control of what one does takes place as an interaction between organism and environment that requires flexibility, adaptability, plasticity, and responsiveness. As such, according to the editors of the volume, improvisation seems to bring about interesting philosophical paradoxes. The first paradox is precisely that we call improvisation both highly specialized activities based on sophisticated and demanding skills and techniques and simple, repetitive, habit-based everyday activities. The second paradox is due to the apparent contrast between the spontaneity and freedom of improvisation, on the one hand, and, on the other, its being an intentional activity linked to a plan of action. Finally, it also seems to be paradoxical that improvisation as a very specialized activity involves a relaxation of control over action: in fact, technical skills would seem to involve a high degree of control over the action processes. This is often related to the fact that improvisational action usually requires the interaction between several agents.

The chapters of the volume investigate these issues from different perspectives, particularly building on, and fruitfully relating, the approaches of analytic philosophy, phenomenology, French philosophy (Gilles Deleuze), 4E cognition, and social ontology. Section 1 is devoted to the relationship between improvisation, on the one hand, and plans, norms, and habits on the other. Section 2 considers aspects of improvisation related to music, dance, and ritual. Section 3 enters closely into the analysis of specific case studies.

In what follows, I will discuss the single chapters of the book, focusing on some of the most important themes they tackle, and then offer some brief critical considerations. In philosophy of action an interesting problem is whether and how improvisation can be intentional, and thus whether and how improvisation is an action in the proper sense of this concept. To answer these questions, it is certainly crucial to explain the relationship between improvisational acting and planning, which is indeed not an easy task. Following up on reflections offered in an earlier book of hers,[5] Beth Preston deals with the topic in a chapter ('The Birth of Planning out of the Spirit of Improvisation: The Iceberg Model') that is interesting right from the title, which presents a parody of the famous title of Friedrich Nietzsche's book *The Birth of Art: From the Spirit of Music* (1871). Interestingly, the title of one of my articles ('The Birth of Art from the Spirit of Improvisation') exhibits a similar parody.[6] But it derives art (not planning) from the 'Spirit' of improvisation. And it is telling that both planning and art may be derived from the spirit of improvisation. The two things might seem incompatible; but they are not! Indeed, Preston suggests that planning prior to action characterizes only a small portion of human actions, which mostly organize their plan as they unfold and adapt to the concrete circumstances in which they are carried out. Thus, it can be argued, the plan, as a rule of action, is realized concretely precisely through the action itself, in each and every circumstance. And this comes very close to the thesis – which I have argued elsewhere – that improvisation is paradigmatic for art because in art the

5 Beth Preston, *A Philosophy of Material Culture* (London: Routledge, 2013).

6 See Alessandro Bertinetto, 'The Birth of Art from the Spirit of Improvisation', *Quadranti* 6 (2018): 119–47.

rule for the production of works and performances is generated through the making itself: a formative making that invents the way of making while/through making itself.[7] In her chapter, however, Preston does not link her thesis on the relationship between planning and improvisation to art but merely specifies the relationship between planning and improvisation. According to her 'Iceberg model', the tip of the 'iceberg' is the planned actions, while the rest of the body of the iceberg – the much more extensive underwater portion – is the actions we habitually improvise. Therefore, as she writes, 'we are fundamentally improvisers who occasionally plan, not planners who occasionally improvise' (p. 13). To defend this thesis, Preston first criticizes the assimilation of both planning into improvisation and improvisation into planning and argues that these are two different phenomena. Improvisation – explained also in terms of what in philosophy of mind is System 1 (comprising fast, immediate, automatic, and unconscious cognitive processes) – is understood as 'goal-directed behavior', while planning (and composition) is explained in terms of System 2 (which is slow, controlled, conscious, uniquely human, and exposed to cultural transformations) and is equated to 'future planning'. Planning, however, depends on improvisation because the world conditions can change and details cannot be planned. To sum up, 'planning is dependent on improvisation for the execution of plans, but [...] improvisation does not have a similar dependence on planning'. Hence, 'improvisation is more fundamental than planning' (p. 25). Yet – Preston continues – this is true only in principle. In practice, human beings – as improvisers in the performing arts exemplarily show – must also plan their performances. Preston in short fails to take a clear position. She distinguishes between improvisation and planning and argues for the primacy (in principle) of improvisation over planning, but at the same time defends that improvisation within human practices often depends on planning. The situation is rather intricate, and the position she argued for in her book seems to me more effective: it is not only the execution of a plan but planning itself that is a largely improvisational activity.

In this regard, an almost opposite position to Preston's view is the thesis defended by Raul Hakli ('Improvisation as Online Planning'). His idea is that improvisation is 'online planning'. This would derive from the consideration that improvisation can be defined as the coincidence of ideation (invention) and realization (performance) – which, on closer inspection, is not really a novelty: it is the most widely used formal definition of improvisation, not only as artistic practice but – as the author of the chapter thinks – as ordinary activity. In any case, Hakli argues that there are two types of action: actions based on prior planning and actions that elaborate the plan of action in the course of performance. Hence, improvisation is a particular kind of planning, considered to be goal-directed intentional activity. Obviously, this view fully contrasts with the idea that an action is improvised if it is unplanned, but also – less obviously – with the thesis that improvisation can be an aimless action such as walking around without a goal. This last aspect is particularly questionable, because it does not seem necessary that the aim of improvisation be predetermined: aims, or at least some aims of an action, can be invented during the course of the improvised action; that is, they can be improvised as well – especially when the improvisation at issue is a joint improvisation (as it is often the case in music, theatre, or dance improvisation). Hakli's response to this objection seems to be that it is a matter of degree: 'The less time there is between selecting actions [and their aims] and performing them, the more improvisatory the actions are' (p. 42). So, most actions are at least somewhat improvised: both totally

7 See Bertinetto, *Aesthetics of Improvisation*.

aimless actions and totally planned actions seem to be excluded from the range of possible human actions. And even the configuration of a plan can take place in an improvised way, and in fact this is what happens when planning involves some rate of creativity, or so the author seems to argue. At any rate, this conception seems to entail the need for a broad approach to improvisation; that is, it seems in general to advocate a conception of improvisation that is capable of taking into account both everyday activities of an ordinary kind and the activities required by very specialized practices such as arts or sports.

The distinction between *expert* improvisation (relating to the latter kind of activities) and *inexpert* improvisation (relating to the former kind of activities) proposed in the chapter by Salice and Krüger ('Towards a Wide Approach to Improvisation') has the ambition of presenting the appropriate theoretical context for this broad conception of improvisation. The thesis is based on the conceptual paradigms of the embedded and extended mind and distributed action and, in its general approach, is especially appreciable for offering a theoretical basis for arranging different types of improvisation. In general, in inexpert improvisation, the agent does not have sufficient practical knowledge; improvisation is not the purpose of the action and is not freely chosen by the agent but forcibly imposed by the situation of the action. Improvisation is a crucial resource in everyday life, because it allows human beings to adapt plastically to the changing conditions of the environment in which they operate by responding to them as affordances for action. Conversely, in the practices of expert improvisation, improvisation is freely chosen by the agent as a '*proximate* goal which is supposed to enable achievement of a *distal* goal' (p. 54). Its possibility depends on the acquisition of skills and techniques through practice, and criteria for success are established by the normative coordinates of the type of practice in question. As also noted by John Sutton in his 'Afterword' to the volume, the distinction between inexpert and expert improvisation is, however, too rigid. In fact, even everyday practices (conversing, riding a bicycle, cooking, and so on) require expertise and, conversely, expert improvisation – in art and sports, for instance – includes reactive improvisation. Moreover, improvisation is not always itself the goal of expert improvisation. Thus there is continuity, and perhaps a difference in degree, between expert and inexpert improvisation. However, the idea that there is no contrast between creative–improvisational acting and acting from conventions, mental and social institutions, and habits is certainly a crucial one. Habits, conventions, and institutions scaffold our (inter)acting with(in) the environment and, conversely, this improvisational acting adapts conventions, institutions, and habits to the environment. This means that we shape the norms – and habits – of our practices as we act.[8]

This thesis is also explored by Nick Crossley in his chapter 'Improvisation as a Social Process'. Moving from the correct idea that planning and improvisation are not mutually exclusive, Crossley argues that norms and habits of action are negotiated *in situ* – which means: in an improvisational way – and, symmetrically, improvisation is not *ex nihilo*; it is rather an exploratory activity that involves responding to natural and cultural environmental conditions as well as interacting with other agents. As a consequence, the meaning of individual action also depends on the response of others; that is, it is configured retrospectively (I would say: *retroactively*). Of course, this is nothing new, but it seems to be pointing in the right direction, indeed.

8 See Bertinetto and Bertram, 'We Make Up the Rules'.

Crossley's chapter is certainly one of the most interesting in the entire book. Equally interesting is the text by James McGuirk, which, although placed in the third section, on 'Improvisation in Practice', makes a very fruitful contribution to discussing improvisation from the standpoint of action theory. The thesis proposed by his chapter, 'Improvisation in the Classroom: Towards an Aspectual Account of Improvisatory Practice', is that improvisation, rather than being a particular *kind* of action, is a possible *aspect* of action. Being reducible neither to mere planning nor to pure, free spontaneity, improvisation always takes place within the framework of constraints. The danger of overly broadening the notion of improvisation is exorcized precisely by means of the idea, which it would be interesting to explore even beyond the school context to which the author refers, that improvisation can be understood as the action considered under a particular perspective, which, precisely, means understanding improvisation as an aspect of action. I guess that this could be an interesting way to reconcile the philosophical perspectives on action theory offered by the articles discussed so far.

The second section presents chapters devoted to 'Specific Aspects of Improvisational Practices'. The first contribution ('Taking Responsibility by Letting Go: The Improvisation of Responding to the Call') is by Bruce Ellis Benson. Referring to music as an activity ('musicking', as Christopher Small put it),[9] Benson argues that improvisation is paradigmatic for music as an activity precisely because of the invitation it proposes to be responsible to what one does, but also responsive to the cultural tradition in which the specific performance is embedded. In addition, as a hermeneutical–dialogical enterprise, improvisation teaches that the performer is responsible not only to the composer but also, and more importantly, to the listeners. In this, as Benson maintains, lies also the ethical and political scope of improvisation. In the subsequent chapter, 'Dance Improvisation and the Metaphysics of Force', Philipa Rothfield considers another key aspect of artistic improvisation. Building on Nietzsche and Deleuze, she argues that 'the body is an event, an emergent set of relations that finds temporary, bodily expression before moving on' (p. 103). On this basis she proposes a view of dance improvisation in terms of a formation of bodies involving performers and audience as well as an exertion of forces that produce forms by exploiting the performance circumstances. Particular attention is paid to how stripping away habits of action makes possible the emergence of the performative flow and thus of the improvisational event.

But improvisation is often a collective enterprise. Mikko Samela, in his chapter on 'Joint Improvisation as Interaction Ritual', explores this specific aspect by focusing on 'the affective phenomenology of joint improvisation' (p. 121). As he maintains, while Keith Sawyer's notion of 'group flow' is too vague a classificatory concept and therefore cannot explain the affective experiences of artistic improvisational interactions,[10] the sociological 'ritual theory of Randall Collins, enriched with enactivist and phenomenological theories on human sociality, offers a more plausible account of the elements and processes from which the affective experiences of joint improvisation build up' (p. 124). Shared intentionality as shared attention elicits via entrainment and emotional contagion 'interaffectivity' and 'inter-bodily resonance', thereby shaping group solidarity. In artistic improvisation, in particular, 'interpersonal synchronization [...] is embedded in a mutual coupling and coordination of embodied subjects whose

9 See Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).

10 R. Keith Sawyer, 'Group Creativity: Musical Performance and Collaboration', *Psychology of Music* 34 (2006): 148–65.

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interaction is experienced as being gripped in a joint dynamic of moving and being-moved' (p. 131). This dynamic has a 'dramaturgical structure with *internal* goals and standards of excellence' (p. 132) in relation with the activity itself, thereby eliciting shared emotions: the emotional expression of the audience also participates in this process of emotional sharing that the author understands as an 'affective resonance' that, as happens in ritual interactions, facilitates experiences of transcendence.

However, it is not clear what is really meant with the notion of transcendence. Maybe it is about the feeling that an (artistic) community is developing through the performance and a special form of union is inexplicably reached. Yet the point seems to be that affectivity is produced through the improvisational performance. More precisely, as Susanne Ravn argues in her chapter about 'Improvising Affectivity: Kitt Johnson's Site-Specific Performances', which opens Section 3, the point itself of an artistic performance may be the *improvisation of affectivity*. Indeed, happenings set up in non-institutional art venues, such as car parks, streets, and courtyards, 'demand that the artists also react spontaneously to the everyday life of specific places as well as take care that their way of moving and interacting also stands out in relation to this everyday life' (p. 144). This involves not only questioning, from the standpoint of the 4E cognition paradigm, of some assumptions about artistic improvisation traditionally understood; it also involves extending its scope to practices that intervene in the sphere of the everyday. Improvisation in this sense is about the way affectivity scaffolds the environment in which we engage in interaction with the world and it is paradigmatic of the way 'our emotional lives [...] take shape in the dynamical interplay with others' (p. 149). Juggling with different levels and types of awareness (self-awareness, awareness in performance, and awareness of places and people), the performer shows their ability to interact affectively with the environment, inviting the audience to initiate the same kind of affective improvisation with the situation.

The 4E cognition paradigm is also adopted by Simon Høffding and Torben Snekkestad in their contribution ('Inner and Outer Ears: Enacting Agential Systems in Musical Improvisation'). However, the goal here is to offer a close analysis of the techniques Snekkestad exploits in his own musical improvisation. In Snekkestad's musical practice, improvisation is understood not only as an 'intuitive art form' (whatever this may mean, which is not clear) 'but a socially engaged ethical practice that directly influences [Snekkestad's] ability to make creative decisions, engage in critical dialogue, and take risks that allow for the discovery of new insights and changed social relationships' (p. 164). As such, this musical practice is explained in terms of distributed and relational creativity. This involves instruments, co-performers, location, and audience; it welcomes unexpected accidents as creative affordances and resources; and it involves imagination, pretention/retention, automatisms ('reflexive playing'), and responsiveness ('reflective playing'), as well as the formation and breaking of musical habits.

As John Sutton makes clear in the 'Afterword' to the volume (almost a review of the text included in the text itself), the book is characterized by a variety of approaches to improvisation and perspectives on improvisation that is difficult to pin down to a unified theoretical horizon. But this is not a flaw in the book. Indeed, improvisation lends itself to multidisciplinary investigations capable of explaining it both as a crucial feature of human practices in their interaction with the environment and as a specific artistic practice. As the essays collected in this volume show, in the former sense improvisation can present an important challenge to theories of action, while in the latter sense it can call into question some assumptions of the philosophy of art. And, again as many of the essays collected here show, certainly the recent developments

in the cognitive sciences of the embodied, extended, embedded, and enacted mind prepare very fertile ground for studies of improvisation in everyday life and art.

The main shortcoming of the book seems to me rather another one. As far as artistic improvisation is concerned, this is more than anything else considered from the perspective of the performers, without considering, instead, the specific meaning of improvisation, as a kind of artistic production, for art appreciators; moreover, more generally, the appropriate aesthetic paradigm for improvisation is not discussed and, indeed, it seems that the basic assumption is that the aesthetics of improvisation is an aesthetics of imperfection, like the one elaborated by Andy Hamilton.[11] I do not think it is the only possible paradigm, nor the most appropriate one. After all, Hamilton himself in his recent works is reworking his perspective,[12] in a direction that brings it very close to my thesis that improvisation is an 'aesthetics of success'.[13] And, as such, improvisation is paradigmatic for aesthetics as such: an idea that should appeal to proponents of enactivism.

In fact, improvisation, in its autopoietic processual articulation, is governed by a transformative, situated normativity that unfolds in the course of performance. As such, improvisation is a paradigmatic practice of all human practices: human practices are governed by norms and habits that, unlike algorithms, not only prescriptively organize the situation to which they apply but are capable of adapting plastically to the situation, thereby transforming themselves as they work. This explains, as I suggested at the beginning of this review, why it is not contradictory to argue that both planning and art arise from the spirit of improvisation. Moreover, it shows that one can profitably adopt the same, though aspectually differently articulated, notion of improvisation to account for different phenomena: the development of historical cultural processes, the (inter)action of human beings with and within the environment, and the performative practices of artists.

That said, the work done by the volume is definitively highly valuable, particularly because it makes readers think intensely and extensively, particularly, but not only, from the recent debate on 4E cognition, about key aspects of improvisation that open up very interesting perspectives on central issues in the philosophy of action and in the philosophy of art, as well as in other areas of contemporary philosophical discussion such as ethics and pedagogy.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

11 Andy Hamilton, 'The Art of Improvisation and the Aesthetics of Imperfection', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 40 (2000): 168–85.

12 See, for example, his 'Improvisation as Spontaneous Creation versus "Making Do"', in Bertinetto and Ruta, *Routledge Handbook*, 171–86.

13 See Bertinetto, *Aesthetics of Improvisation*.

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