The Metaphysics of Improvisation

Tobyn C. DeMarco

Graduate Center, City University of New York
THE METAPHYSICS OF IMPROVISATION

by

TOBYN C. DEMARCO

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Philosophy in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2012
This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Philosophy in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Barbara Gail Montero
__________________________________________

Date     Chair of Examining Committee

John Greenwood
__________________________________________

Date     Executive Officer

Nickolas Pappas
__________________________________________

Steven Ross
__________________________________________

Noël Carroll
__________________________________________
Supervisory Committee

The City University of New York
Abstract

THE METAPHYSICS OF IMPROVISATION

by

Tobyn C. DeMarco

Adviser: Professor Nickolas Pappas

In “The Metaphysics of Improvisation,” I criticize wrongheaded metaphysical views of, and theories about, improvisation, and put forward a cogent metaphysical theory of improvisation, which includes action theory, an analysis of the relevant genetic and aesthetic properties, and ontology (work-hood).

The dissertation has two Parts. Part I is a survey of the history of many improvisational practices, and of the concept of improvisation. Here I delineate, sketch, and sort out the often vague boundaries between improvising and non-improvising within many art forms and genres, including music, dance, theatre, motion pictures, painting, and literature. In addition, I discuss the concept of non-artistic improvisation in various contexts. I attempt to portray an accurate picture of how improvisation functions, or does not function, in various art forms and genres.

Part II addresses metaphysical issues in, and problems and questions of, improvisation in the arts. I argue that that continuum and genus-species models are the most cogent ways to understand the action-types of improvising and composing and their relations. I demonstrate that these models are substantiated by an informed investigation and phenomenology of improvisational practice, action theory conceptual analysis, cognitive neuroscience studies and experiments, cognitive psychology studies and models, and some theories of creativity. In addition, I provide a constraint based taxonomy for classifying improvisations that is compatible
with, and supports, the continuum model. Next, I address epistemological and ontological issues involving the genetic properties of improvisations, and the properties “improvisatory,” and “as if improvised.” Finally, I show that arguments against treating, or classifying, improvisations as works are weak or erroneous, and by focusing on music, I provide a correct ontological theory of work-hood for artistic improvisations.
To my parents, Arlene and Louis, for all their generosity and kindness and patience;

And in loving memory of my grandparents, Helen and Joseph Kollar, and Velia and Luigi DeMarco;

And to Stacey, *pulchra omnifariam atque sine qua non*. 
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am a fortunate person. Lucky for the quantity and quality of friends and colleagues who have taught me much, endured my questions and impositions, supported my work, and tolerated my failures. Many people have helped me. Douglas Sobers “piqued” my interest in the topic, and he and I first worked on some ideas about the aesthetics of improvisation while I was an undergraduate. I was very fortunate to have Peter Kivy, Laurent Stern, and Stephen Davies as my first professors in aesthetics, whose words, lectures, thoughts, and conversations continue to resonate in my thinking. I fondly recognize Kivy’s kindness, friendship, support, and encouragement. Aaron Meskin, Rupert Read, Terence Ferraro, Amy Coplan, Jami Weinstein, Sheila Lintott, Sherry Irvin, and Steven Ross have provided me with excellent intellectual and moral support. Ronald Arimenta has been a good friend, musical and philosophical comrade, and fellow seeker. Julien Valenstein, my musical comrade for many years, taught me so much about music, improvisation, and life. The people who first taught me intellectual rigor, about the examined life, about pedagogy, and introduced me to philosophical thinking: Magister Joseph Chukinas, Kenneth Kutchak, Robert Peterson, Dick Fiori. The wisdom, intellect, rigor, and character of my Latin and Greek teacher, Magister Chukinas, have influenced every domain of my life, every day. I was lucky, and I am intensely grateful, to have studied under his tutelage.

At the Graduate Center, I have been inspired by the teaching of David Rosenthal and Steven Ross: both have made me a better teacher and scholar. Steve Ross has caused me to change my mind many times about many issues. Our gallery crawls and long conversations have had and will have an enormous impact on my thinking about philosophy, aesthetics, art, literature, academia, and life.
I thank the following friends whose support and friendship have been very important to me: John Fabbo, Pankaj Sharma, John Fussa, Mark Coakes, Steven Weinstein, Louis Glinn, Dan Samaritan, Eric Brummer, Robert Higgins, Anthony Salvemini, Michael Minaides, Jennifer Spagnoli, Douglas Sobers, Aaron Meskin, Amy Coplan, Ryan Nichols, Steven Ross, Jami Weinstein, Jonathan Weingard, Sarah Markgraf, Gregg Biermann, Robert Couto, and Richard Riederer. I am blessed to have a family whose love and support are infinite: my parents, Arlene and Louis; my sister, Kyra Lang; my niece and nephew Ainsley and Haydn; my aunt Sr. Arlene Maryann Kollar; my uncle, Joseph Kollar.

The late Marx Wartofsky was my initial dissertation advisor. The scope of his erudition, his intelligence, his witiness and cleverness, and humor are legendary. The influence of his work and him are pervasive in my work and thinking. I miss him.

I thank my dissertation supervisory committee and defense examination committee for their suggestions, time, patience, and efforts: Steven Ross, Noël Carroll, Christa Acampora, and Barbara Gail Montero.

Finally, I thank my dissertation advisor Nickolas Pappas for his patience, excellent criticism, piercing intelligence, encouragement, erudition, disparate interests, never lacking something interesting to say, and knowing just what to say at the right time. Truly, he is a Mensch.

My partner in life, Stacey Balkan, provided and provides everything one could need and want. Her support, encouragement, and love sustained me, and helped me to finish this project. Truly, I am lucky.

There are, probably, others I should thank, but, alas, the limits of memory and time impinge; it is no reflection on them. My apologies to the unmentioned. As is customary, and
justified, I say (with confidence) that all remaining deficiencies of and in the dissertation are mine alone.
I must admit that I have an attraction to heresies, and that my sympathies naturally tend to be with the cranks and doubters and against well-established doctrines. But this is not because I enjoy controversy. Rather, it is because, like Dewey, I believe that the search for knowledge is as often impeded by faulty assumptions and by a limited creative vision for alternatives as by a lack of necessary tools for critical evidence. So I will have achieved my intent if, in the process of recounting my thoughts on this mystery, I leave a few unquestioned assumptions more questionable, make some counter-intuitive alternatives more plausible, and provide a new vantage point from which to reflect upon human uniqueness.


Just ten years ago, one would have had to provide a lengthy preface to justify a philosophical study of improvisation. A justification is no longer needed. Now the interdisciplinary study of improvisation is plentiful and of mostly high quality.

In this dissertation, I provide a cogent metaphysical theory of artistic improvisation. I argue for a continuum model for understanding the distinction between improvising and composing (action theory), and attach a taxonomic system for classifying improvisations. Next, I criticize arguments that conclude that improvisations are not works of art. Lastly, I argue that improvisations are works of art, and provide a proper ontological theory of the work for artistic improvisations.
EPIGRAPH

Now I shall spy on beauty as none has
Spied on it yet. Now I shall cry out as
None has cried out. Now I shall try what none
Has tried. Now I shall do what none has done.
And speaking of this wonderful machine:
I’m puzzled by the difference between
Two methods of composing: $A$, the kind
Which goes on solely in the poet’s mind,
A testing of performing words, while he
Is soaping a third time one leg, and $B$,
The other kind, much more decorous, when
He’s in his study writing with a pen.

In method $B$ the hand supports the thought,
The abstract battle is concretely fought.
The pen stops in mid-air, then swoops to bar
A canceled sunset or restore a star,
And thus it physically guides the phrase
Toward faint daylight through the inky maze.

But method $A$ is agony! The brain
Is soon enclosed in a steel cap of pain.
A muse in overalls directs the drill
Which grinds and which no effort of the will
Can interrupt, while the automaton
Is taking off what he has just put on
Or walking briskly to the corner store
To buy the paper he had read before.

Why is it so? Is it, perhaps, because
In penless work there is no pen-poised pause
And one must use three hands at the same time,
Having to choose the necessary rhyme,
Hold the completed line before one’s eyes,
And keep in mind all the preceding tries?
Or is the process deeper with no desk
To prop the false and hoist the poetesque?
For there are those mysterious moments when
Too weary to delete, I drop my pen;
I ambulate–and by some mute command
The right word flutes and perches on my hand.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Part I: History and Conceptual Landscape ......................................................... 1

II. Part II: Metaphysics ............................................................................................ 133

   2.1 Action Theory ................................................................................................. 144
       2.1.1 Thought Experiments and Data ............................................................. 149
       2.1.2 Cognitive Neuroscience and Cognitive Models ...................................... 161
       2.1.3 Taxonomy ............................................................................................... 180
       2.1.4 Philosophical Models ............................................................................. 195

   2.2 Properties ....................................................................................................... 213

   2.3 Works of Art ................................................................................................... 230
       2.3.1 A General Critique of “Musical Work” and a Defense ......................... 233
       2.3.2 General Challenges to Improvisations as Works ................................. 248
       2.3.3 Burden-Shifting: Levinson’s Theory and Improvisations ................. 274
       2.3.4 The Proper Theory for Improvisations as WOAs ............................... 293

Envoi ..................................................................................................................... 316

Bibliography .......................................................................................................... 317

   A. Improvisation and Jazz .................................................................................. 317

   B. Philosophy and Psychology of Music, Musicology ..................................... 361

   C. General Aesthetics, Philosophy of Culture, Criticism .................................. 389

   D. General Philosophy and Psychology ............................................................. 442

   E. Action Theory ............................................................................................... 466

   F. Creativity ....................................................................................................... 467

   G. Reference Works ......................................................................................... 472
Part I: History and Conceptual Landscape

Part I is an historical and conceptual survey of my first-order subject (improvisation), and it outlines some preliminary matters necessary for “doing the philosophy” of Part II: Metaphysics. One of the goals of this part is to disabuse readers of biases and misconceptions that they may hold about how and what is classified as improvisation.

Improvisation: The Word(s)

In 1968 I ran into Steve Lacy on the street in Rome. I took out my pocket tape recorder and asked him to describe in fifteen seconds the difference between composition and improvisation. He answered: ‘In fifteen seconds the difference between composition and improvisation is that in composition you have all the time you want to decide what to say in fifteen seconds, while in improvisation you have fifteen seconds.’

His answer lasted fifteen seconds and is still the best formulation of the question I know.


The Oxford English Dictionary\(^1\) recognizes the following forms of the word: improvisate (verb), improvisate (participial adjective--rare), improvisation (noun), improvisatize (verb--rare), improvisator (noun), improvisatorial (adjective), improvisatorially (adverb), improvisatorize (verb), improvisatory (adjective), improvise (verb), improvising (verbal

---

improvisation - 1. The action of improvising or composing extempore. 2. The production or execution of anything off-hand; any work or structure produced on the spur of the moment.

improvisatorial - 1. Of, pertaining to, or of the nature of an improviser; relating to or having the power of extempore composition or oratory.

improvise - 1. *transitive* To compose (verse, music, etc.) on the spur of the moment; to utter or perform extempore. 2. To bring about or get up on the spur of the moment; to provide for the occasion. 3. *intransitive* To compose, utter, or perform verse or music impromptu; to speak extemporaneously; hence, do anything on the spur of the moment.

improvised - Composed or uttered off-hand; invented or produced on the spur of the moment or for the occasion.

improvisedly - 1. In an improvised or unpremeditated manner; impromptu, extempore. 2. Without forethought, impudently, precipitately
A few comments are due. First, one notices that an action is involved: producing, inventing, composing, uttering, or performing. Second, there is a sense of how the aforementioned actions are performed: off-hand, on the spur of the moment, extempore, impromptu, for the occasion, unpremeditated. The “for the occasion” phrase expresses the strong sense of the action and/or the product of the action being temporary, fleeting, ephemeral, but also necessary or needed. In addition, there seems to be an implicit attribution about the agent or the agent’s psychological states as evidenced by “unrehearsed, not forethought, unpremeditated, spontaneous.”

The etymology of the word implies something temporal, i.e., not being provided for in the future, a lack of a plan, as in “unforeseen.” Thus, John Ayto says: “[19] Etymologically, if you improvise something, it is because it has not been ‘provided’ for in advance. The word come via French improviser from the Italian adjective improvviso ‘extempore,’ a descendent of Latin improvisus ‘unforeseen.’ This in turn was formed from the negative prefix in- and the past participle of providere ‘foresee’ (source of English provide). The earliest recorded use of the verb in English is by Benjamin Disraeli in *Vivian Grey* 1826: ‘He possessed also the singular faculty of being able to improvise quotations.’ (The closely related improvident ‘not providing for the future’ [16] preserves even more closely the sense of its Latin original.)”

The first recorded appearance of “improvisation” is thought to be in the eighteenth century by Tobias George Smollett, who was a Scottish man of letters known especially for his picaresque novels. *The Oxford Dictionary of Word Histories* indicates that “improvise [early 19th century] This comes from French improviser (or its source, Italian improvvisare from improvviso

---

‘extempore’) from Latin *improvisus* ‘unforeseen’. The base is Latin *provisus*, the past participle of *providere* ‘make preparation for’.”

Similarly for “impromptu [mid 17th century] This word was first used as an adverb. It is from French, from Latin *in promptu* ‘in readiness’, from *promptus* ‘prepared, ready’.” In addition, the combination of the Latin “in,” which functions like “un” in English, and the verb “*provideo,*” which means to foresee, to see in advance, indicates a strong sense of lack of planning. Also used in later Latin, was “*de*” or “*ex*” “*improviso*” (sometimes without the preposition), which functioned as adverbs meaning suddenly or unexpectedly. For “spontaneous” this dictionary indicates “[mid 17th century] This is based on late Latin *spontaneus,* from the phrase (*sua* *sponte* ‘of (one’s) own accord’.”

In Europe the term “improvise” seems to have been associated with improvised poetry and the like, probably including lyrics to various song forms. Published in Venice in 1612, the *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca* attempted to retain the purity of the Tuscan dialect, in part by citing usage in texts. Based on a passage from a text dated between 1304 and 1309, improvisation is associated with “subito, cioè senza pensare, o premeditare.” In 1636, Lorenzo Franciosini’s *Vocabolario italiano spagnolo* defines “improvisare” as “comporre versi senza

---

4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., 479.
As noted by Pietropaolo, a bit later the term becomes associated with improvised theatre dialogue, especially in the well-known *Commedia dell’Arte*, which was originally called *commedia all’improvviso*. After the Renaissance period to about 1810, various adverbs and adverbial phrases were used to indicate forms of improvisation. Here is a sampling:

Latin: ex improviso, ac improvisa, ex tempore, ex sorte, fortuita, repente, ad placitum, ad libitum, sine arte, sine meditazione

Italian: de improviso, all’ improvise, all’ improvistà, all spoveduta, sprovedutamente, estemporaneamente, all’ impronto

a caso, alla mente, a piacere, ad arbitrio, do fantasia, senza arte

French: à l’impourvue, à l’improviste, impromptu, sur-le-champ, de tête à plaisir, à phantasie, sans règle ni dessein

---


9 Ibid., 3. Pietropaolo also indicates that the first instance of “*Commedia dell’Arte*” is in Carlo Osvaldo Goldoni’s *Il Teatro Comico*, published in 1750.

Some terms emphasize the temporal element; some focus on mental states (or in some cases the lack of mental states such as thinking, e.g., “aus dem Kopfe,” “sine meditacione,” and “unbedachtsam” literally meaning thoughtless. Still others suggest randomness and artlessness.

It is interesting to note that in Johnson’s Dictionary, there is no entry for “improvise” or “improvisation.” However, there are entries for “improvided, improvidence, improvident, improvidently, improvision.” All of these entries are strongly related to the Latin etymology. For example, Johnson gives the definition of “improvided” as “Unforeseen; unexpected; unprovided against,” and “improvidence” and “improvisation” as “Want of forethought.”

Stephen Blum usefully summarizes the history of the terms in Europe:

The development of the European terms for improvisatory practices began with adverbs and adverbial phrases …, then continued with verbs and nouns for specific practices or genres (e.g., sortisare and sortisatio, ricercare and ricercar), and nouns for agents (e.g., Italian improvvisatore). Only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have the new verb improvise, the noun improvisation, and their cognates in other languages been treated as general terms, applicable to a number of practices (though sometimes used as substitutes for older terms with a more restricted reference).

---

11 In contemporary German, the phrase would be “aus dem Stegreif.”
12 Samuel Johnson, A Dictionary of the English Language: In Which the Words Are Deduced from Their Originals Explained in Their Different Meanings, and Authorized by the Names of Their Writers in Whose Works They Are Found. (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1756, 1994), 378.
13 Blum, 36.
The French used the phrases *jouer de tête* (which is similar to the German *aus dem Kopf*) and *préluder* as synonyms for *improviser*. Jean Jacques Rousseau claims to have introduced the verb *improviser* into French from Italian, but this is wrong because the term appears in the great dictionary of Oudin in 1660 and Rousseau’s dictionary appears about a century later. Rousseau defines it as: “*improviser* – C’est faire & chanter impromptu des Chansons, Airs & paroles, qu’on accompagnecommunément d’une Guitarrre ou autre pareil instrument. Il n’y a rien de plus commun en Italie, que de voir deux Masques se rencontrer, se défier, s’attaquer, se riposter ainsi par des couplets sur le même air, avec une vivacité de Dialogue, de Chant, d’Accompagnement dont il faut avoir été temoin pour la comprendre. Le mot *improvisar* est purement Italien: mais comme il se rapporte à la musique, j’ai été constraint de la franciser pour faire entendre ce qu’il signifie.”14 In 1821, a dictionary of music has this definition: “*improviser* – C’est faire et executer impromptu un morceau de musique vocale ou instrumentale. Il y a d’excellens improvisateurs parmi les piansites. En Italie, on rencontre des chanteurs qui *improvisent* en même temps les paroles et la musique.”15 The composer André Ernest Modeste Grétry uses *improviser* in his manual of 1803.16 Blum points out that in the famous reference work *Musikalisches Lexikon* (1802) of Heinrich Christoph Koch17 the verb *improvisieren* is given the following meaning: “Improvisieren – die Geschicklichkeit eines Tonsetzers, über ein ihm noch unbekanntes Gedicht sogleich aus dem Stegreife eine Komposition zu vertigen unde solche zugleich singend unter der Begleitung eines Instrumentes vorzutragen. Überlegung des Textes

---

geschriebenen Geschichten kann sehr oft für den Tonsetzer ein Mittel warden, die Thätigkeit seines Genies zu
reizzen, oder sich in denjenigen Zustand zu versetzen, den man die Begeisterung nennt.”

Even up to about 1820 Germans would have used the verbs *fantasieren* or *präludieren* to
indicate improvising on a keyboard. There is at least one instance of Beethoven using
*fantasieren* in his writing, and another use of *phantisiren*. In the nineteenth century, Chopin
used the Polish term *imпровизować*.

So, did people of a particular culture improvise before the word (or concept) entered their
language? Of course they did. They did not describe their actions with this word, but they
certainly had available other concepts which communicated similar meanings. So what did they
call it? How did they conceive of what they were doing? Moreover, when did distinctions
among generative or productive practices come about? Next, I shall survey the historical and
conceptual landscape of improvisation to attempt to answer these and other questions.

The history of improvisation has not been as extensively studied as other artistic
phenomena, but there are sources focusing on various art forms, genres, and time periods. Of
course, there are bits and pieces in sources that do not focus on improvisation *per se*. Ernst
Ferand’s *Die Improvisation in der Musik* is the most comprehensive history of improvisation in
Western art music. Jeff Pressing has also provided a history, especially for keyboard music, in a

---

18 Koch, 778.
19 Blum, 38.
20 Ibid., 39.
21 Ernst Ferand, *Die Improvisation in der Musik: Eine Entwicklungsgeschichtliche und
Psychologische Untersuchung* (Zurich: Rhein-Verlag, 1938). This book has not been translated
into English (as of 2012). The fact that this book has not been translated into English may reveal
something about the status of scholarship on improvisation.
series of articles. Daniel Belgrad’s *The Culture of Spontaneity* is an excellent source for the post war period in the United States. A virtue of Belgrad’s book is that he addresses all art forms.

How has improvisation been defined in music? Here are the remarks of Nicolas Slonimsky from his famous *Lectionary of Music*:

Improvisation. From the Latin *improvisus*, “unforeseen,” and *ex improviso*, “without preparation.” In music, improvisation denotes the art of a completely spontaneous performance without a preliminary plan. Formerly, improvisation was regarded as integral to the craft of composition. Organists in particular were emboldened to improvise freely on a given hymn tune. Among the greatest improvisers on the organ were Frescobaldi and Buxtehude. Bach was a master of organ improvisation in the fugal style. As a child, Mozart included improvisations at his performances at the European courts. Beethoven’s improvisations for his musical friends left an overwhelming impression. At his recitals, Liszt asked musicians in the audience to give him subjects for free improvisations and amazed them by the spontaneity of his invention. Organ improvisations have continued to be the stock in trade of organists in the 20th century, but public improvisations by pianists gradually fell into disfavor. Some doubt persists whether the supposedly spontaneous improvisations were not in fact prepared in advance. One type of talented improviser on the piano, unfortunately extinct, was represented by pianists in the silent movies early in the century. Some of them had a real flair for enhancing the visual image on the screen while producing music of considerable validity. Jazz players have brought the art of improvisation to a new height of brilliance, especially in collective improvisations occurring in jam sessions.

Slonimsky makes unwarranted assumptions in this definition. For example, the phrase “without a preliminary plan” is a common misconception. In many of the examples I discuss in Part I, we shall see that that is false.

---


It is well-known that Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven were excellent improvisers, often giving performances for friends and others. In contemporary art music, there are many examples. Terry Riley’s In C is a notable case because it gives minimal figures for musicians to play as they feel. Many other contemporary compositions are based upon scores of visual material that are to be interpreted by players/performers. Consequently, many of these works, if they can be called works at all, will have indefinitely many instantiations. Each performance can, and usually does, result in a unique sound sequence. Silent film piano playing was largely improvised, as Slonimsky pointed out above. There is a very strong improvised organ playing tradition. In this part, I will review many of the different forms of improvisation in Western art and popular music, and some non-Western musical cultures.

Improvisation has had a central role in jazz, classical Persian, and classical Indian music. David Demsey, writing in the The Oxford Companion to Jazz says that there at least two major misconceptions about improvisation in jazz music. “One is that it [jazz improvisation] simply involves ‘playing whatever comes to mind’ or ‘being spontaneous.’ This idea is naturally drawn from dictionary definitions of the term, which commonly contain words such offhand or spur of the moment.” Clearly, if this view were correct, then jazz musicians would have little need to practice, besides for the development of general facility on their instruments. The “second misconception is that jazz improvisation is created by divine intervention.” The basic idea here is that there is no or little improvisational skill, and perhaps the denial of agency to improvisers.

Other famous improvisers in the western art music tradition are Francesco Landini, Paulus Hofhaimer, Sweelinck, Frescobaldi, Buxtehude, Handel, Moscheles, Liszt, Franck, and Bruckner.


Ibid., 789.
Some musicians are just lucky to be the recipients of such divine manna. This recalls the Platonic *Ion* theory of inspiration and the later romantic theories influenced by it. There are few serious people who hold this view today. Although, if one has ever been privileged to directly experience a master improviser, one recognizes that one begins to have strange thoughts. Genius will do that to sufficiently sensitive and sophisticated people. We have these thoughts, too, with respect to non-improvising performers (Glenn Gould, Jascha Heifetz, Martha Argerich, Maria Callas, Pablo Casals comes to mind, but pick your favorites here).\(^{28}\) The fact is that there are improvisational skills, many of which are domain specific, jazz performance education (for example) is possible, and practicing is crucial for successful jazz improvisers.

Another definition: “Improvisation is the practice of creating a musical composition on the spur of the moment, without reference to a pre-existing score, memory, notes or sketches. Putting it as simply as possible, it involves ‘making it up as you go along’.”\(^{29}\) Notice this definition says that improvisation results in a composition. In Part II, I shall take up the issue of comparing and contrasting composing with improvising, and compositions with improvisations. Here is a working definition by neuroscientists who experimented with spontaneous music generation: “Spontaneous musical performance, whether through singing or playing an instrument, can be defined as the immediate, on-line improvisation of novel melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic musical elements within a relevant musical context.”\(^{30}\) The problems here are that

\(^{28}\) Lewis Thomas says: “Music is the effort we make to explain to ourselves how our brains work. We listen to Bach transfixed because this is listening to a human mind.” From Lewis Thomas, *The Medusa and the Snail: More Notes of a Biology Watcher*, (New York: Viking, 1979); quoted in William Calvin, *How Brains Think: Evolving Intelligence, Then and Now*, Science Masters Series (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 108.


the term “improvisation is used in the definition, on-line and novel are vague terms. I hope to clarify some of these matters.

There are many synonyms and nuanced terms for the practice of improvising, and related phenomena (and some not so related, as we shall see). Here is a list of words and phrases:

improvisation, improvising, improv, ad libbing, ad libitum, off the cuff, soloing, spontaneous creation/composition/making, on the spot, making it up as we go along, spontaneous composition, real-time composition, blowing, jam, jam session, chase, impromptu, ex tempore, extemporize, fill-in, unrehearsed, free improvisation, scat and scatting, faking, fabricating, stopgap, makeshift, MacGyverize or to MacGyver, MacGyverism, bricoleur, bricolage, adhocism, a piacere, ornamentation and embellishment, figured bass (basso continuo, thoroughbass, bassus generalis, Generalbass), sortisatio (sortisare), Contrapunto alla mente, dechant sur le livre (discantus supra librum), discant (descant), cadenza, passacaglia (pasacalle, paseo), ritornellos (riprese), ossia, stream of consciousness, commedia dell’arte, fantasia, capriccio (caprice), ricercar (ricercare, ricercata, recercada), free association, action painting, Tachisme, non-editing and non-revising, free association, cut-up technique, nonsense and asemic writing, automatic drawing and writing (Dada, ideomotor effect), variation, parody, aleatory (chance music, mobile/open form), taqsim, tanan, niraval, tani avartanam, anibaddha, estilar and estillistas, bertsolaritza.
Some of these words and phrases are exactly equivalent in meaning and use. Others capture specific nuances. The different, but related, meanings derive from the fact that many of these words are used, more or less, exclusively for one art form or genre, or they are used non-artistically. For example, “embellishment” and “ornamentation” are synonyms, and “improv” is just a colloquial term used for improvisation mainly by the theatre and comedy community. Ad libbing, *ad libitum*, *ex tempore*, and extemporize are all general synonyms for any kind of improvising. “Blowing” is a colloquial term used in jazz for improvisation, especially solo improvisation with or without accompaniment. “Soloing” is a term used in jazz, rock, and some popular music for solo improvisation with or without accompaniment. Jam and jam session are primarily used in jazz, rock, and other popular music contexts. *The Oxford Dictionary of Popular Music* says that jam is “The art of informal collective jazz improvisation. Hence a jam-session, when such music-making took place. Earlier the word was occasionally used as a synonym for all jazz.”31 As I mentioned, today the term is used outside of jazz, and may be attributed to both informal and more formal performance contexts. Often, one hears of live jam sessions of rock musicians.32 After professional engagements, there are still late night jam sessions of especially younger musicians at certain New York City jazz clubs. Let us investigate in more detail several groups of these terms and concepts. “Scatting” is vocal improvisation by a singer or group of singers, often mimicking the sound of musical instruments. The scatting may use meaningful units of discourse or nonsensical (in the literal sense) sounds or some

32 The most notable example of this, and perhaps one of the first instances of it being intentional, is the Grateful Dead rock group. In fact an early recording (1968) is classified as “free” collective rock improvisation: *Anthem of the Sun*. And this probably accounts for the huge bootleg industry of live recording of their concerts (that and the fact that they allowed audience members to do so, even allowing some to place microphones on stage).
combination of both. However, not all scatting is improvised. Scatting sections of tunes may be prepared and rehearsed before performances. Unfortunately, the same term is used of all vocalizations of this type. Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, Lamberts Hendricks and Ross, Bobby McFerrin, and George Benson are notable examples of improvised scatting.

Not all of these terms always refer to a process of improvising in the generative sense. By “generative” I mean how some action is performed or executed. Simply, one may perform an action that is improvised, or perform an action in some non-improvised fashion (much more on this distinction in Part II). The same goes for the terms for the products or outcomes of activities. But there is a group of terms that have a relation to improvisation, or in some cases have been mistakenly associated with improvisation. Here is such a group:

one of the main musical meanings of “impromptu,” fantasia, ricercar (ricercata, recercada), capriccio (caprice), ossia, Tachisme, cut-up technique, some forms of “stream of consciousness” writing, nonsense and asemic writing, variation, parody, “aleatory” composition techniques, some “cadenzas,” unrehearsed, some forms of “ornamentation” in music, some Beat genre writing unconscious/subconscious doings both artistic and non-artistic.

I shall address the easy ones first. Improvisation may be a good way of tapping into the unconscious or subconscious, if there is such a thing, but clearly not all of the putative products of the unconscious are improvisations. If I am yelling at my friend for something very inconsequential, and it turns out that some unconscious state (I am unaware of it), such as jealousy, is my motivation for doing so, I am not thereby improvising. There is a relationship
between improvisation and the unconscious or subconscious, and I shall later discuss some of
them, but one certainly does not want to equate them, or claim that tapping into or using the
“unconscious” is a necessary condition for improvising. If by unconscious or subconscious one
means the kinds of things that are posited and/or discovered by cognitive science, then clearly
these states are involved, because these unconscious states of mind are involved in all mental and
motor functioning. So, that there is a connection between improvisation and unconscious states
on this understanding of the term is trivial. However, one often sees the definite article used
before the term “unconscious.” In this case, there is usually something else going on. When the
term “the unconscious” is used, it comes with a loftier metaphysical commitment than the
cognitive science or neuroscience sense. Often, the Freudian sense is used, or the Jungian
collective unconscious is meant, or even a Hindu version of Atman (universal self) or Brahman
(the Absolute). I will take no position on the metaphysics of such entities here, but it is worth
pointing out that there is a vivid history of making strong connections between improvisation,
spontaneity, and “the unconscious.” Daniel Belgrad, in his excellent book *The Culture of
Spontaneity: Improvisation in the Arts in Postwar America*, points out that the emergence of
the “aesthetics of spontaneity” in all of the arts in postwar Unites States had as one of its main
influences the special access to the unconscious provided by various spontaneous actions. This
influence was strong in the development of action art, abstract expressionism, Black Mountain
Arts and Beat movement, Charles Olson’s composition by field, and Gestalt psychology. The
Beats could be interpreted as trying to incorporate conscious and unconscious experience; other
artists and movements attempted linking so-called “primitive” or tribal art to the then
contemporary art scene. There is no doubt that these post-war movements were influenced by

---

the pre-war movements of the Dadaists and surrealists. Some of the Dadaists and surrealists, especially those involved in “automatic writing and painting,” made explicit claims about tapping into the unconscious. It is not completely clear what is meant by such claims, but phenomena like automatic writing have now been explained in terms of a well-known and well-studied phenomenon called “ideomotor-action effect.” Ideomotor-action effects are supposedly unconscious movements (not voluntary), which are usually attributed to some paranormal or parapsychological phenomenon by its proponents. These parapsychological explanations are no longer necessary because of our understanding of ideomotor-action effects now.34 Ideomotor effects were labeled thus by William James.35 Some traditional examples of automatisms are spinning tables and the like in séances, divining rods, Chevreuil’s illusion, and automatic writing.36 Automatic writing goes back as far as the nineteenth century; however, the Dadaists used this alleged phenomenon for artistic purposes.37 Bargh et alii define automatic ideomotor-action effect as “merely thinking about a behavior makes it more likely to occur, even if it is unintended …”38 These kinds of actions, if framed appropriately, could be used for artistic generation (excluding the issue of their aesthetic value), and could be counted as a method of improvisation. But ideomotor-action automaticity is neither sufficient nor necessary for

36 On automatic writing in general, see Anita M. Muhl, Automatic Writing (Dresden: Theodor Steinkopff, 1930).
38 Bargh, 232.
improvisation. Thus, I am willing to call some of the Dadaists’ writing improvisational texts. The supposed “automaticity” of spontaneous writing and painting may be simply a reflection of the fact that these actions are not fully intentional in the ordinary sense. This, however, does not mean that the actions are not intentional, the product of an intentional psychology. One is still intending to write or paint spontaneously.  

Free association, whatever it is, can be a source or technique of improvisation, and if performed in the right context could be a way of improvising. Perhaps, free association in the analyst’s office should also be classified as improvisation, or a form of improvisation. I do not think there will be deleterious logical consequences for doing so. And if one accepts traditional psychoanalytic theory, one is tapping into the unconscious while free associating. But even if one were not, it could still be a form of improvisation. Hence, one may want to say that free association in any context other than artistic production is simply a form of non-artistic improvisation, which may have instrumental value in therapy, or some intrinsic interest if done in a proper context (e.g., interview show, part of comedy routine or sketch, et cetera). This thought is substantiated by the fact that much art and music therapy involves the patient or client improvising individually and in groups.  

“Ossia” is a term borrowed from Italian to indicate alternative versions of a score, or parts of a score. Often, these alternatives were easier to play, but in the case of Beethoven

---

39 I address these issues in Part II: Metaphysics, Action Theory, and in the Literary Arts section below.


(among others), his ossia were just as difficult as the originals. Deciding which version to play
during a performance is usually determined by a conductor, performer, or teacher beforehand (no
improvisation); however, in rare cases performers have allowed themselves to choose among
alternatives while performing. This is akin to determining how many repeats will be taken while
performing (or even recording, as long as it is decided while the recording is taking place, not
before it). The reasons for this kind of performance practice might have something to do with
how well or poorly a performance was going, the immediate mood of the performer, the desire to
add some mild spontaneity to the event, or the result of “reading” the audience. I am willing to
count these real-time choices as a very moderate form of improvisation.

Being unrehearsed is a more slippery concept than one might think. Where and what are
the boundaries for rehearsing? One day before? Two? One year? All of those years practicing
scales and arpeggios when a child? How much of a piece must not be rehearsed? All of it?
Some of it? Obviously, one can perform a previously composed piece of music without
rehearsing. This kind of performance may not be excellent, but a good sight reader could do it,
and perhaps do it fairly well. This would not be improvisation. Similarly, it is wrong to think
(say) that jazz musicians do not rehearse at all. A jazz musician may have practiced playing over
a particular set of chord changes hundreds of times; she has practiced scales, modes, riffs, licks,
famous improvised solos of other musicians, etudes, and exercises. All of this preparation makes
possible what we recognize as a paradigm case of improvisation: the jazz musician solo usually
with (but can be without) accompaniment (e.g., “rhythm section”). There are many degrees of
being rehearsed and not being rehearsed here. If one uses licks one has practiced hundreds of
times before a performance, is it improvised? How much of (say) a jazz solo must be made up
on the spot? Is the playing of some mode over a set of changes improvisation? Does
improvisation in jazz just amount to the temporal selection of where the previously prepared units (modes, licks, et cetera) are executed? The answer to the last question is no, but these questions raise difficult problems for a theory of improvisation, especially the metaphysics of improvisation. These problems will be addressed in Part II. For now, I want to say that the rehearsed/unrehearsed distinction is not particularly helpful in deciding whether some event has been improvised or not. Certainly, rehearsal and practice play a role in making distinctions, but it may turn out that neither of these concepts is necessary nor sufficient in making the distinction between improvised and non-improvised.

**Improvisation and the Literary Arts**

This endlessly elaborating poem
Displays the theory of poetry,
As the life of poetry. A more severe,

More harassing master would extemporize
Subtler, more urgent proof that the theory
Of poetry is the theory of life,

As it is, in the intricate evasions of as,
In things seen and unseen, created from nothingness,
The Heavens, the hells, the worlds, the longed-for lands.

The role of improvisation in the literary arts is highly contentious. The contentiousness arises from several concerns. First, the ancient debate about the source of poetic inspiration and how it functions in generating poetry and other literary forms involves questions about the relationship between improvisation and composition. Inspiration and related concepts, of course,
are thorny issues. Second, there are specific debates about the sources and conditions of the
generation of the Homeric poems, which form the basis of Western literature. Third, a more
contemporary problem is that of modernist and avant-garde writers explicitly claiming to
improvise texts and proffer them as finished works of art. Finally, there is an entrenched view
that improvisation only occurs, or should only occur, in performing art forms, and literature is
not a performing art form. That view is viciously question begging. Part of what accounts for
this bias is the general waning away of oral traditions in favor of written texts and all of the
associated traditions of the written word. This is still odd because for most of human history
since writing was invented most humans have been illiterate. Consequently, people’s access to
literary forms of entertainment was primarily through oral performances. Hence, probably the
source of the bias stems from the minority literate culture. That this is so today is peculiar
because the one art form historically associated with the primitive, natural, and spontaneous is
poetry and various poetic forms (e.g., songs). In the ancient period this is revealed through the
inspiration theory of poetic generation, and the existence of improvised, or partly improvised,
oral literature both before and after the invention of writing.

My concern will be to briefly survey the relations between forms of literature and
improvisation, to understand the nature of improvised literature, and to clarify the nature of some
related phenomena. I will address oratory in the section on Plato and Aristotle below. A
discussion of improvised literature will yield the following consequences for understanding
improvisation: artistic improvisation can occur outside of performances (at least performances in
the standard sense), immediacy, the generative actions involved in producing an improvisation
need not be publicly available.

42 See especially Plato, Phaedrus and Ion.
Improvising texts ought not to be surprising since the history of poetry itself, especially the various kinds of epic, are intimately connected to a long, ancient tradition of improvising bards and troubadours. Oral poetry, which could take the form of epics, lyrics, songs and the like, has been present in many cultures probably since prehistoric times. Many of these cultures still practice forms of this oral tradition, as in the Basque bertisolaro,\textsuperscript{43} Serbo-Croatian (Balkan), Australian pygmy, various Polynesian cultures, and some African cultures.\textsuperscript{44} There is a huge literature on these traditions and comparative studies; below I shall discuss one significant part of this scholarship called the Parry-Lord theory. But one should not conflate oral literary traditions with improvisation. Now there is no doubt that improvisation was and is involved in some oral poetry, but it is not always used in transmission. The stability of content and form of oral poems are fixed by the limits of human memory. But where and when memory fails, improvisation often makes up for the gaps. For example, one important scholar of the cognitive psychology of oral traditions, David C. Rubin, lists several properties of oral traditions but notes that none of them are necessary or sufficient. This set of properties does not include improvisation.\textsuperscript{45} In addition, one form of play humans have engaged in involves a kind of improvisation: “live” word games, punning games, and \textit{boute-rimés}. Players must create sequences of words on the spot within a set of constraints. This should be considered an artistic enterprise, without necessarily being art, and ought to be classified as improvisation.


Europe also has significant history of improvised literature. It begins of course with poet performers of ancient Greece, which date back to about 1500 BCE to 2000 BCE. The tradition exploded in Europe again in the sixteenth century with the Italians. These improvisers were often accompanied by musicians, such as a violinist, who also improvised music during the improvised poetic recitation. The Italian *improvvisatore* and *improvviatrice* (*improvvisatori* plural) tradition had an influence on the Romantic poets and European culture in general.

During the Medieval period to roughly the fifteenth century minstrels performed songs that probably were partly improvised. Texts were memorized but embellishments often occurred during performances. Both the limits of memory and the vagaries of live performance contributed to the need and desire for spontaneous changes. There were ranks of such itinerant poets, bards, and singers. A “scop” was an Anglo-Saxon term for a maker or shaper and a professional poet before the Norman Conquest. Within the text of *Beowulf* itself: “At times the scop, a thame of the king, glorying in words, the great old stories, who remembered them all, one after other, song upon song, found new words, bound them up truly, began to recite *Beowulf*’s praise, a well-made lay of his glorious deed, skillfully varied his matter and style.” This passage has been interpreted as revealing the authors’ method: an improvised blending of

---


old content with some forms (“songs”) with new material. Scholarship has revealed that this is the standard practice of most oral literature of the past and present, and is geographically pervasive. A “gleemen” was an itinerant poet below a scop. “Joglars” were performers of poetry from memory. Troubadours were the next group of poetry and song performer who at least partly improvised and embellished at the time of performance. The classical period of the troubadours is roughly 1170 CE – 1220 CE, and there is evidence of such performances until about 1350 CE.

Improvisation is particularly important in the history of Italian literature. Some scholars date the beginning of this tradition to the thirteenth century; however, the Golden Period of the improvvisatori according to Benedetto Croce and others was roughly 1690 CE – 1840 CE. Some scholars believe these improvvisatori influenced commedia dell’arte all’improvviso theatre. It is interesting to note that today one sees the name of this genre as only “commedia dell’arte,” omitting the significant “all’improvviso.” The practice developed over time into solo performances with and without music accompaniment, and poetic jousts (like jazz “cutting sessions”) in which improvisers competed for public approval. Topics for the improvised verse would be provided by the audience during the performance. Sometimes a single topic would

---


50 See the articles by Domenico Pietropaolo, Timothy J. MCGee, and Clifford Davidson in Improvisation in the Arts of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, Early Drama, Art, and Music Monograph Series, Volume 30, ed.Timothy J. McGee (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 2003).

result in an entire two to three hour performance; other times several topics would take up to
generate several improvised poems. From historical accounts, letters, and novels audiences were
mesmerized. By the 1840s – 1850s the phenomenon was finished.

One of the earliest improvvisatori was a Neapolitan called Camillo Querno. Perhaps the
greatest of the eighteenth century was Bernardino Perfetti (1681 – 1746). Francesco Gianni was
an official singer of the victories of Napoleon. Two of the most famous improvvisatore were
Pietro Metastasio (1698 – 1782) and Tomasso Sgricci (1789-1836). Gabriele Rosetti (1783-1854) claims in his autobiography of 1850 La vita mia to have improvised after hearing
Quattromani. The Italian improvvisatori became mythical figures and were a main attraction in
Italy. They travelled around Europe and their influence broadened. There were Eastern
European improvisers: improvvatrice Jadwiga Luszczewski (1834-1908) whose pseudonym was
Deotyma (1850s), the Pole-Lithuanian Adam Bernard Mickiewicz (1798-1855), considered one
of the greatest Polish poets, was an improviser but had mixed feelings about improvisation and
his own skills. Mickiewicz may have been the model for Alexander Pushkin’s (1799-1837)
unfinished short story Egyptian Nights (circa 1835). Scholars have made the case that Pushkin
was impressed by his improvisations. In the story, an Italian improviser is presented partly
negatively, and shown to be unremarkable as a poet. Mickiewicz even included his own fictional
improviser in his drama Forefathers, Part Three (1832), wherein the central scene is called “The
Improvisation.” Another Russian story, “The Improvisator,” by Vladimir Fyodorovich
Odoevsky (1803-1869) published around 1833 presents a somewhat harsh view of improvised
poetry. A German improviser, Maximilian Leopold Langenschwarz (1801- c. 1860), wrote a

52 Other famous improvvisatori include: Corilla Olimpica, Bernardo Sestini, A. Boehringer,
Bartolomeo Lorenzi.

53 Wiktor Weintraub, “The Problem of Improvisation in Romantic Literature,” Comparative
Literature 16, no. 2 (Spring 1964): 119-137.
manual for improvisers and impromptu speakers: *Die Arithmetik der Sprache, oder: Der Redner durch sich Selbst* (1834). Unlike many of the theories of poetic improvisation, Langenschwarz argues that improvisational skill could be acquired through diligence, hard work, and the will. Because of the myth-like status of both the performers and the performances, which were no doubt enhanced through gossip and hyperbole, the source of such a talent became mysterious. Where there is mystery, there is a lot of bunk. Those with mystical leanings attributed the talent to an undefined spiritual source and compared *improvvisatori* to prophets. Balzac’s novel *Le Lys dans la vallée* (1835) and Joseph-Marie, comte de Maistre’s (1753-1821) *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersboug ou Entretiens sur le gouvernement temporel de la Providence* (1821) pursue this line of thinking. Others attributed it to divine inspiration.

The fascination with the *improvvisatori* is revealed by the number of protagonists who are *improvvisatori* in novels from the late eighteenth century to mid-nineteenth century: Anne Louise Germaine (Madame) de Staël’s *Corinne, ou l’Italie* (1807); Francesco Furbo’s *Andrew of Padua, the Improvisatore* (1820); Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Improvisatore* (1835). Andersen himself performed as an *improvvisatore cortegiano*, and claimed that *The Islands of Voenue and Gloenue* originated in an improvised dinner table speech. Then there are the attempts at reproducing the spontaneity of the *improvvisatori*, or faking it, especially by the Romantics. Examples include Alphonse de Lamartine’s (1790-1869) poems “Improvisation sur le bateau a rapeur du Rhone,” “Improvisation a Saint Gaudens,” *Improvisation a la Grande Chartreuse*;” Letitia Landon’s (1802-1838) poem “The Improvatrice” (1824); Coleridge’s

“Improvisatore” (1827); Thomas Love Beddoes’ *The Improvisatore in Three Fyttes with Other Poems* (1821); and the general influence on Wordsworth, Shelley, and Byron.

The evaluations of both the process of improvisation and its poetic products are mixed, even within Italian culture. There were defenders and detractors of improvisation. For example, Carlo Ludovico Fernow defended extempore art against excessive meditation in his *Über die Improvisatoren* (1806).\(^{55}\) On the other hand, the playwright and librettist Carlo Goldoni (1707-1793), and playwright Carlo Gozzi (1720-1806) did not attribute much value to improvised verse and arts.\(^{56}\) Benedetto Croce opines thusly: "Intorno agli improvvisatori si e scritto abbastanza e, in vertita, di essi non e da dir molto."\(^{57}\) Some scholars speculate that the fame and interest in the *improvvisatore* is not based on the intrinsic merit of their improvisations (the products, the poems and verses themselves), but instead the spectacle of the event, the speed and aplomb with which they improvised upon topics provided at the time of performance, their ability to please audiences, and project a sense of mystery. The Romantics may be the most significant group to be influenced by this misprision. For the Romantics, spontaneity was associated with sincerity, authenticity, the “unity of thought and feeling.”\(^{58}\) Wordsworth describes (good) poetry as “the


\(^{57}\) Benedetto Croce, "Gl’improvvisatori," in *La Letteratura italiana del settecento* (Bari: Laterza & Figli, 1949). Translation: "enough has been written on *improvvisatori* , and, in fact, there is not much to say about them."

spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.” It is not clear, however, whether Wordsworth and the other Romantics equated spontaneity with improvisation, or perhaps they thought that spontaneity was a necessary condition for improvisation. Moreover, spontaneous and/or improvised writing was (and still is) viewed as the raw material from which a more polished text can be achieved. Of course, we even find this view in Aristotle’s *Poetics* in the passages I shall analyze below.

Written improvisations raise special difficulties, among them are epistemic questions. For example, how would one know that a text was improvised if there are no witnesses? One must rely on the testimony of the writer herself, or if there were witnesses, then the testimony of the witnesses. Should one believe the writer? There are motives for writers to not lie about such things. Here are some: the fact that improvised texts may be “rougter” than their non-improvised texts thereby making the admission a hedge or discount; in order to communicate the experimental nature of the texts; and to call attention to their improvisational skill. Typically, since the production of non-performed literary texts is not a public event (there are exceptions, e.g., Quick Muse project), there is a matter of trust involved that is not as prominent in performing arts improvisation, where the improvised artistic activity is usually public. However, it is possible for a performing artist to engage in deception by performing a pre-planned piece. Even the *improvvisatori* could have “plants” in the audience, who would feed them agreed-upon topics. In addition, given the aesthetic values of particular periods, artists may attempt to either conceal or markedly reveal the method of artistic production and generation. In other words, if

---

improvisation is “in,” then artists want to be known as improvisers; if improvisation is “out,” then artists will conceal the improvisation if they continue the practice at all.

There is also confusion over the differences between the phenomena of stream-of-consciousness, nonsense, cut-up, automatic writing, and improvisation. As in the case of film, there are many literary works that give the appearance of spontaneity but are not improvised in any sense. Because it has a longer tradition in literature, and because the canon includes many such works by respected writers (such as Laurent Sterne, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, Dorothy Parker, and William Faulkner), stream of consciousness has gained a more or less established status as a valid technique of generating, or device of, literary texts, and even has a critical base by which one can evaluate such writing. There are borderline cases, too. Are some of Jack Kerouac’s works stream of consciousness, or improvised, or do they just have the appearance of being improvised? What is the relationship between stream of consciousness writing and improvised writing, if any? In addition, there are other related phenomena that I shall discuss briefly: nonsense poetry, Oulipo writers, aleatory/indeterminacy methods, and cut-up technique.

Cut-up technique was used most notably by William S. Burroughs, Brion Gysin, John Cage, and Jackson Mac Low. Cut-up involves taking already written or published texts (e.g., newspapers, magazines) and adopting a method for extracting sequences of text and placing them together, usually adjacent to one another. The length of the extracted sequences and the method of choosing the sequences are decided upon by the artist beforehand. Sometimes the

---

method of selection was random. Mac Low developed various methods, some of which were
deterministic and other chance operations. For example, when one adopts an algorithmic process
for selecting text, then as long as the seed text remains constant, the result will always be the
same. However, in chance operations (aleatory) the result can only be the same, improbably, by
“accident.” The concern for Mac Low was to remove the ego as much as possible from the
creative process. Is this generative method a kind of improvisation? It could be. These
generative methods are based on constraints similar to any other conventions with which any
writer operates, and since artists who use such methods in general do not edit these texts, this
writing occurs in real-time.

Ouvroir de literature potentielle (Oulipo), roughly “the workshop of potential literature,”
was founded in 1960 by Francois Le Lionnais and Raymond Queneau.61 It included such writers
as George Perec, Italo Calvino, Oskar Pastior, and Jacques Roubaud. They were particularly
influenced by mathematics and science, and were interested in experimental methods of
generating literary texts. The Oulipo writers used constraint based methods and self imposed
rules in writing and developing their texts—poems, novels, plays, et cetera. For example,
lipogrammatic texts involved avoiding a particular letter or set of letters in composition. George
Perec’s famous novel La Disparition (1969) was written in French without using any word

61 See Warren F. Motte, Jr., trans. and ed., Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature (Lincoln,
Nebraska Press, 1986; reprint edition, Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998); Harry Mathews
and Alastair Brotchie, eds., Oulipo Compendium, Atlas Arkhive Documents of the Avant-Garde
Series, Number 6 (London: Atlas Press, 1998); Harry Mathews, Iain White, and Warren Motte
Jr., trans. Oulipo Laboratory: Texts from the Bibliotheque Oulipienne by Raymond Queneau,
Italo Calvino, Paul Fournel, Jacques Jouet, Claude Berge and Harry Mathews, Atlas Anti-
containing the letter “e.” The translation into English by Gilbert Adair is an outstanding accomplishment. I do not believe Oulipo writers improvised. The use of constraints, in particular arbitrary ones, was confused with the constraints improvisers adopt. Oulipo writers edited and revised their texts, and they had no expectation that the final product would be had in real-time writing.

The following genres are commonly confused with improvised texts: nonsense verse, concrete poetry, abstract poetry. These genres may contain improvisation but are not of themselves defined by improvisational generative practices. Abstract poetry, purportedly coined by Edith Sitwell, is verse that primarily depends on its auditory qualities for its meaning. Some Beat poetry was of this kind. Concrete poetry “substitutes for such conventional elements of the poem as metre, rhyme, stanzaic form, and even normal syntax, the ultimate elements of language: letter, syllable, word, in such a constellation that the visual effect of the typography … is of an importance equal or superior to that of the semantic and phonetic elements involved.” Nonsense poetry and writing can be dated to the fourteenth century in Europe, but flourished in England in the late nineteenth century. Lewis Carrol and Edward Lear. These genres can be combined. For example, the collectively improvised poems of Jack Kerouac,

62 George Perec, *La Disparition* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969). Perec’s novel was inspired by Ernest Vincent Wright’s novel *Gadsby* from 1939, which contains 50,000 words without the letter “e.”
65 Ibid., 34.
Allen Ginsburg, and Neal Cassady have calligrammatic, lipogrammatic, abstract, concrete, and nonsense elements.\textsuperscript{67}

The term “stream of consciousness” was coined by William James in order to describe, more or less figuratively, the nature of certain mental processes.\textsuperscript{68} There seems to be general agreement that the first instance of the technique was by Edouard Dujardin in his novel \textit{Les Lauriers sont coupes}, published in 1888. In literary studies and criticism, at least one theorist claims that the subject matter of the novel is the best way to distinguish stream of consciousness from other literary forms and devices, rather than such aspects as technique, purpose, or themes.\textsuperscript{69} Robert Humphrey says, “Stream-of-consciousness fiction differs from all other psychological fiction precisely in that it is concerned with those levels [of consciousness] that are more inchoate than rational verbalization—those levels on the margins of attention.”\textsuperscript{70} Further, he distinguishes between stream of consciousness texts and \textit{monologue intérieur}. They are not synonyms: there are kinds of stream of consciousness, such as certain forms of omniscient narration and soliloquies, which have little to do with interior monologues. The use of interior monologue is not necessary condition for being stream of consciousness, although some interior monologues are stream of consciousness as well (e.g., the last chapter of \textit{Ulysses}). Consequently, some interior monologue passages are not stream of consciousness, and some stream of consciousness passages are not interior monologues. So, according to this definition,

\textsuperscript{68} William James, \textit{Principles of Psychology, Volume 1} (New York: Henry Holt, 1890).
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 2-3.
Marcel Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu* is not a stream of consciousness novel,\(^{71}\) whereas *Ulysses, Mrs. Dalloway, To the Lighthouse,* and *The Sound and the Fury* (or parts of them) are paradigm examples of it. At this point one can discern that stream of consciousness writing may involve improvising or it may not. They are logically independent phenomena, but they are compatible. In fact, one source of confusion between improvisation and stream of consciousness is that stream of consciousness passages often have an improvisatory feel or quality, but this does not entail anything about how the passage was actually written. The differences between *being improvised,* as a genetic property of works of art, as opposed to sounding or looking or seeming improvised, which may be an aesthetic property of a work of art, will be discussed in detail in Part II: Metaphysics 2.2. Historically, it turns out that improvisation was not used much in stream of consciousness novels.

What is interesting here is that the fact that stream of consciousness writing has been associated with improvisation reveals something about improvisation (and about stream of consciousness writing). Stream of consciousness writing is supposed to mimic thinking, sometimes particular kinds of thought, such as self-reflection, introspection, or just ordinary, quotidian thinking. Like the analogy with conversation, improvisation easily can be compared to the ordinary thinking process. This is natural because conversation often reveals, or is a source of, unedited thinking—thinking laid bare. Though not all conversation will do so because of the way in which humans edit themselves, pause, false-starts, et cetera.

\(^{71}\) One might say that Proust’s masterpiece is *about* stream of consciousness without being an instance of the literary device or technique.
Written Improvisations

i could use the word “improvisations” i've used it before but i've come to distrust what most people think it means the idea of starting from a blank slate nobody starts from a blank slate not charlie parker nor homer nor ludwig wittgenstein started from a blank slate each in his different way going over a considered ground that became a new ground as they considered it again

—David Antin, I Never Knew What Time It Was, pp. ix-x

Performance poets, talk poems, and other forms of performance art have been improvised (e.g., David Antin, Jackson Mac Low, Spalding Gray). Improvised writing has a history from Dadaist automatic writing to the improvised texts of William Carlos Williams, Jack Kerouac, Charles Olson, writers of the Black Mountain Group and Naropa Institute, and A. R. Ammons. Recently, the Quick Muse project by Ken Gordon\(^2\) has revived improvisation in poetry. Given a theme expressed in a short, quoted passage, two poets have fifteen minutes to compose a poem using a computer keyboard. The poets do not know the subject matter, or the theme, beforehand. A computer program records all of the poet’s depressions upon the keyboard in real-time. Consequently, one can see the finished product (at the end of fifteen minutes—strictly enforced), and view (and re-view) the real-time composition of the poem, which includes by default the pauses, amendments, deletions, and alterations of composing. One might argue that this is not improvisation; this is just an arbitrary time limit constraint on composition. But improvisation must occur in time as well—it takes time to improvise. Someone may choose to improvise for thirty minutes. It is a public event: an audience views the writing on a computer screen. The written component of Quick Muse is one feature that distinguishes it from the improvisatori. It is the writing that allows for editing and revision, but since this editing is in the real-time of a

\(^2\) The Quick Muse web site URL: <http://www.quickmuse.com>.
performance—a public event—it is part of the “performance.” People may choose afterwards to view only the finished poem, but the recording of the writing process during the fifteen minutes is also available. The availability of editing should not exclude Quick Muse from the improvisation classification. The compression of time of writing, the contest-like format, and the performance aspects are sufficient to warrant Quick Muse projects a point near improvisation on the continuum line between composition and improvisation.

Obviously not all poems, novels, and stories that are classified in the Beat genre were improvised. This is a common misconception. Some Beat writers did improvise occasionally; other times they often wrote as if it was improvised, trying to capture spontaneity, the unconscious, et cetera. One notable case is the mythology surrounding perhaps the most famous Beat novel *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac. Kerouac did improvise some sections of the novel, and he wanted to capture spontaneity and immediacy in his writing, but recent evidence makes clear that most of the work on *On the Road* was seriously edited and revised.73 For example, it took three and a half years for Kerouac to write; there were five distinct versions of the novel; the notorious scroll manuscript was “the outcome of a fastidious process of outlining, chapter drafting, and trimming;”74 and plot lines and journal entries used in the novel have been found in the Kerouac archive. It has been pointed out that the scroll took three weeks for Kerouac to compose. My point is that taking three weeks, or three hours, in and of itself does not provide a sufficient reason for classification as improvisation or non-improvisation. Admittedly, it is rapid

---


74 Brinkley, 53. It should be noted that there is some controversy now over the status of the scroll, especially since a transcript has been published recently. See Jack Kerouac, *On the Road: The Original Scroll*, ed. Howard Cunnell (New York: Viking, 2007).
composition, but an author may still revise and use notes during that time. On the other hand, very rapid composition—this is going to be vague—in and of itself may be a reason to classify a text as improvised.\footnote{See my comments below on Ken Gordon’s Quick Muse project.} The briefer the time period, the less time there is for revision, second-guessing, and the like. But why are those properties identified with improvising? How brief does the time of composition have to be in order to qualify as improvising? However, after \textit{On the Road} was composed/improvised, Kerouac did use what he called “sketching”\footnote{See Jack Kerouac, \textit{Book of Sketches: 1952-1957} (New York: Penguin, 2006).} and “Spontaneous Prose.”\footnote{See Jack Kerouac, “The Essentials of Spontaneous Prose,” \textit{Evergreen Review} Volume 2, no. 5 (Summer 1958); reprinted in \textit{The Portable Beat Reader}, ed. Ann Charters (New York: Penguin, 1992), 57-58.} Among many other examples, there are texts of poems that were collectively improvised by Kerouac, Neil Cassady, and Allen Ginsburg.\footnote{See, \textit{inter alia}, Kerouac, \textit{Scattered Poems}, which contains some brilliant, improvised poems by Kerouac, Ginsburg, and Cassady.}

How is modernist and contemporary literature improvised? In the cases in which we have confirmation of improvised texts, the generation of the text is spontaneous and either there is very limited time allowed for editing and revision, or none at all. Two very famous, well-respected poets engaged in improvising poems: William Carlos Williams and A. R. Ammons. William Carlos Williams’ \textit{Kora in Hell} was (allegedly) spontaneous and he did not edit the texts. Some of Jack Kerouac’s texts were generated in a similar fashion, and his most famous texts seem to have not been improvised, even though these latter texts may have initially been improvised but later significantly edited. This raises the question of the difference between and boundaries of improvised writing and non-improvised writing. (I will use the term “writing” instead of “composition” so as not to confuse it with music.) In addition, there is a trust issue with improvised texts. One may be inclined to call them “allegedly” improvised.
claims these texts are improvised. How do we know this is true and how do we know that the author has a sound conception of what improvisation means. In the case of Ammons, the evidence for the latter is at least in the text itself. In Williams’ case, we have his later commentaries, which discuss how the texts were produced. However, sometimes the author’s own account cannot be trusted. In a later autobiographical work Williams claims that he is engaging in automatic writing. Sayre says: “In I Wanted to Write a Poem, Williams calls both Kora and A Novelette examples of ‘automatic writing’ (IWWP, 49); and he must have in mind the kind of writing generated by Soupault’s and Breton’s ‘psychic automatism.” But Williams’ improvisations do not seem like Breton’s, and thus should not be classified as automatic writing. Here is reminiscence by Williams: “I wrote some things once called Improvisations: Kora in Hell. They were wild flights of the imagination. As I look at them now I see how ‘romantic’ they were. I feel embarrassed. I was having ‘dreams’ at that time; I was having ‘ideas.” Besides displaying a desire to distance himself from Kora, this passage confirms that Williams was improvising text and not engaging in automatic writing. Automatic writing is supposed to ignore and eschew “wild flights of the imagination.”

It is especially when investigating stream of consciousness and improvisation in literary arts that the theories of improvisation that focus on intuition-tapping and conscious-raising seem particularly relevant. The writer is trying to find what she has to say, and the best way to do this is to engage directly in the process by which one expresses what one has to say: writing or talking. So one writes down on the page (or otherwise records) whatever comes to one’s mind

---


attempting not to filter, edit, enhance, or detract as much as one can. This can be quite difficult because the impulse to edit, to filter, to revise is very strong, because that is what we ordinarily do in all forms of writing and of course in conversation. But there is another feature of what we ordinarily do in writing and speaking: create novel expressions. The novel expressions seem improvised. Seemingly, they come from nowhere, they just pop out of our pens or mouths. It is consciousness, or at least artistic consciousness, laid bare, or thinking or creativity laid bare.

Roger Gilbert says, “Ammons and Ashberry are thus poets of thinking, rather than poets of truth or wisdom. They are more concerned with rendering the experience of reflection, its rhythms and contours, than with delivering completed thoughts that claim the status of truth.”

That writers have motivations and goals for improvising is clear though not always obvious. But there are less clear answers to the following questions. Why do writers then publish such things (i.e., make the texts public)? And why do we read them? Why are we interested in them? And, perhaps even more difficult, why do we sometimes evaluate them as good or bad or even brilliant? The fact that many poets and writers themselves have published these kinds of works is evidence that these works, and their generative methods, are not considered just instrumentally valuable—as merely an exercise for brainstorming or breaking writer’s block.

To answer these questions, one needs to describe exactly what is going on when writers do this in prose or poetry (in fact, this distinction may be called into question when looking at

---


82 There is also a similar technique called “Zen writing,” which is often recommended to students and others for getting non-fiction writing started. See Natalie Goldberg, Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within (Boston: Shambala, 1986).
“improvised” texts). Let us look at an example. I have chosen a master poet who has improvised texts, A. R. Ammons, but one could easily use William Carlos Williams. I should note that one reason why I have chosen these poets is because of their uncontroversial stature in the modernist canon (and post-modernist for Ammons), their almost universal critical acclaim, and because some of the best literary critics and scholars of the past fifty years have lauded these two poets (e.g., Harold Bloom, Helen Vendler).

_Tape for the Turn of the Year_ by A. R. Ammons is an experimental long poem. It is considered experimental because Ammons adopted an almost arbitrary constraint on composing the poem. He used a long roll (approximately one-hundred feet) of adding machine paper (width: approximately three inches) placed in his typewriter to compose in a journal-like way his thoughts during the period from December 6, 1963 to January 10, 1964. Consequently, the length and width of the thin, long roll of adding machine paper provided the external limitations of Ammons’s composition. Some line breaks (enjambment) and the ultimate end of the poem were left to the physical boundaries of the paper itself. Ammons’s poem is experimental in two ways. First, it is a literal experiment for the poet to investigate his own writing techniques, styles, and thoughts, much like journals function in composition courses and creative writing programs. Second, it is an experimental form, a new technique for composing a literary text. In this second sense, it is less original because writers before Ammons (some Oulipo writers, Jack Kerouac) experimented in similar fashion. Ammons differs from these experiments because he uses physical limitations in addition to conceptual ones. Here I quote A. R. Ammons’s ending to his long poem _Tape for the Turn of the Year_:

83 It is humorous and interesting to note the putative yet unconfirmed remark by Truman Capote about Kerouac’s _On the Road_: “that isn’t writing (at all), that’s typing.” Kerouac sometimes used long rolls of teletype paper because his writing was so rapid and continuous that this is the only medium that did not break the “flow” of his work.
I wrote about these
days
the way life gave them:
   I didn’t know
   beforehand what I
   wd write,
whether I’d meet
anything new: I
showed that I’m sometimes
blank and abstract,
sometimes blessed with
song: sometimes
silly, vapid, serious,
angry, despairing:
   ideally, I’d
   be like a short poem:
   that’s a fine way
to be: a poem at a
time: but all day
life itself is bending,
weaving, changing,
adapting, failing,
succeeding:

   I’ve given
you my
emptiness: it may
not be unlike
   your emptiness:
in voyages, there
are wide reaches
of water
with no islands:

I’ve given you the
interstices: the
   space between
electrons:
   I’ve given you
the dull days
when turning & turning
revealed nothing:
I’ve given you the
sky:
uninterrupted by moon,
bird, or cloud:
I’ve given
you long
uninteresting walks
so you could experience
vacancy:

old castles, carnivals,
ditchbanks,
bridges, ponds
    steel mills,
cities: so many
interesting tours:

the roll has lifted
from the floor &
our journey is done:
thank you
for coming: thank
you for coming along:

the sun’s bright:
the wind rocks the
    naked trees:
so long.⁸⁴

Essentially, these last lines of the long poem recapitulate what happened in the previous pages—what the poet did. In doing that, Ammons both criticizes the project and justifies it. He says goodbye to the reader, and thanks the reader for tolerating this experiment. Interestingly, Ammons recognizes the limitations of this kind of odd project, but reconciles it with assigning it value. There is also the view that the whole enterprise was didactic for the poet: he knows better what possibilities of ideas, poetic lines, and tropes come from him, and even what he has to do in order to tap into them. The poem functions simultaneously as failure (though not wholly a failure) and inspiration, which is explicitly recognized by Ammons in the lines above (“I /

showed that I’m sometimes / blank and abstract, / sometimes blessed with / song: sometimes / silly, vapid, serious, / angry, despairing: / ideally, I’d / be like a short poem: / that’s a fine way / to be: a poem at a / time:”). This kind of explicit admission is surprising yet refreshing.

Ammons uses his poetic lines to criticize the poem he has just written (and still is writing at that time). His justification for the varied quality and interest of different sections of the poem is indicated in these lines from above: “but all day / life itself is bending, / weaving, changing, / adapting, failing, / succeeding.” The poem itself is a demonstration of, and mirrors, the contours of life. As he talks about his talking about nothing in some sections of the poem, he is of course expressing himself beautifully and poetically. It is a kind of meta-poetry. Analogously, one can discuss ennui without being bored tout court or bored with the discussion of ennui. Thus, a poetic discussion of emptiness is neither empty nor fruitless.

Ammons indicates the values of such a poem (improvised, diary- or journal-like, arbitrary constraints on writing) by the repetition of “I’ve given you …” Five different things follow this phrase: 1) emptiness, 2) interstices, 3) dull days, 4) sky, 5) long, uninteresting walks. Even though I am not concerned with evaluation and aesthetic value tout court, I am going to adumbrate such issues because the values in this case happen to coincide with the reasons, and motives of the improvisational writer, and the interests an audience might have for engaging with such improvised literature. And this is necessary if one is going to have a proper aesthetic understanding of improvised texts.

One value of reading such a poem is that of identification, which is hinted at in the lines “I’ve given/ you my/ emptiness: it may/ not be unlike/ your emptiness.” Perhaps such recognition (through identification), like finding out others are going through similar psychiatric
illness, is the whole rationale for support groups, and why some group therapy is therapeutic, and when expressed in art through such identification, there is inspirational value. Inspirational value is the value a work possesses in virtue of its capacity to trigger, spring, and coax readers to produce their own art. The fact that the content of the poem is improvised, and left untouched, adds to this kind of value because it gives the poem an authenticity of immediacy of voice and inner thoughts to which one may not have access, nor be able to experience, with non-improvised texts. Moreover, identification can function in a cathartic way, also akin to group psychotherapy, and of course recognized by Aristotle to solve his problem of tragedy (although the fact that he has this “solution” almost immediately suggests that this phenomenon was not a “problem” to Aristotle). When one recognizes the emptiness in others, one confirms one’s own experience as not unique, thereby attenuating the angst associated with it, and in the case of art, the objectification of such a subjective sentiment as emptiness in achieved. It is there in the poem (reification), and the details of how emptiness (say) is communicated, even metaphorically, makes it concrete.

With “interstices,” Ammons implies that his creativity is laid bare. One sees the creativity as a process in the poem because it is immediate, unmitigated, rough, unedited. It mimics the flow of our own thinking, but not in the stream of consciousness way. The difference is that Ammons is not making claims to an ordinary thinking, his thinking is within the bounds of the poetry with a poetic sensibility, nor is it the thinking of some other (or fictional) persona or character. This kind of an effect is best achieved through improvisation. Again, with “dull

---

days,” Ammons reveals that in reading the poem one sees him at his best and worst and everything in between (interstices).

Sky as a symbol of purity is implied by Ammons saying “uninterrupted by moon, / bird, or cloud:”. Again a reference to the creative process laid bare—pure, raw creativity. Readers are witness to the process of composition.

The line “I’ve given you long, uninteresting walks” refers literally to his writing about some of the walks he took during the period of writing. But it also refers back to “emptiness” because he writes “so you could experience vacancy.” Ammons in an essay compared poems to walks. Why is improvised writing better at communicating emptiness and vacancy than non-improvised writing? There are many non-improvised poems that do this brilliantly (perhaps Eliot’s “J. Alfred Prufrock”).

Moreover, there is the value of skill in improvisation. Ammons demonstrates that he is a virtuoso. Our interest in diaries, biographies, and autobiographies undergirds in part our interest here. There is voyeurism: seeing how the poet lives and works. But could this be done by less famous poets or writers? Would our interest be sustained if these texts were written by non-famous, ordinary people? But when both Williams and Ammons wrote these improvised poems both were young and not famous yet. The aesthetic value of their improvised works has perhaps increased with time because of their subsequent fame. In the case of Ammons, however, a good case can be made that his later fame was in part due to such experiments.

Consider the following example from a much later poem of Ammons in which he goes back to writing on narrow paper—the section is called “Strip” for the strip of paper. In the following, he is being explicit about his motives and method:

---

86 Whether improvisation is a skill or virtue (or something else) will be discussed in a future work on evaluating and valuing improvisation.
I know why I write in this method: if I don’t write what I’m thinking right then, it slips my mind: yep: gone for good: sometimes, the next day, or several weeks later, I have a thought that has an air of remembrance about it, and I think, gee, this may not be déjà vu exactly but I think I’ve been down this street before: I remember now that yesterday morning or this morning when I was coming back from the campus store with a mocha chip muffin I was thinking of the word cramp and I was thinking how this tape cramps my style: it breaks down my extended gestures: it doesn’t give your asshole time to reconfigure after a dump.⁸⁷

What these more or less spontaneous “compositions,” akin to stream of consciousness whatever-pops-into-one’s-head, reveal is the pure unadulterated imagination of the author. The only way to understand “unadulterated” is that it means no editing, revision, or only real-time composition editing. One discerns the creative process unadorned at the beginning stage, the imaginative connections one makes for seemingly mysterious reasons. Like free association, we learn about the author and the process. What do we learn about the author? We learn about the

author’s fundamental concerns, interests, repertory of images, examples, natural talent, and devices. These are laid bare as he exposes the unpolished, unedited improvisations to the audience. The process reveals how imaginative connections between sentences, ideas, and images are made—randomly sometimes or through unsuspecting slips, which can all be seen in the improvised text. One may argue that such things can be gleaned from non-improvised texts as well. So, what is the difference? Because of revising, editing, time for further reflection, etcetera, one does not experience the more unmediated creative mind at work. This is not to say that the attributes that can be gleaned from non-improvised texts are less significant. We can, of course, find out about the author through non-improvised texts, and surely natural talent is also exposed in ordinary (non-improvised) literary writing. But what one might want to say here is that these are compatible values, but different. Different interests are answered by improvising texts and not improvising them. Sometimes we learn similar things about the author, and other times we learn different things about the author and the author’s process by reading (or listening to) improvisations. In some cases, improvisation is the sole source of evaluating an author’s work (e.g., David Antin).

**Parry-Lord Theory**

Another piece of evidence for the general prejudice (of some kind) against improvising and improvisations is revealed by discussions of the Parry-Lord theory of oral-traditional literature. In particular the Parry-Lord theory involved the nature of epic narrative poems and

---

songs, and ballads. The theory was motivated by finding out about the Homeric epic poems: How were they composed? What is their source? and many related questions that classical scholars have been investigating and speculating about for centuries. Milman Parry thought that one can find out things about the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* by comparing them to a current oral tradition of epic poetry and song. Parry chose Serbo-Croatian oral epic narratives. For the most part, the tradition was oral, not literate or written (for whatever reasons), and has a fairly long history and tradition. Most importantly was the fact that the tradition was still being practiced when Parry was researching. One could have a first-hand experience and account of an oral tradition, which Parry initially hypothesized as analogous to Homer and other epics. So Parry set out to discover methods of transmission, content, style, poetics, and composition. He discovered that the content was mostly traditional, based upon a set number of stories or narratives. The method of transmission was from one generation to another through performances of the poems, the memories of audience members, and apprenticeship of performers (*guslars*). The method of composition might be called improvising. Parry and Lord used the term “oral composition.” The *guslar* would “improvise” lines of poetry, which were constrained by the traditional content, and traditional poetics, including style, meter, and even diction, and most importantly for Parry it was formulaic. Tragically, Parry died young, and Albert Bates Lord, his student, carried on his work with an emphasis on Serbo-Croatian literature.

The idea that the Homeric epics were originally oral was not surprising to most scholars. Parry was not the first to recognize this. Most scholars agree that Flavius Josephus of the first century CE was the first to put forward such a thesis. In the Modern era, Friedrich Wolf made similar claims in his *Prolegomena to Homer* (1795). And if anyone had been reading Aristotle, they would have been able to make the inference fairly easily, since in the *Poetics* Aristotle
mentions twice the improvisatory beginnings of Greek poetry and theatre (this will be discussed below). What scholars did find blasphemous was the idea that the Homeric epics retained this improvised character. The reason given, either explicitly or implicitly, was that texts such as the Homeric epics were of such high aesthetic and artistic complexity and value that they could not have been improvised or even based upon improvisations. The assumption making such a claim plausible was that improvising cannot give rise to the same properties, or as valuable properties, as written, non-improvised texts. More generally, written texts and traditions (literate cultures) have different properties than oral ones. Now, that may be true, but what was usually implicit or tacit is the presupposition that the differences are differences of value or merit, too. And of course the written traditions are found to be more valuable than the oral ones. Now here is where the debate gets tricky, and both sides, it seems to me, are guilty of philosophical confusions and mistakes.

First, differences in output, results, texts, et cetera do not necessarily entail differences of value. This entailment holds only if there is a lemma somewhere stating that the standards of judgment, criticism, and evaluation are the same for both literate and oral traditions or methods of composition. More generally, such a view would hold that belonging to a specific category, like genre, art form, et cetera, is irrelevant in making aesthetic judgments. Such a lemma would seem to be either question-begging or would have to function as some sort of self-evident axiom. The latter choice is far from obvious, so it is not self-evident. One would have to provide evidence for such a claim. Counterevidence, however, can be produced. A view called (evaluative) contextualism, or the categorical view, seems to capture many of our intuitions about aesthetic and artistic value, and has recently been defended by Noël Carroll in his books
The Philosophy of Motion Pictures, On Criticism, and other articles. One can find the beginnings of the view in Kendall Walton’s now classic “Categories of Art.” The basic idea is that aesthetic evaluation, and the adjudication of aesthetic disagreement in particular, is a matter of categorizing works of art in the correct category, where category is understood broadly to include genre, mode of presentation, art form, aspect, et cetera. There are potential problems with this view; nonetheless, this view of aesthetic evaluation gets some things right about making aesthetic judgments. On this view, the standards and criteria of aesthetic and artistic merit of improvisations and non-improvisations could be very different.

Lord distinguishes between “improvisation” and “composition in performance.” He defines “composition in performance” as the use of “units called ‘formulas’ and ‘themes’ to which I have more recently added the highly important concept of ‘blocks of lines.’” I accept his distinction to a certain extent; however, in my way of viewing things, I would categorize Lord’s “composition in performance” as a species of improvisation. Given my proclivities for a very broad continuum of improvisation (as I shall argue for in Part II), this makes sense, especially since Lord’s category is similar to other forms and artistic activities we are already inclined to label “improvised.”

Here is an important, relevant passage, worth the longish quotation:

The use of the term ‘improvisation’ in referring to the method of composition of the South Slavic oral-traditional epic has caused some misunderstandings. The Oxford English Dictionary defines improvising as making up a song or words ‘on the spur of the moment,’ ‘extempore.’ It quotes Tobias George Smollett in Travels Through France and

---

91 Lord, Epic Singers and Oral Tradition, 2-3.
Italy, who mentions ‘improvisatori, the greatest curiosities, unique within Italy, individuals who have the surprising talent of reciting verses extempore on any subject you propose.’ The OED in its discussion also uses the word ‘unpremeditated’ and defines improvisation as ‘the production or execution of anything off hand.’ This is a very far cry from the technique of composition of oral-traditional epic.

My own preferred term for that type of composition is ‘composition by formula and theme.’ ‘Composition in performance’ or possibly ‘recomposition in performance’ are satisfactory terms as long as one does not equate them with improvisation, which, to my mind, means to make up a new nontraditional song from predominantly nontraditional elements.

There is a considerable confusion on the difference between improvisation and the creation of new songs in an oral tradition of singing narrative songs. It is a complex problem, but this much may be said at present. New songs in a living tradition of epic are forged from traditional formulas and themes and deal with traditional subjects. A new song in this genre has new names, but almost everything else in it has appeared before in the tradition in one form or another. The improvising of shorter topical songs ‘on any subject’ ‘on the spur of the moment’ is a very different matter, especially since the subjects may be, and usually are, nontraditional, thus requiring a new vocabulary.

Milman Parry asked an epic singer in Nevesinje, Hercegovina, if he could compose a song about him. Milovan Vojicic did so, and it has been published in The Singer of Tales. Parry asked a wrong question. Milovan was not an ‘improvisatore,’ and the resulting song was an anomaly, a tour de force. Jeff Opland noted when he collected praise poems among the Xhosa in South Africa that their praise poems about chiefs used many formulas, but when one of them made up—at Opland’s request—a song about an automobile accident that Opland had told him about, the song had fewer formulas. The first were traditional praise poems; the second a nontraditional improvisation.

The outsider misunderstands, when he is told that singers can make up songs ‘on any subject,’ and asks for subjects outside the tradition. The result is a curiosity that proves nothing except that the singer normally does not compose a song extempore about ‘any subject,’ but only about certain kinds of subjects, for which he has the materials in his experience.

Ramon Menendez Pidal, in commenting on the The Singer of Tales, expressed polite shock that I had, allegedly, said or implied that the Iliad and the Odyssey were ‘improvised’ by Homer. I would share his shock, were I to hear anyone say that. To repeat, ‘composition in performance’ does not imply ‘improvisation.’ It can, and in my usage it does, mean ‘composition by formula and theme.’

---

92 Lord, Epic Singers and Oral Tradition, 76-77.
The mistake Lord is making here is to confuse a property of improvisation with improvisation itself. The way he sees improvisation already includes originality in a very strong sense. This is incorrect because improvising itself does not entail originality in the strong sense, and perhaps not even in a weaker sense. Improvising genres may put a premium on originality in its generative and appreciative norms, but this is very different from requiring originality for generation and production. Imagine an improviser who legitimately improvises a text but it is unoriginal. This improviser has failed to produce a good improvisation (because it fails to be original), but this does not mean that she did not improvise. Therefore, it is possible to improvise unoriginal texts (or other works). In addition, Lord takes the OED as authoritative. I will admit that if we suppose the OED definition he cites is comprehensively correct, then Lord is correct in distinguishing between composition in performance and improvisation. But as I am demonstrating throughout Part I, there is little reason to accept the OED definition as comprehensive, and one should not interpret the OED as providing necessary and sufficient conditions for improvisation. I am not committing the denying the antecedent fallacy here. Instead I am reconstructing Lord’s argument as a modus ponens structure and challenging the argument as unsound. The conditional premise is true (as indicated above), but the second premise asserting the truth of the OED definition is false or questionable at best. Therefore, the argument is valid but unsound.

So what is philosophically interesting about the Parry-Lord and critics debate? The critics assume that the written texts we have in manuscripts are the documentations of improvisations of bards, troubadours, and singers. No one is claiming that as far as I know. 93 The relationship between improvisation and originality is discussed in my paper “Originality Is Aesthetically Valuable” given at the American Society for Aesthetics, Rocky Mountain Division Meeting, July, 1998.
Parry-Lord *et alii* are talking about the genetic properties of these texts: how they came to be, how they were initially generated and transmitted, and the conditions of their transmission. This is not to say that there are no “traces” of oral literature and improvisation in such works as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Texts can have evidence of their improvised genetic properties and conditions without thereby being documentations of improvisations or improvised performances or sessions.

Consequently, the Parry-Lord theory, if it is roughly correct, needs a conceptual clean-up. Following is how the account would proceed with a sound conceptual scheme. For centuries, both while writing existed and before it, there were performers who used elements of what today we call story-telling, monologue, poetry, and song. The content of the performances over time congealed into a tradition of characters, plots, stories, poetic tropes, and grammatical and diction formulas, formal and organizational elements. Probably, the best of these performers, determined by popularity and/or the “expert judgment” of the performer community, became famous and were consequently copied by others seeking similar fame and success. This caused further compression of literary conventions and content. The most appropriate analogy here is, I think, that of genes/memes and evolution by natural selection. These performers adopted voluntary constraints on their performances in addition to the many non-voluntary constraints. No doubt some of these constraints were due to mnemonics and other aids for memory. They worked within these constraints, but there was still sufficient malleability for each performer to make changes and for changes to occur from performance to performance. Some of these changes were due to memory limitations, some caused by audience responses, some by artistic choices of the performers. Even though the performers used various kinds of formulas, there

---

was artistic room, so to speak, for the performer to make artistic choices involving content and style. Often these choices were made while performing, while others were planned beforehand either by planning or practicing the performances. This space of artistic choices, especially those in real-time, are improvised. As writing and the technology of writing improved and became widespread and available, scribes, who may have been performers themselves, though in no way necessarily so, began to write texts of these poems and songs. While this writing occurred there were further opportunities for artistic choices to be made, many during the time of writing. Here there is another level of improvisation. These would be akin to the literary improvisations of (for example) Ammons and Williams. Over time, these texts became more static, each scribe treating his job as copier only. These more or less fixed texts are distributed more widely and they are handed down from generation to generation. Hence the Iliad and Odyssey. Improvisation, therefore, is part of the history of these great epics. Does this warrant calling them improvised literature? Yes and no. These texts did become fixed, and significant portions were originally improvised, and those original improvisations were embellished.

**Aleatory Music**

aleatory composition and choral improvisation throwback to dinosaur lagoons, the much floating, winged sawbills, bankless, ambient, figurings, dismemberments of breath by

overhanging fern-spun ramification:

—A. R. Ammons, *Sphere: The Form of a Motion*, § 58, p. 36
“Aleatory”95 (sometimes called “chance music” or “mobile/open form”) is a name of a technique of composition. The key to it is that instead of many compositional elements of a piece being determined by the composer, whether based on some principle, preference, et cetera, these elements are selected randomly. The random procedures vary widely. Consequently, the composer does choose to use a random process, and she chooses which random process will be executed. Grove usefully defines “aleatory” as follows: “A term applied to music whose composition and/or performance is, to a greater or lesser extent, undetermined by the composer … the term is usually restricted to music in which the composer has made a deliberate withdrawal of control …”96

Paul Griffiths distinguishes between three kinds of aleatory music.97 First, there is the use of random procedures to generate a more or less fixed composition. Here the compositional process itself is randomized—thus attempting to eliminate or reduce authorial intention. Since often the goal is to generate a fixed composition, it is not improvisation, although the process will reveal something salient about composing and agency, which shall be discussed in Part II. Examples of random procedures that have been used are throwing dice, flipping coins, using templates drawn from the constellations, and using the Chinese *I Ching*.


97 Ibid.
The second kind of aleatory music is the use of performers’ discretion in choosing between options during performance (sometimes beforehand in rehearsal), and these options are presented by the composer in the score. If the options are selected by the performer during real-time performance, then this practice may count as a minimal form of improvisation. If the selections are prepared and chosen before performance, then this practice should probably not be classified as improvisation but as interpretation. From this case, one can discern that the potential for a fuzzy line between improvisation and interpretation exists. Stanley Cavell notes in his famous article “Music Discomposed” that “I do not, however, hesitate, having reminded myself of what the notion of improvisation suggests, to say that what is called for in a piece such as Stockhausen’s *Pianostücke Elf* (where nineteen fragments are to be selected from, in varying orders, depending upon certain decisions of the performer) is not improvisation. To call it improvisation is to substitute for the real satisfactions of improvisation a dream of spontaneity—to match the dream of organization it is meant to complement …”98 My reply to his rejection of this kind of action as a minimal form of improvisation is that although his reason for rejecting it is insightful, it simply does not recognize that there are, and ought to be, different degrees of improvisation. Those degrees can be determined by many kinds of properties (e.g., amount of time to select, placement or location of selection, discretion, contingencies of performance). When improvisation is more broadly construed, which is one of the points this Part I is trying to show and exemplify, lots of practices and actions will be admitted into the set. Hence, I recognize that the real-time selection incorporated into this piece (I am supposing that it *is* real-time selection, not planned) shares few features with (say) standard bebop jazz solos, but the

---

98 Stanley Cavell, “Music Discomposed,” in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 204. The piece Cavell refers to is Karlheinz Stockhausen, *Pianostücke Elf (Piano Piece XI)*, which is approximately fourteen minutes in duration, and was “composed” in 1956.
selection still involves some features in common—enough, I would argue, to warrant classifying them under the same term. One such feature is real-time discretionary decisions, which lead to actions, made by a performer during performance. Of course, the vagueness of this particular feature is obvious; however, this vagueness does not stop one from analyzing hard cases on a case by case basis, instead of trying to rely on a detached general principle. One reason not to formulate the general principles first, i.e., divorced from the artistic practices, is that this seems to reverse the process that is most desirable when doing philosophy in a field such as aesthetics (some would say in all areas of philosophy). There would be no need to do, or interest in, aesthetics at all if it were not for the first-order phenomena about which aesthetics is concerned and tries to theorize about, and that subject matter is art itself: individual works, art forms, genres, et cetera. In part, the strategy I am employing here is taking the historical and conceptual facts of music history and art history as a starting point, instead of defining improvisation beforehand and excluding and including based upon a potentially fabricated definition. Sometimes those facts imply clear boundaries for improvisation, other times less clarity. We need arche, as Aristotle would say, and I think it is reasonable to describe the phenomena, at least at first, and start from there. However, one risks begging the question. The way one avoids a vicious circle is to treat the initial descriptions of artistic practices as only a starting point for serious conceptual analysis.

In addition, part of the justification for the premise that the Stockhausen selection process in the above piece shares some features with more standard cases of improvisation is that this selection process is very much like some of the established improvisational practices from the late Medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque periods described in this section. In discussing the concept of improvisation, Cavell mentions cadenzas, ornamentation, and figured bass, but says
“In such uses, the concept [improvisation] has little explanatory power, but seems merely to name events which one knows, as matters of historical fact (that is, as facts independent of anything a critic would have to discover by an analysis or interpretation of the musical material as an aesthetic phenomenon), not to have been composed.”

But why should we want the concept of improvisation to be explanatory in any other way than classifying or giving instructions? Certainly, the concept can have explanatory power, especially when used more or less—“metaphorically” is the word that immediately comes to mind, but it does not precisely capture how Cavell is using it in his essay—as an *as-if* property. In other words, a sound sequence can sound *as if* it were improvised, which has little to do with how it was actually generated. This reading is substantiated by Cavell’s next sentences: “My use of the concept [improvisation] is far more general. I mean it to refer to certain qualities of music generally.”

But this conception does not exhaust its use; in particular, its classificatory sense is a valid use of the concept of improvisation, viz., what is and is not improvised as a descriptive property of an event’s generative conditions, which is my concern here.

Third, there is underdetermined notation, which reduces the control the composer has over the realized sound sequence in performance. Once again, how these underdetermined notations are realized may be varied: they may be prepared beforehand by performers or left to the whim of the performer in real-time performance. Underdetermined notation dates back to the origins of Western music notation itself. Various chant notations and contemporary use of proportional notations are examples. Lucas Foss’s UCLA Improvisation Chamber Ensemble of the 1950s performed using charts with only sketches of musical ideas and instructions. William Duckworth’s *Pitch City* (1969) is one example of the graphic score, wherein musicians are

---

99 Cavell, 200.
100 Ibid.
expected to interpret graphic marks of various kinds and execute sounds and other sonic properties. The performances of such pieces will be different unless a set of musicians is able (and have a desire) to reproduce a previously realized sound sequence. If one is to count such practices and musical phenomena as figured bass, cadenza, ricercar, Eingang, and faburden (among others) in the Western art music tradition as a form of improvisation, then this latter case of varied notational realization during performance should count as well. But if this underdetermined notation is prepared before performance, then there can be a presumption of no improvisation, although, again, this kind of case raises serious questions about being able to distinguish clearly between composing, improvising, rehearsing, and interpreting (see Part II). Note that there is a difference between the terms “undetermined” and “underdetermined,” although they are related. Undetermined here indicates an epistemic state of not knowing before the performance what sound sequence will be realized. Underdetermined refers to a notation that does not provide explicit, complete instructions for the performer to realize it in sound any time a player is reading the score. The logical relationship between these two concepts is that underdetermined notation results in undetermined music; however, it is not the case that undetermined music is due to underdetermined notation. If one is asked to freely improvise for two minutes during the performance of a piece, the result will be undetermined prior to performance but not because of an underdetermined notation. In this case, the notation is prescribing exactly what is desired by the composer. If the simple instruction is insufficient, then the composer could prescribe further instructions, such as improvise for two minutes in the style (say) of Keith Jarrett.

Charles Ives is considered to be the first composer to use aleatory components to his compositions. Henry Cowell, Pierre Boulez, John Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Iannis
Xenakis are among the foremost composers who used aleatory techniques. The three kinds of aleatory musical techniques can be combined, too. For example, John Cage’s *Winter Music* (1957) is a combination of one and two above. The aleatory post-war revolution is often interpreted as a way of giving up “compositional fascism,” thereby giving more freedom to the performers, giving up control of the composer (and sometimes players too), and introducing choice. Two of Cage’s pieces may be read as the culmination of these aesthetic forces. *Imaginary Landscape no. 4* (1951) is a set of instructions of when and how to turn on and off twelve radio tuners. Control is lost by both composer and performers because the sounds produced are totally dependent upon the broadcasts that happen to be received at the time of performance. The very famous, and philosophically interesting, *4’33”* (1952) also gives up control except for the eponymous duration of the piece. Since no one knows what ambient sounds will be produced during the framed time, neither the composer nor performer determines the sonic properties.

**Some Notes on Motion Pictures**

Aleatory methods have also been used in filmmaking. Most examples in film involve the screening process, which interestingly would be akin to the emphasis on performance by aleatory music composers. Coin flipping is used in Fred Camper’s film *SN* (1984) to determine which of eighteen reels are screened, and the order of the screening of the eighteen film reels. Another example is from Barry Salt in which a die is used by the projectionist to determine which of six reels are screened.
Improvisation in film raises some thorny problems in the metaphysics of improvisation. If a scene is improvised by actors and recorded on film, it seems that the film itself would be a documentation of an improvisation. The film itself would not be an improvisation. But what does it mean to say that “The film itself would not be an improvisation?” Taken literally, celluloid or video tape would have to be a proper bearer of the ascription “improvised.” There are only two ways in which this can be the case. First, the manipulation of the medium by directors, cinematographers, and editors could involve improvisation. Second, an improvisation is documented on celluloid or video tape.¹⁰¹ Both of these make sense. To accept the second option is not to assume that film is merely documentation or mechanical reproduction. Obviously, one can document with film visual images of objects and events. That claim has been used by some theorists to deny film and filmmaking as a legitimate art form.¹⁰² This debate is well beyond the scope of my project here, but suffice it to say that I, like most other aestheticians today, believe it is false. All of the major arguments denying film the status of art have been thoroughly refuted.¹⁰³ If a scene is improvised in rehearsal in order to generate a more or less fixed script (of dialogue and action), then this also seems to warrant a non-improvisation classification. What would it take for a film itself to be improvised? Perhaps improvisation in filmmaking itself has more to do with the director, cinema-photographer, and other members of the crew. For example, imagine a case in which the director and photographer make decisions

¹⁰¹ The term “improvography” has been suggested for such cases, i.e., cases of recorded improvisations. I am not sure such a term helps: a neologism does not itself constitute an ontology. See Alan R. Slotkin, “Improvography: A Contradiction in Terms,” American Speech 68, no. 4 (Winter 1993): 437-438.


¹⁰³ For a through, excellent review of these arguments and their refutations see Noël Carroll, The Philosophy of Motion Pictures, Chapter 1.
on camera placement and movement at the time of recording. Is this improvisation? Suppose one left a film camera (or video) aimed at a walkway in Washington Square Park for three hours. Suppose further that the three hour segment was chosen randomly or at the spur of the moment. The camera would record whatever actions took place in front of it. Would that be an example of improvisation in film? My inclination is to classify both cases as film improvisation. An art form or medium should not be excluded from classification as improvisation merely on the grounds of the manner in which the medium works. The assumption here is that improvisation may exist in any art form or medium. The denial of this view would be to say that certain art forms or media ought to be excluded from improvisation because improvisation is either impossible or unworkable. This would be a kind of medium specificity thesis: certain contents, forms, artistic practices, or properties are better suited in particular media. Medium specificity ideas go back to Plato and Aristotle and reached a peak in the work of Lessing and Winckelmann, and it is currently a hot topic in the philosophy of film. Since it is outside the scope of this project, I shall not take a general position on any medium specificity thesis; however, I will say that I do not believe it to be relevant to improvisation because of what I will show in Part II with respect to the relationship between composition (generally conceived, not just musical) and improvisation. A brief preview: if the distinction between composition and improvisation is a continuum, then there will be many cases where a solid distinction cannot be made. Composition and improvisation are modes of generative practices or creation. Art requires creation in a medium. Denial of this claim would be absurd. Consequently, composition cannot be used as a factor for medium specificity (of any media or art form) because

---

it is a precondition of the art form itself existing. This is a kind of transcendental argument. If composition cannot be used as a factor for medium specificity, then improvisation cannot be used as a factor since distinctions between them are vague.

Because of past practice in the history of cinema, we may want to classify documentations of improvisations as improvised filmmaking as well. Why? Because mainstream past practice of filmmaking uses scripts and story-boarding (or the like) for the most part, deviations from these norms may warrant a separate classification to distinguish at least two ways in which films are brought into existence. Decisions made well in advance of the recording process itself, which can include comprehensive prescriptions for the real-time performance of actors, is a reason to classify the traditional filmmaking process as akin to composition in music, literature, painting, and choreography. This is not to say that there are not mixtures of composition and improvisation in many traditional (Hollywood style) films. However, the improvisatory parts in these cases are probably quite minimal. Consequently, one could classify some significant parts of Michelangelo Antonioni’s films as improvisation, but not sections of the films of Mike Leigh and John Cassavetes. It is important to note that there are parts of Antonioni’s films that are like Leigh and Cassavetes, and there are parts of Leigh’s and Caasavetes’s films that are like Antonioni. What is the difference? Antonioni has said in interviews, documentaries, and writings that he improvised complete scenes during the recording process or made off the cuff decisions just before recording (without planning).105 Leigh and Cassavetes are well-known for their use of improvisational rehearsals and very sketchy scripts. The directions for a scene were very minimal, if anything at all, requiring that the actors, and often the crew, to improvise dialogue and actions. These rehearsal improvisations in turn

generated the “script” to be followed during the recording process, although further
improvisation was often done and encouraged during the recording process as well. Homay
King notes that “Cassavetes’ method of improvisation does not involve ad-libbed dialogue or
scenes invented on the fly (with some exceptions, of course, …). On the contrary, his method
involves sustained reworking and polishing of the script. … Thus improvisation for Cassavetes
does not mean jettisoning the script, but rather producing a script collectively through multiple
drafts.”106 So, in some cases Leigh and Cassavetes are farther away from improvisation than
Antonioni and vice versa. Of course, in many of Antonioni’s films, most parts were more or less
completely scripted and planned.

The relationship between paradigm cases of improvisation and the concept of
“impromptu” in Western art music is also problematic. For example, here is Nicolas
Slonimsky’s entry on “impromptu:”

Impromptu. From the Latin locution in promptu esse, “to be at hand,” “to be ready.”
The term, which suggests improvisation, was applied to interludes in theatrical plays in
the 17th century, as in Molière’s L’Impromptu de Versailles. As a form of character
pieces, the impromptu became popular in the 19th century. Schubert wrote a number of
impromptus for piano. These pieces are indeed “in promptu,” for they are built in a
symmetric form in which each main section is subdivided into three subsections, and
each subsection is subdivided into three subaltern segments, which in turn are split into
brief musical phrases in three-part form. The title Impromptu was not original with
Schubert; it was appended to the music by his publisher. Chopin’s impromptus for piano
are particularly remarkable in their perfect symmetrical design.107

So, in western classical art music “impromptu” does not describe the genetic property of being
improvised. Instead, it uses improvisation as a baseline concept: the pieces sound as if they

106 Homay King, “Free Indirect Affect in Cassavetes’ Opening Night and Faces,” Camera
107 Nicolas Slonimsky, Lectionary of Music: An Entertaining Reference and Reader’s
were improvised or could be improvised.\textsuperscript{108} It also seems to refer to the “somewhat casual origin in the composer’s mind.”\textsuperscript{109} \textit{The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians} says the term ‘impromptu’ “probably derives from the casual way in which the inspiration for such a piece came to the composer.”\textsuperscript{110} Notice the association of improvisation with being “casual.” One can infer what these reference works mean to some extent, but it still puzzles me: casual as opposed to what? Formal? Are there two kinds of inspiration: formal and casual? Perhaps it is like this: if one were \textit{really} trying to compose and edit, then it is “formal;” if it just popped into one’s head without the context of composing, then it is “casual.” This kind of theme about improvisation and related terms will come up again and again. Although I do not think it is necessarily the case, the use of “casual” can seem somewhat derogatory or negative. One can imagine someone saying: “Well, it is only an ‘impromptu,’ you know.” But we may learn something from cases in which composers use “improvisation” in the title or description of a work that was not improvised at all nor derived from improvisations. Arnold Whittal speculates that “Here the implication is not simply that the character of the music has something of the unconstrained quality of ‘real’ improvising, but that the composer’s thoughts themselves have an improvisatory character, seeking to replace the logical and rational with something more spontaneous and freely associative.”\textsuperscript{111} Once again, notice the potentially derogatory connotation here: the


improvisatory character of thoughts and actions are opposed to rationality and logicality. Is improvisation irrational and illogical, then? Using any conception of “rationality” and “logical” with respect to the arts, and bracketing the inherent difficulty of making sense of these concepts in artistic composition, clearly this is wrong. Not all improvisations lack rationality and logic. Numerous studies and analyses have shown that some of the best improvisers in jazz, for example, create even large-scale formal and expressive properties in their improvisations.¹¹²

Consider what a very famous, accomplished organist (in the French organ improvisation tradition) says about this: “According to [Jean] Guillou, although improvisation ‘can project and express the most innate impulses of the psyche, it also demands the intervention of intellect, which endeavors to organize these impulses, submitting them to method and to the mental discipline essential to any work of art ... improvisation must be as self-aware and controlled as minutely as a composition developed over a long time’.”¹¹³ That is a very strong statement coming from an expert practitioner. Other music theorists have also viewed much of improvisation as problem-solving. This model suggests that the harmonic structure (and sometimes melodic structure) of a tune presents a “problem” for the improviser to overcome. In other words, the improviser is forced to find ways of connecting harmonic units, cadences, placing relevant scales and modes to form a coherent, musical, aesthetically pleasing performance—all, of course, in real time. Another error here is that improvisation is being

¹¹² The notable examples here are Sonny Rollins, Charlie Parker, Louis Armstrong, Miles Davis, Bill Evans, John Coltrane, Lee Konitz, Jimmy Giuffre, Paul Desmond, among many others. One of the first music theorists (and also a musician, teacher, and composer) to discuss this seriously was Gunther Schuller. See Gunther Schuller, “Sonny Rollins and the Challenge of Thematic Improvisation,” *Musings: The Musical Worlds of Gunther Schuller: A Collection of His Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 86-97. This article was originally published in the *Jazz Review* (November 1958).

equated, or at least strongly correlated to, “free association.” But as I remarked above, this is but one kind of improvisation, e.g., free jazz improvisation (and even in this genre this method is not always used).

A similar case to impromptus is “fantasias.” According to the *Harvard Dictionary of Music* at least five groups of fantasias have been recognized. Two of these recall improvisation directly. The first one is: “Pieces of a markedly improvisory [sic] character; written records, as it were, of the improvisation technique of the various masters.”¹¹⁴ Secondly, we have: “Operatic potpourris of a free and somewhat improvisory treatment, as if written in remembrance of a performance.”¹¹⁵ From both of these definitions one can infer that a fantasia was a sort of *post facto* document of a previously improvised performance, whether imagined or actual, or a document of an improvisatory style of a former master. A “ricercar” was an “instrumental piece common during the 16th and 17th centuries. The earliest were improvisatory in style, often for solo instruments such as the bass viol or lute …”¹¹⁶ One of the main characteristics of these pieces is that they were virtuosic, featuring lots of embellishment and scalar, flowing passages—just as one might hear in an improvisation by virtuosic master. Consequently, one can say that many impromptus, fantasias, and ricercars are trying to exhibit the property of *as if improvised.*¹¹⁷ “Capriccio” had several uses depending on the period. In the nineteenth century, the term was used similarly to impromptu and fantasia for short piano pieces. In the seventeenth century, capriccio was one of the four pre-fugal forms (ricercar, canzona, fantasia), and was

---

¹¹⁴ Apel, 307. Examples cited are: J.S. Bach’s *Chromatic Fantasia, Fantasia in A minor for Harpsichord*; W.A. Mozart’s *Fantasia in D minor for Piano*; Beethoven’s *Fantasia opus 77*; and the many *Fantasien* by K.P. E. Bach.

¹¹⁵ Apel, 308. Example cited: Liszt’s *Réminiscences de ‘Don Juan’.*

¹¹⁶ Denis Arnold, “Ricercar,” *The Oxford Companion to Music,* 1060. There are other meanings of “ricercar” as well.

¹¹⁷ A fuller discussion of this property is in Part II: Metaphysics.
“looser” than the others. None of these pieces were improvised, although their ultimate source may have been the improvisations of the composers. Once again, the meaning suggests that the pieces sound as if improvised.

“Tachisme” comes from the French noun tache, which means blot or spot. Its original use was derogatory toward the Impressionists, but it took on a new meaning with the French critic Michel Tapie,118 who used it of non-geometric abstract painters, but it could have an application to American action painters such as Jackson Pollock.119 The idea was that this kind of painting looked spontaneously created. A related term is gestural painting. The Oxford Dictionary of Art defines it as: “Gestural Painting - A term near synonymous with Action painting, but used more broadly and not envisaging a specific school of American painting. It carries an implication not only that a picture is the record of the artist’s actions in the process of painting it, but that the recorded actions express the artist’s emotions and personality, just as in other walks of life gestures express a person’s feelings. The name ‘gestural’ is applied particularly to painting in which the visible sweep and manner of applying pigment has been deliberately emphasized. It has sometimes been used as a synonym for Art Informel or Tachisme.”120 So, the painting is a physical object that documents a process of painting. Of course, all paintings, no matter how they were made, are documents of the processes used to produce them; however, here the idea is that there is a document of a spontaneous process, and the process of painting is not to be concealed but rather celebrated. In what sense can painting or drawing or sculpture be improvised? Was there improvisation involved in this kind of painting?

119 Grove Dictionary of Art, s.v. “Tachsime.”
Probably, some improvisation was involved, but there was also a background aesthetic that prescribed producing art that looked as if it was improvised. Traces of spontaneity were intended and viewed as desirable in the post-war period of the twentieth century. Whereas in the past history of music and the plastic arts, with some exceptions noted herein, spontaneity was eschewed in most contexts, and there was a desire for concealment, the twentieth century valued the transparency of spontaneity—no concealment—and has been called the “culture of spontaneity.” The immediate precursors of this post-war aesthetic were Wassily Kandinsky and the Dadaists and Surrealists. Kandinsky began a series entitled Improvisations in 1909. However, one ought to make a distinction between spontaneity of feeling and spontaneous action. It is unclear exactly how Kandinsky painted these works. His own words do not give us a precise verdict. In his famous Über das Geistige in der Kunst, Kandinsky identifies three sources of inspiration. The two that concern us here are: “(2) A largely unconscious, spontaneous expression of inner character … This I call an ‘Improvisation.’ (3) An expression of a slowly formed inner feeling, which comes to utterance only after long maturing. This I call a ‘Composition.’” It is not clear what he means by sources of inspiration, but he distinguishes between improvisation and composition, which I classify as two generative processes or practices. Note that timing seems to be significant: “spontaneous” versus “slowly formed.” In addition, Kandinsky, like many others, associates improvisation with the unconscious. If “spontaneous expression” means painting more or less deliberately but to some degree

---

121 See Belgrad, The Culture of Spontaneity.
123 Kandinsky, 57.
unplanned, letting skilled whim on the spur of the moment take its course, and not contriving to make a painting look as if it was improvised, which would require more time, editing and revision, then Kandinsky’s *Improvisations* ought to be classified as improvised painting.

The evidence for improvisation in post-war abstract expressionist painting mainly lies in the documentation of Jackson Pollock’s working methods. Hans Namuth published in 1951 photographs of Pollock painting in his East Hampton studio in 1950. A year later Namuth and Paul Falkenburg produced a short, color film of Pollock working,\(^{124}\) which was first screened at the Museum of Modern of Art in June of 1951. Both the still and moving photography of Pollock in action contributed to idea that Pollock was improvising while painting. The Modernist definition of improvisation in the plastic arts seems to be “characterized in the belief in the simultaneous conception and manifestation of a given work which is rendered quickly, impulsively, and with concomitant freedom of expression.”\(^{125}\) Notice the emphasis on lack of planning before the creative act itself, the *making* of the art, and the adverbial attributes of speed, lack of reflective deliberation, and lastly an idea about content: this method, generative process is about immediate self-expression. A process of painting in which the painter makes at least some decisions while in the process of painting may qualify as improvised painting. However, there are always decisions made by painters while painting, even when most of the subject and theme of the painting have been planned and sketched out. But of course we cannot say that improvised painting cannot be planned at all. We have already reviewed to some degree how improvisation works in music, and one result was that improvisation does not entail no preparation or no planning. It is nearly impossible to do something intentionally without

\(^{124}\) In fact, there were two films produced: one black and white and one color. But Namuth thought the only the color film did Pollock justice.

\(^{125}\) Korrick, 289.
preparation and planning, even if it is minimal. One must have skills, and have some ideas about what one is going to do before improvisation can begin. So it must be with painting and sculpture. Problem is that it is more difficult to discern what things may be planned and prepared beforehand, or to what degree they may be accomplished beforehand, or

The practice of improvising drawings is documented as far back as Michelangelo and the Cinquecento. Improvisation appears in the famous treatise of Giovanni Battista Armenini, *De’ veri precetti della pittura* (1586). His remarks about improvisation are divided. On the one hand, improvised schizzi or bozze are prescribed as instrumental only in helping the invenzione of the artist. On the other hand, there is much praise for those, like Michelangelo, who could improvise excellent drawings. Armenini recalls being a witness to Michelangelo’s improvisatory skill. When asked to render a drawing of Hercules on the spot, Armenini says, “era un stupor grande a quelli che cio avevano veduto fare in cosi poco tempo, che altri vi averebbe giudicato dentro la fatica di un mese.” The key phrase here is “cosi poco tempi” for evidence of improvisation. Moreover, the quality of the drawing is compared to the finito of what others would judge to take a month or more. The additional time implies no improvisation. Vasari mentions Leonardo’s skill at improvising on the lyre (*lira da braccio*) and in recitation of poems, but Vasari mentions nothing about Leonardo’s improvising in visual art media.

---


127 Armenini, 93.


130 Korrick, 290-291.
Similar to what I said above with respect to literature, the speed with which one makes renderings may itself qualify a painting or drawing as improvised. This coheres with what both Vasari and Armenini describe as improvised, too. For example, as Leslie Korrick notes, in his treatise Armenini uses *all’ improvviso* as a synonym for working rapidly and contrasts it with *con tempo*, which means “over time” or “slowly.” In addition, Armenini seems to equate improvisation with *prestezza, velocemente* (swiftly), and *in breve tempo* (in a short time).

My hypothesis is that because there a fixed material object in standard cases of the plastic arts, the duration, and possibly context, of execution becomes the point of focus for distinguishing between improvisation and non-improvisation (or composition). This also seems to be the case for the literary arts.

**Some Specific Kinds of Improvisation**

Here are some terms for specific kinds of improvisation:


---

131 Korrick, 293.

132 Korick, 297.
Most dictionaries of music take ornamentation and embellishment to be semantic equivalents. Depending upon the period of music history, there were different practices, locations of, and instructions for ornamentation and embellishment. The essential attribute of embellishment, whether improvised or notated, is that it is decorative rather than structural. Ornaments are categorized into two kinds: simple (graces) and compound. Many scholars believe that ornamentation may have arisen because of the limits of orthodox notation. This view is not incompatible with another historical view: at least in the improvised cases, performers were allowed more freedom. The performer’s aesthetic inclinations and goals had an opportunity for realization in conjunction with that of the composer’s and conductor’s prescriptions. Embellishments can be notated or at least prepared beforehand, as many performers do, or they can be improvised with the constraints indicated in notation, and by custom and style. Manuals on how to embellish and play figured bass have been numerous since the fifteenth century. So, one is not told exactly what to play, but options and loose rules are presented, and in some cases even what would be inappropriate. Moreover, just because something in a composition is left up to the performer’s discretion, or gives the performer some latitude in execution, does not necessarily mean that it is improvised. What would make the difference? Suppose the ornament was in fact improvised while the player was rehearsing the piece. When she performs it later, is it improvised or not? A performer can figure out, and almost always does, her interpretation of the work, which includes making decisions on the aspects and sections that call for performer’s discretion. I do not classify these performances as improvisations. In this case, improvisation occurred during rehearsal but not during public performance.
“Division” may refer to either a compositional or improvisational practice. The latter was a primarily seventeenth century technique in which a player would divide the notes of a melody into shorter ones to create a variation effect, or counter melody. Similar practices include diminution (*diminuire*), *diferencia* (Spanish), and “breaking.” Divisions were written down for two purposes. First, they provided exercises for those players learning how to improvise in this style and within these constraints. Second, they were meant to be compositions that had the flair of spontaneity.

The Latin phrase “ad libitum” has two meanings. First, the phrase can be used to indicate any kind of improvising in any art form. Second, in Western art music scores, the phrase affords performers a certain amount of discretion and freedom. Three specific senses have been isolated: (1) discretion for changes to tempo; (2) the discretion to add or delete a part of a voice or instrument; and (3) as an indication for the performer to include a cadenza. All three of these senses do not guarantee improvisation. The discretion afforded the performer or conductor can be exercised before performance and rehearsed. A cadenza may be written out completely beforehand. However, in cases where the discretion is exercised more or less at the time of performance, there is a small degree of improvisation. An exercise of freedom from fidelity to score or what has been planned beforehand, does not itself entail improvisation; the relevant timing (and often space) of the exercise of such freedom is necessary.

*Sortisatio* is “A 16th-century term for improvised counterpoint, as opposed to *compositio*, written out counterpoint.”

133 *A piacere*, an Italian phrase, is used to indicate that the performer may use her discretion with regard to tempo and rhythm.134 Cadenzas are passages or sections

---

134 Ibid., 42.
of a composition (usually a concerto in Western classical art music) that were left by the composer unwritten, allowing the performer to improvise for varying lengths of time. Often the duration was at the discretion of the performer or conductor. During specific periods, the cadenzas were not without some rules. For example, in the eighteenth century it was customary to play the cadenza in the style of the composer, and to end by trilling on the dominant chord. In the nineteenth century more liberal standards were accepted and the cadenzas reflected the lush harmonies of the Romantic period even while playing compositions of Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven. Some composers wrote the cadenza, which shows that one cannot automatically assume that “cadenza” means improvised or that one should improvise it. Beethoven, Schumann, and Brahms sometimes wrote out cadenzas. In some cases, there might have been a distrust of performers. The odd and paradoxical history of the cadenza is that while originally its purpose was as an outlet for the performer, to indulge one’s virtuosic skills and improvisational skill, the nineteenth century brought the cadenza into a writing exercise. Often the attempt would be to write it as if it were improvised—much like a fantasia, impromptu (especially for piano), or ricercar.\textsuperscript{135} Today, most performers choose an already written cadenza or model their own on an already written one; whatever the case, most of the time they are prepared beforehand—that is prepared and practiced before the performance. Consequently, there is no improvisation. There are exceptions, such as Robert Levin who improvises the cadenzas to Mozart piano concertos. In fact, Levin says, “... an audience that knows (and anticipates) every note of the authentic cadenzas as well as the concerto proper is deprived of the critical element of uncertainty that is the very raison d’être of the cadenza.”\textsuperscript{136}

\textsuperscript{135} The property “as if improvised” will be discussed in Part II: Metaphysics.

\textsuperscript{136} Robert Levin, “A Note on Performance and Improvisation,” liner notes in Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, \textit{Piano Concertos} No. 17 K.453 and No. 20 K.466, Robert Levin fortepiano
Figured bass was originally a stenographic system from the Baroque period for accompaniment, to provide the bass lines, and to provide counterpoint. These were played most commonly by organs, harpsichord, cello, or viola da gamba. There were strict rules for this practice (in most cases), but it still left room for the performer’s discretion and improvisation. *Contrappunto alla mente* was a High Renaissance term for improvisation—literally it means mental or unwritten counterpoint. Also used was *déchant sur le livre* (English descant).137

“Discant” was a term mainly used between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries to describe an often improvised line against the plainchant. “Faburden” was a term used in the fifteenth century to describe an improvised harmony under a fixed melody.138 Although there is some scholarly controversy on what “fauxbourdon” refers to exactly, one can say with some confidence that it was a fifteenth century French practice in which a vocal composition contained a middle part that was supposed to be improvised (within strict rules) by a singer. Some scholars believe that this middle part was simply a doubling of the melody (*superius*) by a lower fourth.

“Eingang” literally means “entrance” in German. This term is used now, and has been used since the Baroque period, to indicate a “short improvisatory passage that leads into a statement of thematic material.”139 Composers of all periods of Western art music have used *Eingänge* in all genres in two ways: some were written out by the composer, others were left for the performer to improvise. The latter was usually indicated with a fermata or a note in the

---


138 There are other meanings of “faburden” as well.

score. *Eingänge* are shorter than cadenzas, and the same performing practice has developed as in cadenzas: most performers today prepare the *Eingänge* beforehand. When they are prepared and practiced by a performer beforehand, or written out by the composer, I would not classify them as improvisations.

A “chase,” which is used mainly in jazz, describes an improvisatory competition. The competition is usually two players or soloists, but may be more. The goal of a chase is for the improvising soloists to be influenced by what the previous soloist played, and each musician tries to outplay the other. In live contexts, sometimes the “winner” is indicated by audience reaction and applause. The soloists can “trade” any amount of musical units, i.e., the musicians take turns in improvising over four, eight, or sixteen bars of the tune or harmonic structure. Thus the common jazz terms: “trading fours,” “trading eights,” et cetera. Sometimes the traded unit is an entire chorus of the base-tune over which the musicians play. In some famous examples, the unit has been reduced to phrases or even half phrases, wherein the soloists may attempt to “finish” each other’s lines, licks, or musical thoughts. So, there may be a progressive decrease in the musical units over time, which often results in some musical climax.

Many world music traditions have a stronger presence of improvisation, as in the classical art music of India and Persia. There are many world music and art terms that refer to some form of improvisation. In some cases these terms are used exclusively to describe music improvisation, in other cases the term is more general. “Taqsim” is a term that refers to

---

140 There is a presentation of a “cutting” session or chase in Robert Altman’s film *Kansas City*.

141 Famous live, non-recorded chases have been recalled and discussed in jazz histories, interviews, and memoirs. However, there are many live or studio recorded chases. Some notable examples are: Dexter Gordon and Gene Ammons, Gordon and Wardell Gray, Ammons and Sonny Stitt, Sonny Rollins and others.
improvisation sections in Arab and Turkish music. Karnatak music, which is the art music of south India, is a genre in which improvisation plays a large role. In Karnatak, there are several terms for improvisation: tanan, niraval, tani avartanam, anibaddha. Tanam is pulsed rhythmic improvisation; niraval is improvised variation on a composed melodic line; tani avartanam is a solo percussion improvisation; and anibaddha is the improvised elaboration of a raga melody. In classical Persian music (radif), both before and after the Islamic influence, melodic and rhythmic aspects of the music are improvised within a frame of reference. It is interesting to note that beginning with some of the Westernization of Persian music, improvisation has been downplayed. Estilar, literally “styling,” is the term for melodic improvisation in fado music of Portugal. Esillistas are those men and women who are famous for their creative

---


improvisations. Bertsolaritza is a “Basque genre of oral improvised poetry created by folk poets for an audience.”146

Some Notes on the Dance

Improvisation occurs in both the classical and popular dance traditions of Europe, India, Africa, and parts of Asia. In the European tradition, one may trace improvisation in the dance to the frenzied, orgiastic bacchanal dances of ancient Greece and Rome. (In modernity, perhaps the duende sections of flamenco serve as the best analogues to these ancient bacchanal dances.) Much of the later classical ballet tradition involved fixed, choreographed movements. No doubt because of the lack of a standard and good notation system for choreography (even still today, but there are developments), even dance works intended to be fixed had more fluidity over individual performances and over periods of time. As Curtis Carter notes, there are essentially three areas in which improvisation occurs in the dance: “the embellishments left to the individual artists where a set choreography persists; improvisation as a process of spontaneous free movement to invent original movement intended for use in set choreography; and improvisation for its own sake that is brought to a high level of performance.”147 The first is directly analogous to ornamentation in Western classical art music. The second is what I call instrumental improvisation; in the way described by Carter, it is directly akin to the use of improvisation by Leigh and Cassavetes during rehearsals for films. In addition, it shares the


instrumentality of the use of improvisation for training actors and speech makers. The third domain is improvisation during public performance as in jazz and theatre improvisation, and also includes the various “private” improvisations in some contact improvisation and therapeutic movement and verbal techniques, such as Feldenkrais, Awareness-Through-Movement method, Moreno, DanceAbility, and psychoanalysis.

In the South Indian classical dance called Bharatanatyam, improvisation of expressive movements is essential to a section, called padam, of the traditional seven-part recital. The female dancer is expected to use a “vocabulary” of mudras (codified hand gestures) and abhinaya (mimetic expressive movements) to communicate expressive and thematic elements of the melodic, sung text. During the padam, percussionists and other musicians join the dancer for artistic, collaborative improvisation. So they are improvising simultaneously by collective interaction with respect to tala (rhythm), bhava (emotive, expressive), and raga (melody) aspects of the performance.

Spanish flamenco music and dance (cante jondo/grande) share similar properties to the South Asian classical dance. There are “codes” to be learned in flamenco—brazeo—and are used by the dancers in solos (as in jazz music). Important criteria of evaluation of flamenco include virtuosity of rhythm and movement and “authenticity,” which amounts to improvisational skill. Fully choreographed flamenco performances are not considered authentic; there is an expectation for improvisation especially in a duende section, but in other sections as

---

148 As in theatre, drama, acting pedagogy, there are a plethora of how-to books on dance improvisation.

149 This is a kind of art therapy using dance, although some are offended by that categorization. Others view it as simply art making and performing (like “outsider” art phenomena). DanceAbility puts together able-bodied and disabled dancers with no hierarchies.

well. Both the dancer(s) and the musicians improvise. At certain points of the flamenco performance *palmas sordas* (rhythms that are handclapped or played on a small percussion instrument) are improvised as well, much like *tala* are improvised by tabla players in South Asian classical music.

Contemporary dance works (postmodern), like contemporary musical works, often use some degree of improvisation or random techniques during a performance (and composition). Many of Merce Cunningham’s dance works, like his often close colleague John Cage, involved aleatory techniques, some of which were executed before performance during the compositional act, and other aleatory techniques would be executed during the performance. These are not instances of improvisation because the chance devices Cunningham and Cage used generated fixed, set choreography or scores. Although Cunningham and Cage often disparaged improvisation, there were mild improvisational elements to some of their works—real-time performer discretionary decisions. They were skeptical of improvisation because they thought that improvising performers would tend to gravitate to things the performers’ already or had already done; whereas, aleatory and chance methods precluded this problem and opened up more territory, expanded the artistic possibilities. This indictment of improvisation only makes sense against the background of Cage’s and Cunningham’s alleged artistic goals: novelty (at any cost—even the cost of meaning), originality, exploration. Many experimental dance companies and “choreographers” of the 1960s and 1970s have focused on improvisation in dance: Yvonne


Rainer (especially *Continuous Dance—Altered Daily*), Anna Halprin, Simone Forti, Dianne McIntyre, and Judson Dance Theater concerts. Many postmodern dance works incorporate improvised sections and give much leeway to the dancer(s). This kind of postmodern dance is called open choreography, or indeterminate choreography (although this label may be confused with Cunningham’s projects), or situation-response composition.\(^{153}\)

Contact improvisation is probably the best known genre of improvised dance.\(^{154}\) Contact improvisation involves the movement of two dancers with each other. The movements are not planned beforehand; there is no script, no choreography. The dancers react in movement to one another in real-time. Contact improvisation is interesting because it reveals something that I think is largely unique to improvised art making, viz., although one may watch contact improvisation being performed (if one can even call it that) and experience aesthetic pleasure and attribute aesthetic merit to it, another purpose, perhaps its main goal, is the aesthetic pleasure of the dancers themselves. I do think this pleasure is aesthetic, although it may be experienced with other kinds of pleasures as well. Therefore, the aesthetic focus of this practice, for example, is twofold: audience and agents (dancers).

Not a dance *tout court*, but a martial art, *capoeira* is similar to contact improvisation. *Capoeira* is an Afro-Brazilian phenomenon that consists of musical and dance elements. Some classify *capoeira* as a separate art form or hybrid art form; however, there is now a recognized

---


genre of music called *capoeira*. The debate over its status is in part due to the vague and incomplete accounts of its origins. Nonetheless, much of what *capoeira* participants do may be classified as improvisation. Within a circle of participants, members gravitate to the center either playing a musical instrument, or singing, or sparring with a partner. The sparring in particular is what makes *capoeira* very interesting. The sparring consists of acrobatic movements, superficial hitting and slapping, feinting movements, kicking, and other interactions that resemble Asian martial arts and boxing. I have seen this executed by two males without a circle or audience and without music. When the participants are good, it is quite beautiful and reminds me of good contact improvisation.\(^{155}\)

Improvisation is integral to many popular or folk dance genres, many genres being analogous to their musical counterparts. For example, tap dance challenges between two or more dancers are akin to “chases” in jazz.\(^{156}\) Ordinary, social dancing should not be excluded. The various genres of dance that people engage in at parties, clubs, rituals, and other social settings involves moderately to completely unplanned movements, especially since one of the goals is to react to one’s partner and the particular of the context. Anyone who has danced without a set choreography has improvised.

\(^{155}\) I thank Jennifer Balkan, a sociologist at the University of Texas at Austin, for enlightening me about *capoeira*.

Examples from Theater, Drama, Broadcast

Improv is ancient. Impromptu performances by bards and troubadours, usually involving the playing of an instrument such as the lyre, were common. Medieval theatre also had it. *Commedia dell’arte all’improvviso* of the Renaissance period is probably the most well-known. Improvisation was also a part of British, French, and American nineteenth century genres such as the extravaganza, which was similar to burlesque, Pantomime, and hippodrama, which was a theatrical genre started in the late eighteenth century involving circus-like horsemanship with melodramatic scripts. In the twentieth century, experimental theater groups: Chicago Compass Group,\textsuperscript{157} Second City, Keith Johnstone’s theatre group,\textsuperscript{158} Roberto Ciulli’s Theater an der Ruhr,\textsuperscript{159} and early Mike Leigh theatre works. As the name of the famous comedy club in New York “The Improv” indicates, stand-up comedy, either individual or group, usually contains elements of improvisation. A “bit” or joke is never performed the same way, and the differences consist in improvisation of content, style, dynamics, et cetera. The comedy sketches of Elaine May and Mike Nichols were largely improvised from a bare script, which contained general descriptions of the context and characters.

Various television and radio programs, such as television and radio sketch comedy, live shows, radio plays, teleplays, and “talk” radio shows. Often these broadcasts have some scripting, but the scripts allow for, in fact encourage, improvisation by the actors. Broadcast

television shows, such as “Whose Line Is It Anyway?,” and a new show “Thank God You’re Here,” involve a set of performers who are given props, scene descriptions, or other forms of prompts for the purpose of individually or collectively generating an improvised performance. One may even count food/cooking shows that require chefs to construct and prepare a menu based on ingredients not revealed to the chefs before the taping of the show. The chefs do not know beforehand what restrictions and requirements they will be subject to during the “contest” broadcast. Notice the comparison with ancient Greek performance contests, rap contests, and music showdowns. The ingredients, and sometimes style and cuisine, are unknown. Sometimes there are other restrictions. The Chicago chef Charlie Trotter has been influenced by jazz in his approach to cooking in both his restaurant and television shows.\footnote{See Charlie Trotter, \textit{Workin’: More Kitchen Sessions with Charlie Trotter} (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2004).}

Improvisation is common in the filming of television shows. Actors on these shows improvise to keep things fresh, elicit a particular response from fellow actors during filming, to generate material for writers, to test material from writers. It is instructive to watch “blooper,” out-takes, or gag reels and deleted scenes of high quality shows, which are now generally available on the DVD recordings of television shows by season. For example, in one scene from the \textit{The Office}, Steve Carell’s character (Michael Scott) is supposed to (I inferred this from watching many alternatives of the scene) utter an erroneous surname of an Indian colleague to co-actor Jenna Fischer (Pam). The Hindi name is difficult to say and remember, but is particularly so for the bumbling idiot character of Michael Scott. There are several versions of the scene on a “blooper” reel in which Carell utters a different sequence of nonsensical but funny sounds, which are supposed to sound like the Hindi surname. Each version of the scene contains a different sequence of uttered sounds. It is obvious from watching that Carell is improvising the
sounds each time. Perhaps it was written in the script as “ad lib erroneous surname.” Whether it is planned improvisation or not, Carell’s improvising is brilliant because each concoction of the name is funny and sometimes onomatopoetic, and it achieves the likely goal of acting like someone who is coming up with the name on the spot. In other words, Carell must improvise each time the scene is shot in order to reveal authentic improvisation of the character. This is an interesting use of improvisation. Improvised acting can be the conduit to unexpected outcomes, whether called for or not, and improvisation is a method to portray a character who is supposed to behave off the cuff or on the spur of the moment. The desirable authenticity of such behavior may not be conveyed by non-improvised movements and verbal behavior.

Acting pedagogy has a long history of recognizing the value of improvisation in order to develop acting skills. The main purpose here is to make students better general actors (for both theatre and film), although it can obviously have the effect of helping students become better improvisers. It is one of the main components of what is now called “method acting,” and is associated with the Actor’s Studio in New York. There are a plethora of improvisation manuals for the theatre and acting.

**Related Terms and Non-Artistic Improvisation**

Here are some terms related to improvisation, some referring to exclusively non-artistic improvisation:

- stream of consciousness, free association (in psychotherapy, especially psychoanalysis), bricolage, bricoleur, parody, variation, makeshift, provisional,
substitute, temporary, adhocism (coined by Charles Jencks in 1968), stopgap ("improvised to fill a need temporarily") , MacGyverize or to MacGyver, MacGyverism.

I have already addressed stream-of-consciousness and free association. The Oxford Thesaurus gives these synonyms for the verb "improvise:" ad-lib, extemporize, Colloq play (it) by ear, fake it, wing it; invent, concoct, devise, contrive, jury-rig, make do. And for Makeshift: temporary, stopgap, expedient, emergency, temporary, jury-rigged, improvised, tentative, standby, slapdash, substitute.

The Oxford Thesaurus gives these synonyms for "spontaneous:" unannounced, unpremeditated, unplanned, impromptu, extemporaneous, extempore, unprepared, unrehearsed, offhand, ad-lib, spur-of-the-moment, off the cuff. Second set: natural, unforced, unbidden, instinctive, instinctual, unconscious, reflex, automatic, mechanical, immediate, offhand, unguarded, unthinking, unwitting, involuntary, impetuous, impulsive, knee-jerk. And for "extemporaneous" the following are added: unstudied, extemporary, unscripted. And for "unpremeditated" the following are added: unarranged, uncontrived, coincidental, last-minute, casual.

---

165 Urdang, The Oxford Thesaurus, 145, 492, 563.
Parody, variation, and improvisation are sometimes related and confused with one another. Nelson Goodman and Catherine Elgin comment on this:

4. Improvisation and Parody
Among concepts closely related to variation, improvisation is presumably subject to somewhat looser formal restrictions than is variation. Otherwise, improvisation upon—that is, referring to—other music differs little from variation. A completely “free” improvisation referring to no other music is simply a spontaneous creation invention having nothing to do with variation.

A parody of work ordinarily meets the formal requirements for a variation. But while a variation is always upon a theme or work, a parody may be upon (or of) a style or a whole corpus of works; and features exemplified and those contrastively exemplified are features common to works in the corpus. Of course the point of a parody is quite different from that of the usual variation. This may remind us that I have not so far discussed the why of variations—what they do, how they are used, what artistic roles they play. But I shall postpone that subject a little longer until after we have considered variation in arts other than music.\footnote{Nelson Goodman and Catherine Elgin, \textit{Reconceptions in Philosophy and Other Arts and Sciences} (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1988), 73.}

Obviously one may improvise a parody or variation, but being a parody or variation does not entail that it was improvised. Parody involves the treatment of a trivial or ludicrous subject in an obviously deliberate imitated style of notable artists and works. Related terms are caricature, burlesque, and travesty. Travesty involves an imitation (thus derivative) that is grotesquely incongruous in style (extravagant), treatment, or subject matter.\footnote{\textit{Merriam-Webster Dictionary}, s.v. “travesty.”} Thus, a travesty may have derivative subject matter, which remains the same, but is absurd in style. Burlesques are of two types: (1) usually a literary or dramatic work that seeks to ridicule by means of grotesque exaggeration or comic imitation (e.g., mockery of a serious or lofty subject by frivolous treatment); (2) “theatrical entertainment of a broadly humorous often earthy character consisting
of short turns, comic skits, and sometimes striptease acts." Caricature involves exaggeration by means of ludicrous distortion of parts or characteristics; caricature is usually visual but may be literary or even musical. Probably, confusions between these works and improvisation arose because travesties, burlesques, parodies, and caricatures often tried to convey a sense of whimsy and spontaneity in achieving their ends.

There are practices in Western art music, world folk music, and popular music in which musicians perform a variation on a common tune or theme. Some of these are improvised and some prepared before the performance. Goodman is correct to point out that most of the time improvisation and variation have little to do with one another. Furthermore, improvisation that uses a referent, as in modern jazz, should not be considered variation. This is true even of the interpretations of jazz standards. This may be just a semantic point, i.e., one may call it whatever one wants, but given that there is a technical meaning of “variation” one should eschew extending its application. In addition, jazz musicians do not describe their “versions” or interpretations of standards as “variations.” In the arts, parody requires imitation of a style (of an individual work or entire oeuvre), genre, or other well-defined category for the purpose of ridicule or comedy. Parodies may be improvised, but obviously not all parodies are improvised. Much of sketch comedy qualifies as parodies, but these are often scripted before performance. Comment on parody and variation.

From these lists, one can see that it is quite natural to think of non-artistic improvising. Consider the terms makeshift, stopgap, jury-rig, which are mostly associated with non-artistic actions. Bruno Nettl has expressed skepticism about the relationship between artistic and non-artistic improvisation: “The art of improvisation, as the concept is ordinarily used in Western

---

168 Merriam-Webster Dictionary, s.v. “burlesque.”
169 Merriam-Webster Dictionary, s.v. “caricature.”
discourse about music, appears to be quite different from the improvisatory processes that are necessary in ordinary speech, or from improvisation as a way of dealing with emergencies."¹⁷⁰

But I think this is false. There must be some shared core of meaning in order for the same terms to be used, and more importantly for the concept to be applied, albeit sometimes stretched too thinly, to both artistic and non-artistic contexts, even if it is being used metaphorically in non-artistic cases. First, as I shall discuss in Part II, there is now neuroscientific evidence that ordinary speech production and musical improvisation share similar brain activation in neuroimaging studies.¹⁷¹ This probably shows that there is some underlying computational process, and neuroanatomy, that both speech generation and (at least) musical improvisation share. Second, there are very plausible accounts of the origins of improvisation from non-artistic matters to artistic generation.¹⁷²

Without stepping too far athwart, I want to say that the motivation for improvisation in the arts, to a certain extent, stems from the presence of (non-artistic) improvisation in everyday life (non-artistic improvisation). Many theorists have linked significant portions of intelligence (as cognitive ability) of both humans and non-human organisms to the capability for improvisation and the degree of it executed. The fact that human behavior is highly regularized and rule governed is a fact that hardly exhausts our behavior. Much more needs to be added to


¹⁷² See my paper “The Evolution of Art Behaviors and Improvisation,” given at the American Philosophical Association, Pacific Division, Annual Meeting and Conference, April, 2012 (panel with Stephen Davies and Noël Carroll).
an explanation of human behavior, and that element is going to involve reference to creativity (in the plain, broad sense) and improvisation. As Arthur Koestler has noted, humans need to improvise because of the contingencies presented to them by the environment.\(^{173}\) This, too, is probably a vestige of natural selection—improvisational skill (whatever that may be) is a trait that increases survival. Improvisation that occurs in everyday tasks, so my thesis goes, transfers quite easily to entertainment, and becomes a way to satisfy the desire to express oneself—consider the improvisational nature of much tribal art: music-making, dancing, oral poetry and the like, et cetera. Conversation itself is entertainment. The evolution and development of language involves the uttering of novel strings of meaningful discourse. Novel strings are prompted by novel stimuli, and novel strings trigger more new ones.

Moreover, the role of play in humans and other animal species has been studied extensively, and may be a significant part of the explanation of the origin of improvisation.\(^{174}\) Consequently, anthropology, primatology, and ethology can turn out to have a role in explanations of improvisatory behavior in humans. Perhaps not obvious at first, there seems to be a strong connection between play and improvisation. On the other hand, this should not be too surprising because there is a long history of connecting play with art and aesthetics.\(^{175}\) It has been said that one major source of the origin of human artistic practices is play. Much has been written about the subject, and the *locus classicus* is *Homo Ludens* by Johann Huizinga.\(^{176}\) None


\(^{175}\) See note 217 below for sources.

of this excludes other illuminating approaches that may enhance biological or evolutionary theories of improvisation. Presently, since no clear evolutionary theory of art in general (including music) stands out, improvisation may have to wait for a plausible theory. Although there is no dearth of such theories, many seem plausible; some conflict with each other; for some it is difficult to determine whether they could be empirically verified.\footnote{See Denis Sutton, \textit{The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution} (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010); Stephen Davies, \textit{The Artful Species: Aesthetics, Art, and Evolution} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).}


The use of the concept of improvisation in non-artistic contexts goes back to at least Thucydides. At \textit{Histories} 1.138.3.10, Thucydides uses the verb \textit{αὐτοχειδάζειν} which post-Homer was used, more or less, for improvisation:

\begin{quote}
\textit{αὐτοχειδάζειν}\footnote{A more extended analysis of this Greek term and concept is below. The Greek text for Thucydides is taken from \textit{Thucydides: History of the Peloponnesian War Books I and II}, ed. and trans. Charles Forster Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 236.} which post-
\end{quote}
From this passage, it is clear that the ability to improvise is viewed positively. Speaking of Themistocles’ genius, Thucydides cites his natural ability to judge in crises in which there is little or no time to deliberate, and that his ability to intuitively handle an emergency was extraordinary. Here, Themistocles is being lauded for being an excellent, non-artistic improviser.\(^ {182}\) However, a scholia remark for \(\text{αὐτοσκεδιάζειν}\) in the above passage indicates “\(\text{ἔτοιμος λέγειν}.\)”\(^ {183}\) Consequently, this suggests that Thucydides was pointing out Themistocles’ ability “to speak readily.” Nonetheless, this passage is an example of a non-artistic conception of improvisation, which is the case for Plato’s use of \(\text{αὐτοσκεδιάζειν}\) as well (see below).

Contemporary philosophical sources also discuss non-artistic improvisation. For example, Stanley Cavell recognizes not only the use of non-artistic improvisation, but its necessity in human life. In an unlikely place (if that truly can be the case for Cavell’s writings), while discussing virtue in the Platonic and Aristotelian sense, Cavell comments:

>Courage and temperance are virtues because human actions move precariously from desire and intention in to the world, and one’s course of action will meet dangers or distractions which, apart from courage and temperance, will thwart their realization. A world in which you could get what you want merely by wishing would not only contain


no beggars, but no human activity. The success of an action is threatened in other familiar ways: by the lack of preparation or foresight; by the failure of the most convenient resources, natural or social, for implementing the action (a weapon, a bridge, a shelter, an extra pair of hands); and by a lack of knowledge about the best course to take, or way to proceed. To survive the former threats will require ingenuity and resourcefulness, the capacity for improvisation; to overcome the last will demand the willingness and capacity to take and to seize chances.\(^{184}\)

Notice the connection Cavell makes between improvisation and “the willingness and capacity to take and to seize chances.” The latter is recognition of a common theme in discussions of artistic and non-artistic improvisation: risk.\(^{185}\) Improvisation seems to require taking risks of various sorts. This risk is entailed by the very nature of improvisation itself: since improvisation always goes beyond the planned, the known, et cetera, and may occur in circumstances in which one’s usual choices, decisions, or courses of action have been exhausted or do not even seem applicable, uncertainty of outcome is always present. Uncertainty is an epistemic state of an agent, whilst risk involves executing an action with uncertain results under uncertain circumstances. The uncertainty is important to human agents because the outcomes may be positive or negative for us, and those outcomes will depend on what we do, how we improvise.

The importance of the skill (or virtue?) of improvisation for a successful life in general, not only in emergency or crisis situations, is also noted in the work of Martha Nussbaum, Pierre Bourdieu, and a growing number of psychologists.\(^{186}\) What is interesting in the Cavell quotation above, is that he suggests that improvisation enters the scene from a failure of an action (“The

\(^{184}\) Stanley Cavell, “Music Discomposed,” 199.

\(^{185}\) I have addressed the issue of the relations between artistic improvisation and risk in a paper entitled “Improvisation and Aesthetic Risk.” There I argue for a new kind of risk, akin to moral risk, called aesthetic risk.

success of an action is threatened in other familiar ways: by the lack of preparation or foresight; by the failure of the most convenient resources, natural or social, for implementing the action (a weapon, a bridge, a shelter, an extra pair of hands); and by a lack of knowledge about the best course to take, or way to proceed.”). In other words, it may be the case that “the lack of preparation or foresight” requires a skill that fills in the gap, which skill is itself associated with no or little preparation and foresight. Being prepared for when one is unprepared means the development of a particular kind of skill—improvisation. This is the paradoxical nature of non-artistic improvisation. It is hoped that I have already presented some evidence refuting this view of all improvisation, i.e., improvisation often involves much planning, forethought, et cetera; however, this fact does not entail that improvisation involves exhaustive plans, forethought, and rehearsal. If one’s plans, outlines, and forethought are exhaustive, then simply there is no improvisation and there is no need for it.

Sorting through the uses of the concept of improvisation in philosophy is tricky because it is often unclear whether a philosopher is using artistic improvisation as an analogy for understanding a particular phenomenon, or she is referring to a species of non-artistic improvisation. This difference is important for making the case of whether we should recognize non-artistic improvisation at all. If these uses are all analogies to artistic improvisation, then there really is no non-artistic improvisation, but just phenomena that are like, similar to improvisation as it occurs in the arts.

In one of Gilbert Ryle’s last articles before his death entitled “Improvisation,” he seems to be suggesting that a large portion of thinking, and perhaps behavior, is improvisation. His main concern is the way in which thoughts impinge on us, that is, they just come to us, without
any conscious preparation or deliberation, nor any verifiable stages of thought. Ryle describes the phenomenon aptly:

I shall soon be reminding you of some of the familiar and unaugust sorts of improvisations which, just qua thinking beings, we all essay every day of the week, indeed in every hour of the waking day.

My interest is in the notions of imagination, invention, adventure, improvisation, initiative, etc., derives from an interest in the general notion or notions of thinking; i.e. in what it is that *Le Penseur* is now doing which is beyond an infant, reptile, or a clock. … That impromptu but well-timed joke, that swift, pertinent, and unrehearsed reply to a question, that on-the-spur-of-the-moment twist of the steering wheel—certainly we had been awake and had just used out wits; certainly we accept blame or praise, applause or jeers, for the doing or saying of it, since it has been intentional and not a slip, an automatism, or a seizure; certainly we had been thinking what we were saying or doing, and minding how we said or did it. But to the request for a chronicle of its component steps we have nothing to say, except ‘Oh, it just came to me’, as if some thinking, including some adequate or even bright thinking, is, after all, not a state-after-stage progression; or as if there could be the thinking-up of a wanted something without the execution of any successive pieces of thinking-out or thinking-over, however condensed or swift.187

Recently, Galen Strawson has written on this, providing us with a brilliant phenomenology of thinking.188 Strawson’s concern, however, is whether thinking, or much of it, should count as action. Are we agents while thinking?189 We must not fall into the trap that because we cannot give a full account of something, or make it wholly intelligible to ourselves, where that involves, as Ryle points out, a step-by-step process, a recipe if you will, then agency must be questioned. A similar concern is presented by Anthony Palmer: “Understanding the creativity of a piece of work presents the dilemma that if the account we give is successful it will have the effect of

189 Derek Melser, for example, has argued that thinking counts as action. See Derek Melser, *The Act of Thinking*, Bradford Books (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).
denying that creativity is involved.”\textsuperscript{190} I am not sure that that paradox exists. That may rely on an overly Romantic notion of creativity. What this shows, perhaps, is that we are up against the limits of our understanding, at least presently.

J. David Velleman’s recent work on practical reasoning\textsuperscript{191} seems to involve non-artistic improvisation. In Velleman’s work, there are several ways in which improvisation is invoked. First, Velleman introduces and explains improvisational theatre and acting. Clearly, this is artistic improvisation. The second level is more difficult to interpret. He extends the discussion of actors improvising theatre to human action, in particular acting for reasons. It is unclear whether he is using improvisation as a model for understanding human behavior, or that he is suggesting that humans are improvising in their ordinary (non-artistic) behavior, or both. Here is a sentence that suggests improvisation is a model and analogy: “On the one hand, the rational agent does not attend to the mechanics of self-enactment, any more than the improvisational actor attends to the mechanics of improvisation.”\textsuperscript{192} But here is another that suggests that acting for reasons is a form of non-artistic improvisation: “I believe that process of improvisational self-enactment constitutes practical reasoning, the process of choosing an action on the basis of reasons.”\textsuperscript{193} Velleman, I believe, is using artistic improvisation as a model and analogy for practical reasoning, and simultaneously claiming that humans engage in non-artistic improvisation frequently. Nussbaum has a similar view.

Martha Nussbaum has also used the concept of improvisation. In her article “The Discernment of Perception: An Aristotelian Conception of Private and Public Rationality,”

\textsuperscript{190} Anthony Palmer, “Creativity and Understanding,” \textit{Aristotelian Society}, Supplemental Volume (July 1971): 75.
\textsuperscript{191} J. David Velleman, \textit{How We Get Along} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
\textsuperscript{192} Velleman, 25.
\textsuperscript{193} Ibid., 18.
included in *Love’s Knowledge*, section VII is entitled “Improvising When to Improvise.” Before this section she remarks: “Good deliberation is like theatrical or musical improvisation, where what counts is flexibility, responsiveness, and openness to the external; to rely on an algorithm here is not only insufficient, it is a sign of immaturity and weakness.” Nussbaum uses literary examples, especially Henry James, to interpret Aristotle’s notion of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and the role of perception of particulars in *phronesis*. She takes the following well-known passage from Aristotle as her stepping stone: “Practical wisdom is not concerned with universals only; it must also recognize particulars” (1141b4 – 16). The following longish passage displays well how Nussbaum moves from using improvisation as a metaphor and analogy to suggesting that human moral behavior is and often ought to be improvised (non-artistic). She moves between artistic and non-artistic improvisation, recognizing the role artistic improvisation plays in our understanding of non-artistic improvisation:

We can begin by returning to the metaphor of theatrical improvisation, which is a favorite Jamesian as well as Aristotelian image for the activity of practical wisdom. Maggie Verver is an actress who has prepared and practiced, and now discovers that she must ‘quite heroically,’ ‘from moment to moment,’ improvise her role. Does she, in learning to improvise, adopt a way of choosing, in which there are no principles and everything is ad hoc? (Perhaps: in which everything is permitted)? The image of the actress suggests how inaccurate such an inference would be. The salient difference between acting from a script and improvising is that one has to be not less but far more keenly attentive to what is given by the other actors and by the situation. You cannot get away with doing anything by rote; you must be actively aware and responsive at every moment, ready for surprises, so as not to let the others down. An improvising actress, if she is improvising well, does not feel that she can say just anything at all. She must suit her choice to the evolving story, which has its own form and continuity. Above all, she must preserve the commitments of her character to the other characters (of herself as actress to the other actors). More, not less, attentive fidelity is required.

---


195 Nussbaum, 72-73.
Consider the analogous contrast between a symphony player and a jazz musician. For the former, commitments and continuities are external, coming from the score and the conductor. Her job is to interpret those signals. The jazz player, actively forging continuity, must choose in full awareness of and responsibility to the historical traditions of the form, and actively honor at every moment her commitments to her fellow musicians, whom she had better know as well as possible as unique individuals. She will be more responsible than the score-reader, not less, to the unfolding continuities and structures of the work. (We can also say that as the classical player ascends the scale of musical excellence, so to speak, becoming not simply a rote reader of the score but active thinking interpreter who freshly realizes the work at each performance, she resembles more and more the jazz musician in the nature of her attention.)

These two cases indicate to us, then, that the perceiver who improvises morally is doubly responsible: responsible to the history of commitment and to the ongoing structures that go to constitute her context; and especially responsible to these, in that her commitments are forged freshly on each occasion, in an active and intelligent confrontation between her own history and the requirements of the occasion.\(^\text{196}\)

Cora Diamond, in commenting on Nussbaum, has picked up on this theme. She emphasizes the relationship between improvisation and possibility: “There is a contrast between two notions of what possibility is in moral life: are the possibilities open to an agent in a particular situation fixed, with his responsibility being only to choose between them, or is what is possible dependent on creative response to the elements of the situation?”\(^\text{197}\) Does being limited to two or three choices of courses of action exclude improvisation, or the need for improvisation? I do not think so. Could not making a choice on the spur of the moment, even when that choice was fixed beforehand, constitute improvisation in acting and choosing? As I argued above in the section on aleatory music, the exercise of discretion, even when the discretion is limited and the choices have been pre-set, can be a form of improvisation. This is the case because making choices at the time of acting (these processes often seem simultaneous) is spontaneous, and lacks

\(^{196}\) Nussbaum, 93-94.

comprehensive planning and rehearsal. Again, improvisation admits of degrees. Improvisation, then, opens us to possibilities, leaving the fixity of situations and their descriptions. I think what is most important for Diamond is the leaving room for improvisation. In other words, a choice, or at least recognition, must be made beforehand that one will not limit oneself to a narrow set of choices, and that one may want and need to improvise. This choice, however, is a kind of meta-choice.

In fact, there are sources from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that tried to foster such connections between morality and virtue and improvisation. In Alexandre-Guillaume Mouslier de Moissy’s *Les Jeux de la petite Thalie, ou petits drames, dialogues sur des proverbs* (1769), shorts dramatic pieces are presented for moral instruction through their performance by young people and sometimes older adults. The use of such *proverbe dramatique* was common for the wealthy classes during the eighteenth century. As Penny Brown notes, Moissy’s innovation was including elements of improvisation. This source provides some historical ground for both Velleman and Nussbaum. Typically, young actors were chosen for roles to which they had some resemblance. They were explicitly being asked to act and improvise their own characters, to consider themselves as characters. The similarities to Velleman’s theory are apparent. Moreover, the inclusion of impromptu passages seems to both recognize and foster the presence of improvisation in life, in particular on our moral thinking. Although, there was always a “moral script,” akin to universal moral principles, virtues, the improvisation component functioned as practice for applying such moral principles, and having the ability to adjust them accordingly to the vagaries and particularities of individual situations.

Viewing the improvisations of others is instructive to us. This is part of the training to become a competent improviser in life and art. Nussbaum asks rhetorically: “It is possible to play a jazz solo from a score, making minor alterations for the particular nature of one’s instrument. The question is, who would do this, and why?”199 What Nussbaum misses here is that this is a common, and many would argue necessary, practice for improvisers in training, especially in the jazz tradition. Transcription courses, usually more than one semester, are a standard component of jazz curricula in universities. We spend a great deal of time transcribing the improvised solos of Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, and Miles Davis. Then we play them over and over again. We are presented with the possibilities of improvisation; we discern how these great improvisers solved problems (how did they make that strange and difficult harmonic transition in bars 13 through 18?); and our fingers develop that most important “muscle memory;” facility and dexterity are enhanced through habituation. The practice of scales and modes is limited here; listening repeatedly is also insufficient. One needs to reproduce others’ improvisations. Moreover, it is a way of becoming artistically intimate with the history and tradition of one’s chosen genre. There is another reason for such a practice: quotation. Jazz musicians quote famous improvised sequences from others (sometime even their own in order to be funny or self-deprecating) in jazz solo improvisations. The most famous example is that of the pianist Red Garland quoting a trumpet solo of Miles Davis played on a Charlie Parker recording when Miles was about nineteen years of age. This occurred on a Miles Davis record on a different tune. Garland block chorded the trumpet solo (and transposed it) but otherwise played the exact sound sequence. This was a novel, musically interesting part of Garland’s solo, but also functioned as an homage to Miles Davis.

199 Nussbaum, 74.
Here is my diagnosis of the ambiguity and ambivalence of the use of improvisation as model for some human behavior and claiming that behavior is improvisation *tout court*. The reason for the use of artistic improvisation as an analogy for understanding certain non-artistic human behavior is that we do not have a strong sense of what it means to say that humans improvise in their ordinary behavior. If non-artistic improvisation is as pervasive as many think, then our natural state is one of improvising. We improvise in conversation, in our general interactions with others, in movement in walking, running, and sports, and in making decisions. We are too close to it, too intimately involved in it, to have the intellectual distance to consider it and analyze it. Consequently, analogies must be made to artistic improvisation, a phenomenon to which most us have more distance from a quotidian perspective, and because artistic improvisation is recognizable to us—we have watched it, listened to it. We understand it because it has been portrayed for us in the artistic context. In addition, as Alexander Nehamas has interpreted and emphasized in Nietzsche,200 there are ways in which our lives are like works of art, and we act like artistic agents in the ordinary course of human action.

Kant and other modern philosophers used the concept of spontaneity. Kant uses a few German terms that we translate as “spontaneous” and “spontaneity.” Most of the time, Kant uses “spontan.” These primarily occur in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, and a few in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Thomas Mautner addresses how “spontaneity” was addressed in modern philosophy: “spontaneous adj. In everyday usage, a synonym of *unreflective*, but classical philosophers (e.g. Leibniz, Kant) use it in a different sense closer to the etymology of the word: a spontaneous action is one which originates with the agent; freedom, in contrast to

determination by external forces, is the spontaneity of an intelligent being.”

Kant used “spontan” for a process of the mind. His use has little to do with improvisation (either artistic or non-artistic).

The neuroscientist and philosopher William Calvin cites Jean Piaget as saying, “I like Jean Piaget’s emphasis, that intelligence is what you use when you don’t know what to do. This captures the element of novelty, the coping and groping ability needed when there is no “right answer,” when business as usual isn’t likely to suffice. Intelligent improvising. Think of jazz improvisation rather than a highly polished finished project, such as a Mozart or Bach concerto. Intelligence is about the process of improvising and polishing on the time scale of thought and action.”

Later Calvin says “Intelligence is all about improvising, creating a wide repertoire of behaviors, ‘good moves’ for various situations.” Calvin seems to be using “intelligence” in its descriptive sense, not honorific sense. Hence, according to this conception of intelligence non-artistic improvisation (and thereby artistic improvisation, too) is at the core of organisms with high cognitive abilities. Perhaps, one of the defining features of being human is the ability to improvise. When viewed in this light, it is certainly baffling how improvisation has been largely, not completely, ignored in our intellectual history. Obviously, this scholarly situation has recently changed.

---

203 Ibid., p. 44.
In addition, Philip Ringstrom, in discussing two approaches to psychoanalytic therapy (conventional theatre and improvisational theatre), says that in the improvisational theatre model for the therapist “the emphasis has little to do with ‘what one knows,’ as it is all about what one does with what one does not know.”

In fact, recently, there has been an explosion of the use of the concept of improvisation in non-artistic contexts. Searches of academic databases list hundreds of articles on improvisation in business, management theory, engineering, medicine (emergency and other), and even conflict theory. Many of these articles and books focus on a phenomenon called “situational uncertainty,” which is similar to Piaget’s conception of intelligence noted above. Obviously, these kinds of events can happen in any domain. As an example, consider one of Robin Wagner-Pacifici’s theories of standoffs (“Standoffs are situations of mutual and symmetrical threat, wherein the central parties face each other, literally and figuratively, across some key divide.”):

Rules and spontaneity that work together at a deep level pull coherence out of an evolving and unpredictable situation. In terms of locating improvisation in a sociological theory, I argue that improvisation is a sort of halfway house between the Meadian ‘I’ with its playful and idiosyncratic experience of self and the Meadian ‘Me’ with its learned taking of the role of the generalized other. This involves the temporal looping of the past through the present, as memory and creativity join forces.

This coordination of memory and creativity is most explicit in theatrical improvisation and in musical genres such as jazz and rap where knowledge of dramatic genres, traditional plots, musical variations, and so forth clearly provide the epistemological ground for the improvisation. Thus, improvisations both carry out and reconfigure our aesthetic and narrative expectations. But improvisation is found as well outside of the world of theater and music.

204 Ringstrom, 733 (emphasis in original).
206 Ibid., 220.
This quotation shows that improvisation is a useful, sustainable concept outside of artistic contexts. Theorists outside of the arts invoke non-artistic improvisation regularly and naturally. In these cases, there is an attempt to systematize the “asystematicity” of improvisation.

When perusing other examples non-artistic improvisation, often jazz is used as the model and analogy. I have found that there is a lot of misunderstanding of both jazz and improvisation in many of these cases. Occasionally, these writers have enough of a grasp of jazz to make some point. The general point of these articles and books seems to be that improvisation has a place in various domains, usually when other components and rules fail, or when confronted with “situational uncertainty,” and, probably more importantly, that tools can be taught, or training is possible, to develop some improvisational skill within the relevant domain. This adumbrates the interesting of question of whether improvisation is a skill, and if it is, whether it is domain specific, and how it can be taught, and what is the nature of the training needed for its development. So, there are tools for improvisation in emergency medicine, in business management, emergency management, and so on. Perhaps this literature is useful; nonetheless, it seems it can be summed up in the way Piaget did: knowing what to do when one does not know what to do. This paradox is meaningful because it hints at a putatively acquired (and natural) skill of making do when preparations are not drawn up, or fall short in the situation at hand.

In addition, another major way in which non-artistic improvisation is used is in social theory. For example, Pierre Bourdieu’s famous conception of social practices as “regulated improvisations” directly appeals to the concept.²⁰⁷ Edward Schieffelin notes that “Social practices, emerging in what Bourdieu has called ‘regulated improvisations’ arising from the

²⁰⁷ Michel de Certeau is another example of a social theorist using a similar concept.
socially structured dispositions of ordinary persons (the habitus), assert their own forms of intelligibility and organization in human activity.”\(^\text{208}\) In discussing how to theorize about social practices, Bourdieu rejects the typical models that are mechanical or rely too much (according to him) on the use of the rule-governed approach. And it may actually be that the best understanding of most artistic improvisation, especially in jazz, is Bourdieu’s concept of habitus,\(^\text{209}\) field, and more generally genetic sociology. Without going to far athwart, it is useful to give a brief exposition of this theory. Although Bourdieu has explicitly addressed the arts, primarily found in *The Field of Cultural Production* and *Distinction*, my interest here is in the social theory. Bourdieu aimed at avoiding two dichotomous approaches to social practices in general, and here in artistic production in particular. On the one hand, there is the Romantic, idealistic, charismatic view of the artist, free from all structure and creating structure. On the other hand, there are the deterministic models, either the historical materialism of Marxists, or those theorists who rely heavily on the external circumstances, environment, and social and artistic structures—all outside, more or less, of the agent’s control. Bourdieu’s theory combines the supposed truths of both theories. The agent is important (atomism, cognitivism) and the


\(^{209}\) Bourdieu borrows this concept (explicitly) from Medieval Scholastic philosophy. Interesting, it was also used by Jacques Maritain with respect to art, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, The A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts (New York: Noonday Press, Meridian Books, 1953), 35: “Art resides in the soul and is a certain perfection of the soul. It is what Aristotle called an ἔξις, in Latin a habitus, an inner quality or stable and deep-rooted disposition that raises the human subject and his natural powers to a higher degree of vital formation and energy—or that makes him possessed of a particular strength of his own: when a habitus, a “state of possession” or master quality, an inner demon if you prefer—has developed in us, it becomes our most treasured good, our most unbending strength, because it is an ennoblement in the very kingdom of human nature and human dignity.”
externalities are important (holism). Consequently, Bourdieu introduces the concepts of habitus and field, among others. Habitus may be defined as:

The habitus is sometimes described as a ‘feel for the game,’ a ‘practical sense’ (sens pratique) that inclines agents to act and react in specific situations in a manner that is not always calculated and that is not simply a question of conscious obedience to rules. Rather, it is a set of dispositions which generates practices and perceptions. The habitus is the result of a long process of inculcation, beginning in early childhood, which becomes a ‘second sense’ or second nature. According to Bourdieu’s definition, the dispositions represented by the habitus are ‘durable,’ in that they last throughout a lifetime. They are transposable in that they may generate practices in multiple and diverse field of activity, and they are ‘structured structures’ in that they inevitably incorporate the objective social conditions of their inculcation.210

Bourdieu is not satisfied with rational choice theory, or wholly problem-solving approaches, or mechanistic rule-governed explanations of behavior (historical materialism, behaviorism). The poverty of those approaches is among his reasons for rejecting them. This is not the place to go into the details, but suffice it to say that Bourdieu finds them explanatorily impotent with respect to many social phenomena, not sufficiently fecund to generate the behaviors we observe.

“Field” (champ) for Bourdieu is the social structure of objective social relations and concrete social situations in which agents act.211 Field is determined by the positions the agents occupy, and their relations, in a particular domain: political field, cultural field, economic field, athletic field, et cetera. Fields have their autonomous rules etc., but there is also an hierarchy of fields. Hence, some fields are subordinate to others. The economic and political fields often dominate other social spheres.

211 Ibid., 6.
The combination of habitus and field, then, creates the total structure in which humans find themselves, and is the key, for Bourdieu, to explaining and understanding human behavior. So what of these “regulated improvisations?” Bourdieu uses this term no less than four times in his *Outline of a Theory of Practice.* In Bourdieu’s work, I have discerned two related uses. First, regulated improvisation delineates that social space of action where the habitus and field fail to determine completely or exhaust the motivations and reasons for an action, while simultaneously recognizing that the behavior does not occur in a vacuum. Where these unforeseen or non-deliberated situations arise, one must improvise. Second, the dispositions of one’s habitus and constraints of the relevant fields do not dictate the full range of actions available to agents that are compatible with the socially acceptable norms. Regulated improvisations fill in this gap. Since Bourdieu does not want to be mechanistic about human action and thought, his habitus-field is not a model from which one can predict what people will do given any context or any set of contingencies. The agent always has access to improvisation while still in the framework of habitus and field, thus “regulated improvisation.” Humans improvise in everyday life because of the various contingencies with which we are confronted, because of our fluid whim, our intelligence and natural talents, and habitus.

To use habitus in the jazz context, the jazz musician as an agent of cultural production has been “inculcated” into a system of rules, constraints, a language, a shared knowledge of background information. Listening to jazz recordings, lifting lines and licks, transcribing others’ solos, practicing scales, modes, arpeggios, copying favorite players, going to jazz clubs, taking lessons, reading histories and biographies—all of these form the micro-habitus, if you will, of jazz musicians. I can say from personal experience, one who inhabited that micro-habitus for a

---

long time, that one can tell very quickly whether a new person on the scene “knows the
language,” as Jackie McLean would say. McLean embraced the ambiguity of the phrase
“know the language,” meaning both the large array of musical conventions in jazz, and the
natural language vocabulary (slang, jargon) used by the jazz community. Habitus accounts for
the internalization of the stock from which jazz musicians draw to improvise in specific contexts
(settings, tunes, genres, harmonic structures, et cetera).

The sentence from the early work of Bourdieu that invites his theory’s application to jazz
in particular is this: “Because the habitus is an endless capacity to engender products—thoughts,
perceptions, expressions, actions—whose limits are set by the historically and socially situated
conditions of its production, the conditioned and conditional freedom it secures is as remote from
a creation of unpredictable novelty as it is from a simple mechanical reproduction of the initial
conditionings.” The last part of that sentence accurately describes much of standard jazz
improvisation (as well as other genres in other art forms). The Romantic conception, as I shall
call it, of potentially infinite creativity with complete freedom, unpredictable novelty, and
originality is an erroneous model for jazz improvisation (among other genres). The Baroque
conception of very limited freedom within a narrow domain under strict rules and a small set of
possibilities, with the goal of concealing spontaneity is erroneous as well. Standard jazz
improvisation is neither completely free (and novel) nor is it mechanistic reproduction of
memorized phrases or the instantiation of some internalized rules. The jazz musician operates
under various constraints, both internally and externally imposed, both factual and prescriptive,
but within these constraints there is much room for freedom and originality. (The taxonomy I

213 Jackie McLean would say this and similar things in conservatory classes and lessons, which I attended.
shall provide in Part II will elaborate on this.) In fact, breaking barriers and pushing novelty is a premium value within jazz. Consequently, Bourdieu’s habitus-field model provides an excellent framework for understanding improvisation in the jazz genre. In fact, Jon Elster, another social theorist (and philosopher, economist, et cetera), has introduced a constraint based theory of creativity in the arts, and Elster has discussed jazz improvisation explicitly.

An even more unlikely place to find improvisation is in design, planning, and architecture. In these areas, both the artistic and non-artistic senses of improvisation have been used. In planning and design, the concern has been situational uncertainty as above, but also the open-mindedness required to face the contingencies of localism. “Adhocism,” coined by Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver in the early 1970s, draws upon the bricolage concept of Claude Levi-Strauss, which will be discussed below. Seeking to integrate more fully the notions of community, democracy, and people’s everyday lives with architecture, planning, and design, Jencks and Silver advocate adhocism. But in this sense adhocism has little to do with improvisation.

Given all the ways in which improvisation is used, or can be used, in non-artistic contexts, one can discern two other domains in which improvisation may be essential: ordinary

---

215 See my paper *op. cit.* “Originality is Aesthetically Valuable.”


conversation in natural languages and play. There is a large literature on both of these, and
improvisation is often explicitly cited as both an analogy for what goes on in conversation and
play, and straightforwardly in ascribing much (or even all) conversation and play as
improvisation. Some even think one can learn something about artistic improvisation by
studying conversation and play. In fact, one might say that theatre and comic improvisation just
are improvisation in the ordinary sense of conversation and play and persiflage. Pedagogically,
this putative fact is often stressed.

Not all instances of the use of the concept of improvisation in non-artistic contexts are
metaphorical; some of these uses are genuine, legitimate cases of improvisation. The evidence
for saying this is simply that it follows from the general definitions one finds for “improvise” and

219 For example, see R. Keith Sawyer, Creating Conversations: Improvisation in Everyday
Discourse (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2001); and Pretend Play as Improvisation:
Conversation in the Preschool Classroom (Mahway, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1997). See the
following on play: Hilda Hein, “Play as an Aesthetic Concept,” The Journal of Aesthetics and
Art Criticism 27, no. 1 (Autumn 1968): 67-71; Diane Ackerman, Deep Play (New York:
Vintage, 1999); David Borgo, “The Play of Meaning and the Meaning of Play in Jazz,” Journal
of Consciousness Studies: Controversies in Science and the Humanities, Volume 11 (Art and the
Brain Part III), no. 3-4 (March-April 2004): 174-190; Jerome S. Bruner, Alison Jolly, and Kathy
Sylvia, eds., Play: Its Role in Development and Evolution (New York: Basic Books, 1976);
Margaret J. Kartomi, “Musical Improvisation by Children at Play,” The World of Music 33, no. 3
(1991): 53-65; Stephen. Nachmanovitch, Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art (Los Angeles,
Insight,” The Journal of the Philosophy of Sport 30, no. 2 (November 2003): 159-165; Bruce
Wilshire, Role Playing and Identity: The Limits of Theatre as Metaphor, Studies in
Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982);
M. J. Ellis, Why People Play (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1973); Catherine Garvey,
Press, 1977, 1990); Lenore Terr, Beyond Love and Work: Why Adults Need to Play (New York:
Scribner, 1999); D.W. Winnicott, Playing and Reality (London: Tavistock, 1971; reprint edition,
New York: Routledge, 1989). In addition, there were and are scholarly journals dedicated to the
phenomenon of play. The locus classicus of the study of play is: Johan Huizinga, Homo
classicus of the play theory of art is Friedrich Schiller, Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man

220 There is a huge literature on the pedagogy and use of improvisation in acting, theatre, and
comedy.
“improvisation,” and these cases connect up cozily to the etymology of the terms and concept (as we shall see below, especially the ancient Greek etymology and concept). While recognizing that “Metaphors are notoriously tricky tools of instruction,” John Kao uses the concepts of improvisation, jazz, and jam sessions to foster and manage creativity in business firms. However, being creative is one thing, improvising is another. This conflation occurs frequently, which is akin to the conflation of improvisation with inspiration, too. What compounds the problem is that the term “creative” can be honorific or merely descriptive. Using the honorific sense, one can improvise without being creative. Obviously, not all creating is improvising (but I shall investigate this issue in Part II). So, although I do not object to Kao using jazz as a metaphor to manage creativity in business contexts, I would warn against extending the metaphor too far, especially since there is a predilection among many of these theorists to misunderstand the nature of improvisation and jazz. For example, in one case improvisation is product marketing is explicated as “strategy of emergent learning.” This sounds like Piaget’s idea again, but it is difficult to equate improvisation with any kind of learning. A certain amount of learning and training may be necessary for improvisation, and improvising itself may give rise to new experiences, but beyond that things become hopelessly vague.

One can also discern why various movements of psychotherapy and personal growth have been impressed by spontaneity of action and decision, supposedly getting people to come to terms with some sort of instinctual, basic psychic phenomena. In fact, Malcolm Gladwell’s book *Blink* is a recent best seller which discusses (and sometime advocates) using intuition and

---


spontaneous “gut” reactions.\(^{223}\) Moreover, there is a very long history of valuing some form of spontaneity in eastern philosophy, especially Daoism and Zen Buddhism.\(^{224}\) In Daoism, the very important concept of *wu-wei* often has been interpreted by scholars to be a form of spontaneous action or yielding.\(^{225}\) In many of these traditions, spontaneity supposedly taps into, or is one of the best methods to mine, the sub-conscious mind. Obviously, these views are supposing that the efforts and products of the sub-conscious mind are valuable.

In addition to free association and other techniques in psychoanalysis, Dr. J.L Moreno developed a system of psychotherapeutic treatment involving spontaneity and a kind of improvisational theatre, which also functions as a kind of training and a method of sociological research.\(^{226}\) The three components to his system are sociometry, sociodrama, and psychodrama. The two relevant for my concerns are sociodrama and psychodrama. Sociodrama is a kind of group psychotherapy with the goal of not only the mental health of individuals, but a means to a more integrated and healthy society, too. Psychodrama was a kind of individual (solo) improvisational theatre of role playing with therapeutic aims. Where does spontaneity fit in?

Moreno believed spontaneity was important for two main reasons. First, spontaneous action, talking, and thinking in the context of one these “dramas” is apt to loosen the person’s limited set of behaviors and inflexible cognition, which putatively give rise to mental and behavioral

\(^{223}\) Gladwell, *Blink*. But an unfortunately ignored pre-cursor to Gladwell is Guy Claxton, who was on to this before Gladwell popularized the research and movement. See Guy Claxton, *Hare Brain Tortoise Mind: How Intelligence Increases When You Think Less* (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1997).

\(^{224}\) See Belgrad, Claxton, and Joel J. Kupperman, *Learning from Asian Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 84-89.

\(^{225}\) There are several different interpretations of what *wu-wei* means in the classic Daoist texts of Laozi and Zhuangzi. For a good (and clear) survey, see David Loy, *Nonduality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1988), 96-132.

dysfunction. Spontaneity here allows a self-enlightenment of new possibilities and variations, which increase flexibility in thinking and acting. Second, the technique of psychodrama allowed the patient to “try on” new (social) roles in order to not be confined by one’s own past roles, both those that have outlived their usefulness and those that were constraining to the patient unjustifiably. Importantly, Moreno was also one of the few who thought action, cognition, and rest could be spontaneous. Limiting spontaneity to just exaggerated actions and the like is a caricature of human spontaneity. As Galen Strawson points out, human thinking is spontaneous, and rest itself, not just its time and location, can be spontaneous. In addition, the benefits of spontaneity were supposed to be realized both in the psychotherapeutic context and in real life. The spontaneity fostered and coaxed from patients in the psychodrama was supposed to be a model for ordinary behavior outside of the psychotherapeutic context. Hence, by making people act out roles off the cuff, they experience catharsis (Moreno meant it in the Aristotelian sense), and thus liberation from emotional disequilibria and the constraints of dysfunctional thinking and behavior.

Bricolage, a term originally used by Claude Levi-Strauss in his theory of myth, is used in artistic and non-artistic contexts. In literary theory and cultural criticism, bricolage is used to describe “an improvisatory activity performed by a kind of intellectual jack-of-all-trades with whatever happens to be available … contemporary theorists … view the practice of theorizing as itself a form of bricolage performed with concepts and ideas retrieved from the grand theories of the past.” In general, a *bricoleur* is a person who can make do with whatever is available.

---

227 Strawson, “Mental Ballistics.”


Hence, the terms stopgap, jury-rig, makeshift, and provisional are all especially associated with a bricoleur’s practice. Implied here is a kind of skill, or perhaps virtue, which disposes a person to be able to think on the spot, have sound and useful intuitions, create under material or resource deprivation and time pressure, and make the best of it. In short, this is a person who can improvise well. From the television show *MacGyver*, which was broadcast from 1985 to 1991 (and has a cult following), the eponymous main character is such a *bricoleur*. As a result of this show, two terms have entered the language. “To MacGyver” (verb) is to improvise quickly needed things from a lacking hodgepodge; a “MacGyverism” (noun) is a spontaneous invention or the use of ordinary household items to jury-rig devices. This is consistent with engineering improvisation, which requires this kind of insight and skill in the face of emergencies, obsolescence, embargo, lack of funding, and loss of product support. In education theory, Seymour Papert, who was a collaborator of Jean Piaget, distinguished between two types of problem-solving: analytical and bricolage. The latter is a way to learn and solve problems by trying, testing, playing around, experimenting, et cetera. Notice the connection to Piaget’s definition of intelligence. In these cases, far from having a negative connotation, the concept of improvising is seen as a skill, virtue, necessity even, and a major component of person’s mental and physical resources.

In artistic contexts, bricolage refers not to improvising but styles of fashion, art, and music. The bricolage here may involve some improvisation, but that is not its defining characteristic. Essentially, bricolage is a hodgepodge of materials and styles, genres put together.

---

230 It has also given rise to lots of parody, especially a set of sketches (“Mac Gruber”) on *Saturday Night Live* inspired by the show. (Recently, it became feature length film.) The parodies take advantage of the hyperbolic (and ridiculous) ability to make anything from anything.

231 See the work of Seymour Papert and Idit Harel Caperton on the theory of “Constructionism.”
to create something eclectic and novel, thereby giving rise to a new style or genre. For example, in music bricolage may consist in putting together different instrumentation, conventions, and styles, which may include even non-musical aspects, such as a certain style of fashion. Some of these styles have been described a “guerilla semiotic warfare.”232

And now philosophically speaking: has improvisation been used in doing philosophy? I do not mean philosophical analysis and theorizing about improvisation as I am doing here, nor do I mean the use of improvising as an example (e.g., for action theory or aesthetics); I mean improvising philosophical content itself, and the use of the concept of improvisation to understand philosophy (or philosophical texts). The Socratic elenchus may be interpreted as improvising philosophy because in impromptu conversations, which Plato and others seem to suggest were the nature of Socrates’ interactions, one cannot plan beforehand all of the questions and argumentative moves. If the conversation is in fact impromptu, then one does not know what the topic will be. Obviously, Plato’s dialogues are representations of this kind of conversation; however, I am not suggesting that the dialogues themselves are improvisations.

Stanley Cavell in his famous opening paragraphs to his magnum opus, The Claim of Reason, hints at such a use. In the fourth opening paragraph, which is completely parenthetical, Cavell self-reflexively refers to an earlier article (which I will use extensively in Part II) he wrote entitled “Music Discomposed.”233 The term “improvisation” is used and recalled here:

(If one asks: When must a work, or task, be written, or permanently marked?, one may start thinking what makes a work, or task, memorable. And of course the answer to this alone should not distinguish philosophy from, say, music or poetry or early astronomy or ruler and compass proofs in geometry (or, I wish I knew, what level of logic?). Poetry


233 Stanley Cavell, “Music Discomposed,” in Must We Mean What We Say? (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 180-212. This article is now considered a classic.
(some poetry) need not be written; novels must be. It seems to me a thought I once expressed concerning the development of music relates to this. I said (“Music Discomposed,” pp. 200, 201) that at some point in Beethoven’s work you can no longer relate what you hear to a process of improvisation. Here I should like to add the thought that at that point music, such music, must be written. If one may speculate that at such a stage a musical work of art requires parts that are unpredictable from one another (though after the fact, upon analysis, you may say how one is derivable from the other), then one may speculate further that Beethoven’s sketches were necessary both because not all ideas are ready for use upon their appearance (because not ready ever but in the right company), and as it were, grow outside the womb. What must be sketched must be written. If what is in a sketch book is jotted just for saving, just to await its company, with which it is then juxtaposed as it stands, you may say the juxtaposition, or composition, is that of the lyric. If it is sketched knowing that it must be, and gets in time, transformed in order to take its place, you may say that its juxtaposition, or composition, is essentially stratified and partitioned; that of the drama; the drama of the metaphysical, or of the sonata. Here are different tasks for criticism, or tasks for different criticisms.)

Stephen Mulhall has commented in detail on this parenthetical paragraph. He sees the significance of this paragraph as establishing two theses: the nature of modernism and a prescription for how to read, interpret, for example, his work and Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations. When we focus on the form of some works of philosophy, the most significant property of their form is the fact that they were written. In making his analogy, Cavell mentions that novels must be written, not all poetry needs to be written, and that at a certain point in Western art music history it becomes necessary that it is written, which for Cavell means that the music cannot be construed as being improvised (or derived from improvisations), or better, cannot be attributed the property as-if improvised. Now this is an interesting thesis per se; however, here I limit myself to discussing the point Cavell is trying to make about philosophy itself, or the form philosophy takes (e.g., philosophical texts). There is an ambiguity here. The

---


supposed requirement of writing may be due to the especially complex content of the ideas and arguments, or the availability of writing (and recording, later) itself changes the way philosophers (and artists) conceive of their task, thereby causing the content of philosophy (and art) to change. Both interpretations seem plausible, and I do not choose between them. What is the significance of a philosophical text being *written*? Mulhall interprets Cavell as saying that given certain conditions of our modernist culture, the content of the written text would be forgotten, thereby not available for commentary. So, there are ideas that circulate naturally, without necessarily needing inscribed transmission (today in evolutionary theory, we might call them “memes”\(^\text{236}\)). On the other hand, there are ideas that would be impermanent, fleeting if not written down. Their transmission occurs only when the text survives. So one of the main conditions of modernism for Cavell is the necessity of being written, whether novels, music, or philosophy. Mulhall says “Its parts or elements can no longer be re-enactments or memorials of insights originally discovered by improvisation.” So, are there pre-modern philosophical texts that do not seem improvisatory, even in a metaphorical sense? Are all modern philosophical texts *writerly*? Is the relevant distinction here that between oral and written? As I have pointed out already, it is a mistake to equate “oral” with being improvised. I am wary of the opposition, presumably assumed by both Cavell and Mulhall, of what is written and (or *versus*) what is improvised. However, in another sense Cavell’s thesis seemingly has nothing to do with the development of writing and its technology. Historical point: Modernism in philosophy does not seem to demand any more memorialization than ancient philosophy. But does the content of the philosophy itself require writing for its articulation, or is the matter that it could have been improvised but cannot be memorized. Cavell and Mulhall seem to be suggesting the former.

\(^{236}\) “Meme” was first used by Richard Dawkins.
Hence, for Cavell philosophy has moved away from its memorable origins (could be improvised) to a state in which its memorability is questionable and thus must be written. Improvisation is a model for both a historical claim, and a ways of doing philosophy. But Cavell does not seem to be talking about actually improvising philosophy, that is, improvise while doing philosophy; although he does not exclude this option.

The earliest uses of the concept of improvisation in Western philosophy are in Plato and Aristotle. Plato uses the verb αὐτοσχεδιάζω in *Apology* 20d 1, *Euthyphro* 5a 7, 16a 2, *Menexenus* 235c 7-9 and 235d 2, *Euthydemus* 278e 1-2, *Phaedrus* 236d 5, and *Cratylus* 413d 3-5.

λέγει οὖν ἡμῖν τί ἐστιν, ἵνα μὴ ἡμεῖς περὶ σοῦ αὐτοσχεδιάζωμεν *Apology* 20c 8 - 20d 1; part of direct discourse sentence)

καὶ νῦν ἐπειδὴ με ἐκείνος αὐτοσχεδιάζοντά φησὶ καὶ καινοτομοῦντα περὶ τῶν θείων ἐξαμαρτάνειν (Euthyphro 5a 7-8)

ΣΩ. Οἶα ποιεῖς, ὦ ἐταίρε. ἀπί ἐλπίδος με καταβαλὼν μελάνης ἀπέρχη ἦν ἔχον, ὡς παρὰ σοῦ μαθὼν τὰ τε ὀσία καὶ μὴ καὶ τῆς πρὸς Μέλητον γραφῆς ἀπαλλάξομαι. ἐνδειξάμενός, ἐκείνῳ ὅτι σοφὸς ἦδη γαρ Ἐυθύφρονος τὰ θεία γέγονα καὶ ὅτι οὐκέτι ὑπ᾽ ἀγνοιάς αὐτοσχεδιάζω οὐδὲ καινοτομῶ περὶ αὐτά, καὶ δὴ καὶ τὸς ἄλλον Βίον
οτι ἀμείνον Βιωσόμην. (Euthyphro 15e 7 - 16a 2)\textsuperscript{237}

ΜΕΝ. Ἀεὶ σὺ προσπαίξεις, ὦ Σῶκρατης, τοὺς ῥήτορας. ὑμν μεντοι
οίμαι ἐγὼ τὸν αἱρεθέντα οὐ πάνω εὐπορήσειν ἐξ ὑπογύου γὰρ
παντάπασιν ἢ αἵρεσις γέγονεν, ὡστε ἰσως ἀναγκασθήσεται ὁ λέγων
ὡσπερ ἀυτοσχεδίαζειν. (Menexenus 235c 6-9)\textsuperscript{238}

ΣΩ. Πόθεν, ὤγαθε; εἰσίν ἐκαστὶς τούτων λόγοι παρεσκευασμένοι, καὶ ἀμα
οὐδὲ ἀυτοσχεδίαζειν τὰ γε τοιαῦτα χαλεπόν. (Menexenus 235d 1-2)

ἐὰν οὖν δόξω ύμιν ἰδιωτικῶς τε καὶ γελοῖως αὐτὸ ποιεῖν, μή μου
καταγελᾶτε ὑπὸ προθυμίας γὰρ τοῦ ἀκούσαι τῆς ὑμετέρας σοφίας
τολμήσω ἀπαντοσχεδίασαι ἐναντίον ύμῶν. (Euthydemus 278d 6 - 278e 2)

ΣΩ. Ἀλλ᾽, ᾧ μακάριε Φαίδρε, γελοῖς ἔσομαι παρ᾽ ἁγαθὸν ποιητὴν ἱδώτης
αὐτοσχεδίαζων περὶ τῶν αὐτῶν. (5)

ΦΑΙ. Οἰσθ᾽ ὡς ἔχει; παύσαι πρὸς μὲ καλλωπιζόμενος ἱχθὸν γὰρ ἐχὼ ὁ
εἰπὼν ἀναγκάσω σε λέγειν. (Phaedrus 236d 5-7)

ΕΠΜ. Φαίνη μοι, ᾧ Σῶκρατης, ταῦτα μὲν ἀκηκοέναι τοῦ καὶ


John Burnet comments on the word at *Euthyphro* 5a 7 and *Apology* 20d 1:

\[\text{αὐτοσῳζεῖν, 'judging rashly', from αὐτόσῳζον, 'on the spot', a strengthened form of σῳζον found in this sense in Apollonius Rhodius alone, but implied by ἔξ οῖοι αὐτοσῳζον πειρώμενος in the Homeric Hymn to Hermes 55. It is used in the neutral sense of 'to improvise', but it often means to speak, think, or act in an 'off hand' or 'temerarious' manner. Cf. *Ap.* 20d 1.}\]

\[\text{ἳνα μὴ ... αὐτοσῳζον, 'that we may not form a rash judgment'. Cf. *Euth.* 5a 7 n. and 16a 2.}\]

Burnet assumes Plato intended a negative sense here (which probably derives from the verb’s Homeric/Ionic roots), even though he recognizes the neutral sense of “to improvise.” Temerity means foolish boldness or rashness. Context seems to make the difference in whether this term in interpreted in its neutral sense or has the negative connotation of being rash, rude, or acting or speaking with temerity. I think we find both senses in Plato.

Burnet cites the Homeric Hymn to Hermes line 55. This Homeric Hymn was probably composed in the late sixth century BCE, much time before Plato’s writings. Here it seems definite that αὐτοσῳζον means improvisation in a neutral sense. Here is the text:

---


240 Ibid., 168. Burnet has no comment for *Euthyphro* 16a 2.

The word occurs in the context of the description of how Hermes invented the seven-string lyre. Michael Crudden translates this as “exerting himself [Hermes] impromptu.” Another translation by Jules Cashford has “The god then, improvising, trying his skill, sang out sweet snatches of song ...”243 In a note about this line Nicholas Richardson comments that the improvisation may refer “to the practice of improvisation of comic or abusive songs, sung alternately as a form of contest at feasts or symposia.”244 But does the ἦμετε refer to the improvising of Hermes, or the singing of bits of songs? Of course the passage means that Hermes was improvising the singing, but I think the clause is ambiguous as to what is like the taunting of boys at festivals—that they improvised these taunts or sang “sweet snatches of song.” Nonetheless, the context here certainly warrants a neutral sense of improvisation.

The Euthyphro passages are trickier than they seem. At 5a 7, Socrates is referring to Meletus’ charges against him. Lane Cooper translates this passage as “put forward my own notions and inventions.”245 Grube translates thus: “improvising and innovating about the

244 Nicholas Richardson, notes to The Homeric Hymns (New York: Penguin, 2003), 161.
At 3b 6 Euthyphro tells Socrates of his understanding of the charges. He uses the verb καὶ υποτομέω, which is used metaphorically to mean innovating, being original, et cetera. Before this, at 3b 1-2 Socrates says that he is viewed as a ποιητὴν ἔιναι θεῶν, καὶ ὡς καὶνοῦς ποιοῦντα θεῶς. The fact that Plato uses ποιητὴν here is probably ironic because of the three accusers against Socrates, Meletus brings the indictment on behalf of the poets. Thus, Socrates waxes poetically about the gods! The evidence for this kind of irony is that Plato is often “playing” with figures and language in this way. Probably, it would have struck the ancient audience as very humorous much in the same way that Shakespeare’s figures were to Elizabethan audiences. For example, there is already paronomasia (play on words, puns) at 2d 2 with the use of the verb επιμεληθήναι, in which part of it rhymes with Meletus. Plato does this with the same verb (but a different form) and Meletus’ name again at Apology 26b 1-2 (Μελήτω ... ἐμέλησε). So Euthyphro’s phrase is a reference to Socrates’ characterization of the charges against him: a maker of gods, a maker of strange gods and not believing in the old gods. The commentator John Hare thinks that the use of αὐτοχειδιάζοντα at 5a 7 refers back to Euthyphro’s words at 3b 2-6. Hence, he suggests “innovations” as a translation for it. But I think this is confused. Euthyphro uses καὶ υποτομέω with respect to the indictment against Socrates. Socrates, as just noted above, uses ποιητὴν. Socrates is probably referring to what he

247 Originally καὶ υποτομέω was used in mining: to carve out a new vein in the mine.
248 See Apology 18d 2-3, 23e.
has said before, not what Euthyphro said. Moreover, the use of ἀυτοσχεδιάζω at 16a 2 is again by Socrates. Therefore, if Socrates’ use of ποιεῖν is playful and ironic, and later at 5a 7 he is referring to the same set of charges in the indictment, then ἀυτοσχεδιάζωντο is best thought of as improvising about the gods and religious matters, just as the poets and singing bards improvise. This may be the closest use of ἀυτοσχεδιάζω to artistic production in Plato.

In the Apology, Socrates uses the term in indirect discourse, in which he anticipates what the judges are thinking or would say. Tredennick translates this neutrally: “Tell us the explanation, if you do not want us to invent it for ourselves.” Grube, though, follows Burnet: “Tell us what it is, that we may not speak inadvisedly about you.” I do not think a negative connotation is warranted here. The gist here is that Socrates is suggesting that he should account for his time and occupation at this time (while he is speaking) so that the judges are not left with an omission in which they could think up anything according to their inclinations, including, but not necessarily, negative things.

The Menexenus passages seem to use ἀυτοσχεδιάζω neutrally as well, but something is revealed about extempore speech-making. There is a discussion at the beginning of the dialogue between Menexenus and Socrates about a forthcoming public funeral for the war-dead. In this context ἀυτοσχεδιάζω is used of orators. The implication here is that the professional orators are trained to be able to improvise speeches (and to be able to debate). At 234c 3 Socrates says that dead veterans are honored by having eulogies given by “experts” (ἀνδρῶν σοφῶν), who have tediously prepared these eulogies beforehand. I think the clear implication here is that it is more honorable to have prepared eulogies, with elaborate verbal embellishments, than to have an

---

251 Hugh Tredennick translation in Hamilton and Cairns, 6.
252 Grube translation. in Cooper and Hutchinson, 20.
orator give an extempore eulogy. In fact Paul Ryan translates this passage as “Even if he dies a pauper, a man gets a really magnificent funeral, and even if he was of little account, he gets a eulogy too from the lips of experts, who speak not extempore but in speeches worked up long beforehand.” The term συνοχειδιάζω is not present at 234c3, but the context strongly suggests a comparison between well-prepared eulogies and eulogies that are not thus. This opposition is best interpreted as being between well-prepared speeches and off the cuff speaking. Thus, here improvisation is not necessarily of negative value but inferior to composition. After this at 235c9 and 235d2, συνοχειδιάζω seems to be used in a neutral sense. Menexenus says that since the selection of the orator for the eulogies will be made at the last minute, he will be put in a position in which improvisation is required and this is not an easy thing to do. Socrates replies that professional orators have ready-made speeches for all occasions, but even in the event that improvisation is required, orators can do this without difficulty. Hence, there is recognition here that orators did have improvisational skill, and their training provided them with tools to be able to speak extempore.

The passage from the Phaedrus is similar to the Menexenus: the context is about orators and speaking. Phaedrus is attempting to get Socrates to speak on the topic of love. This is prompted by Socrates’ criticism of Lysisas’ speech on the subject. Once again, Socrates has negative things to say about orators and oratory. Socrates seems to be trying to avoid talking about the subject in this way. Socrates says, probably with typical Socratic irony, that “I’ll be ridiculous—a mere dilettante, improvising on the same topics as a seasoned professional.” So, συνοχειδιάζω is once again being used about making speeches. There is an implication here

253 Paul Ryan translation in Cooper and Hutchinson, 951.
that is slightly different from the *Menexenus* passage: the “professionals” are prepared, and compared to them, one cannot compete in debating and speaking about a topic off the cuff. Here the comparison that is implied in Socrates’ statement is either between the superior skills of the orators in improvising versus the ordinary person’s improvising, or between the ordinary person’s improvising versus the orator’s prepared speech. Neither interpretation necessarily reveals a negative evaluation of improvisation in speck-making.

In the *Cratylus*, Hermogenes uses οὐτοσχεδιάζω to indicate that he thinks Socrates is not improvising what he is saying, rather Socrates must have heard these ideas before from someone. At 411b 3-4, Socrates says that these ideas about etymology “popped into his head.” Hermogenes disputes this claim later (413d 4). The implication is that the content of what Socrates is saying is too worked out for him to have made it up just at that moment. Since, again, this involves speech, I do not think there is a clear sense of value being attached to improvisation. There may be a questionable attitude toward improvisation in the background, in terms of what can be accomplished, but this is quite natural when it comes to speaking.

I include the *Euthydemus* passage even though the term used is ἀπαυτοσχεδιάζω. Burnet’s Oxford text has it as ἀπαυτοσχεδιάζω at 278d 7, but two other manuscripts (or sets of manuscripts) indicate two other possibilities (readings), as Burnet indicates in his Apparatus Criticus. Codex Bodleianus, MS. E.D. Clarke 39 (= Bekkeri U) [B] reads ἀπ’ αὐτὸ σχεδιάζω; and Codex Venetus Append. Class. 4, cod. 1 (= Bekkeri t) [T] reads αὐτοσχεδιάζω. Burnet seems correct to dismiss B because it makes little sense in the sentence (accepting Codex Vindobonensis 54 supplement phil. Gr. 7 (= Stallbaumii Vind. I) [W]).
prefer the T reading against Burnet because text searches and Liddel and Scott show only this one instance of ἀπαυτοσχεδιάσαι. Of course, it is possible that a term may appear only once in the extant Greek manuscripts and texts we possess, and that there may have been more instances in lost manuscripts. But the reading I suggest here is at least plausible given what we know now. Edwin Hamilton Gifford, whose revised text was published after Burnet’s Oxford editions, notes the uniqueness of ἀπαυτοσχεδιάσαι, but seems to accept it. (Gifford reports in his Preface that he introduced only two original emendations, neither of which occurs at 278d, otherwise he mostly accepts Burnet’s textual readings.) However, in his introduction on the text, Gifford claims that in general he has preferred the readings of manuscript B: “In choosing between various readings I have preferred those of Cod. B as being by far the oldest and best authority, except where they are evidently corrupt or fail to give any adequate meaning to the passage.” In his note to 278d 7, Gifford says: “ἀπαυτοσχεδιάσαι V, ἀπ’ αὐτὸ σχεδιάσαι B, αὐτοσχεδιάσαι T. The verb αὐτοσχεδιάζω is found both in earlier dialogues, Euthyphro 5A, 16A, Apol. 20, and in later Crat. 413D, Phaedr. 236D, as well as in Thucydides, Xenophon, and Aristotle. The compound with ἀπό may be compared with ἀπαμῳδίζομενος Apol. 37A,

255 I used Greek electronic text databases for the search: Thesaurae Linguae Graecae and Perseus.

256 Another verb used in Plato is close to what we have here: ἀπαυθάδιζωμαι. This meant “to speak or act boldly,” according to An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon Founded upon the Seventh Edition of Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon, eds. H. G. Liddell and R. Scott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Clarendon Press, 1889), 90.


258 Ibid., 48.
The comparisons Gifford makes at
the end of his note reinforces, I think, a preference for the T manuscript reading.

W. R. M. Lamb’s translation of this Euthydemus phrase is “treating it in a crude and
ridiculous manner.” Rouse translates this more neutrally as “to make a rough sketch,”
Sprague uses “improvise,” and Waterfield uses the neutral term “impromptu.” In this
context σὺντοσχεδιάζω is more or less neutral, but there is a hint of potential shame because of
the warning not to laugh or ridicule and that the presentation might be unprofessional or
ridiculous because Euthydemus is going to improvise. But this may be due to the fact that
Euthydemus is not trained in such speech making, as sophists are, instead of the warning being
elicited from any intrinsic limitation of improvising itself.

Let me now summarize what we have learned about improvisation in Plato. In the
Menexenus, Euthydemus, and the Phaedrus, the concept of improvisation is used of the orators
and sophists, and about rhetoric. The concept is used differently in the Apology, Euthyphro, and
Cratylus. In these passages, σὺντοσχεδιάζω is used in the sense of making things up, with some
implication of not being prepared, well-thought out, and perhaps even recklessness. If, however,
my reading of Euthyphro 5a 7 is correct, then Plato uses σὺντοσχεδιάζω for the making up of
ideas, albeit not in an “on the spot” way, but in a negative sense. Nonetheless, all of the Plato

259 Ibid., 20.
“Euthydemus,” Loeb Classical Library Series Volume 165 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University
Press, 1924).
261 W. H. D. Rouse’s translation of Euthydemus in Huntington and Cairns, 392.
262 Rosamond Kent Sprague’s translation of Euthydemus in Cooper and Hutchinson, 715.
263 Robin Waterfield, trans. of Euthydemus in Plato: Early Socratic Dialogues, ed. Trevor J.
passages share this: improvisation is used with respect to speaking, talking. In Plato, there are no straightforward uses of the concept of improvisation with respect to artistic production.

αὐτοσχέδον and its cognates appear in Homer: nine uses in the *Iliad* (7.273, 12.192, 13.496, 13.526, 15.510, 15.386, 16.319, 17.294), and one in the *Odyssey* (11.536). An Homeric Dictionary\textsuperscript{264} contains these entries:

\begin{quote}
αὐτοσχέδα = αὐτοσχεδόν

αὐτοσχεδίη (σχεδόν): close combat; adv., αὐτοσχεδίην, ‘at close quarters.’

αὐτοσχεδόν: hand to hand, μάχεσθαι, etc.
\end{quote}

It is interesting to see how the word evolved from close combat to acting or speaking off-hand, or improvising. Liddell and Scott\textsuperscript{265} give the following entries:

\begin{quote}
αὐτοσχεδιάζω, f. ἄσσο, to act or speak off-hand, Xen. 2. c. acc. to devise off-hand, extemporize, Thuc., Xen.  II. in bad sense, to act, speak, or think unadvisedly, try rash experiments, Plat.; and

αὐτοσχεδισσμα, στός, τὸ an impromptu, Arist.; and

αὐτοσχεδιστής, ό, ὅ, one who acts or speaks off-hand: a raw hand, bungler, Lat. *tiro*, Xen. From

αὐτοσχέδιος, α, ον, and ος, ον, hand to hand, αὐτοσχεδίη (sc. μάχη) in close fight, in the fray, II.: αὐτοσχεδίην as Adv., = αὐτοσχεδόν, Hom. II. off-hand, of an improvisatore, h. Hom.
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{265} Liddell and Scott, 135, 786.
σχεδιάζω, f. ἄσω, (σχέδιος) to do a thing off-hand, Plat.
σχεδίν, Ep. Adv. ... , of Place, near, close at hand, Lat. cominus, II. II. of Time, straightway, at once, Babr.
σχέδιος, α, ου, (σχέδον): I. of Place, hand to hand, in or for close combat, Aesch. II. of Time, on the spur of the moment, off-hand, Anth.

A Greek etymological dictionary has the following entry for αὐτοσχεδιάζω:

... εξ —ης ‘unüberlegt, aus dem Stegreif’ (h. Merc.); Adj. —ιος ‘unvorbereitet, improvisiert’ (Arist., hell. u. sp.). - Davon die Verba: 1. σχεδίαζω, auch m. απο— u.a., ‘improvisieren, aus dem Stegreif tun, machen, unbesonnen handeln’ (hell. u. sp.) mit —ασμα, —ασμος, —αστικος (hell. u. sp.; zur Bed. Koller Glotta 40, 183ff.). 2. αὐτοσχεδιάζω ‘ds.’ (att.) mit —αστης (X.), —ασμα, —ασμος, —αστος, —αστικος (Pl. Kom., Arist. u.a.).266

In later writing in ancient Greek, Philo (third to second century BCE) uses the verb ἀπαυτοματίζω for “producing or occurring spontaneously” (1.36, 2.182,1.571).267 The same verb is used by Plutarch (first century BCE and CE) for “doing something oneself” (2.717b). In addition, there is a dubious reading of the adverb ἀπαυτίκα, “on the spot,” in the second to third century CE historian Dio Cassius (40.15).

In Aristotle, there are two key uses in the *Poetics* at 1448b 23 and 1449a 9-10. (Aristotle also uses the term in *Politics* 1326b 19.) Both occur in a section on the origins and anthropology of poetry (and art in general). Here are the passages:

κατὰ φύσιν δὲ ὄντος ἤμιν τοῦ μιμεῖθαι καὶ τῆς ἀρμονίας καὶ τοῦ ρυθμοῦ (τὰ γὰρ μέτρα ὑπὶ μόρια τῶν ρυθμῶν ἐστὶ φανερὸν) ἐξ ἀρχῆς οἱ πεφυκότες πρὸς αὐτὰ μάλιστα κατὰ μικρὸν προάγωντες ἐγέννησαν τὴν ποίησιν ἐκ τῶν αὐτοσχεδιασμάτων. (1448b 20-23)

γενομένη δ’ οὖν ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς αὐτοσχεδιαστικῆς — καὶ αὐτὴ καὶ ἡ κωμῳδία, καὶ ἡ μὲν ἀπὸ τῶν ἐξαρχόντων τὸν διθύραμβον … (1449a 9-10)

Aristotle here gives us a speculative, or armchair, anthropology on the origins of different kinds of poetry. I say armchair anthropology because it is doubtful that Aristotle had access to any empirical evidence for this claim; in fact, it is not even clear what would count as evidence for such a claim: thus the controversy over the Parry-Lord theory of Homer. Gerald Else claims: “… but it does not mean that this point of origin for poetry was not suggested to

---

268 Stephen Blum makes a minor error in identifying the passages as 1448b7 and 1449a14 in his article in *In the Course of Performance, op.cit.*


270 The Parry-Lord theory was discussed in the section on literature above. Parry and Lord used twentieth century Balkan oral epic and its traditions to infer claims about other epic traditions including Homer.
Aristotle by research but by reason, by its probability.” So the story goes like this. Aristotle thinks that humans have a natural inclination to and for imitation, and at least some humans have a natural talent for melody and rhythm (and other prosodic elements). When combined, poetic improvisations result—oral renderings, sketches. From the text, it is also clear that Aristotle thought this occurred before Homer, before the Homeric poems were circulating. Now since a clear connotation of autosxedia was not established before Aristotle, as seen above by the Plato passages, Aristotle’s moderate disdain for the primitive beginning of poetry cannot reside wholly in the use of autosxedia. In other words, I do not think Aristotle viewed improvisation itself as bad or rough; rather, these passages reveal Aristotle’s limited conception of what improvisation was and could be. In addition, Aristotle was writing in the third century BCE, wherein textuality and writing became dominant. This would be true of anyone of this historical period, and this shortsightedness might not have been able to be overcome at this point in history. The improvisations available to Aristotle might not have been very good. Although I say that, I am slightly skeptical because the improvising bards and troubadours of the ancient world had exceptional skill as noted by other authors of the period, and this skill seems to have been valued. In addition, there is the strong tradition of the orators and sophists, who valued improvisation, improvised speeches, and trained for improvising. Nonetheless, by Aristotle’s time, this type of performance had waned a bit. However, there had to be a period of confusion (as some of Plato’s passages above illustrate with respect to rhetoric and oratory) over the nature of poetic performances. Even when texts become dominant, their use was either not practical or frowned upon, causing performers to memorize passages. Thus, the distinction between the earlier form of oral composition—that is, composing in real-time during performance—and the

recitation of already composed passages becomes blurry. This confusion was enhanced by the fact that oral composers often composed orally in private first, then more or less memorized these compositions and performed them for audiences at some later time. Because of the well-established textual tradition by the time of Aristotle, a prejudice probably developed because the texts seemed superior to the improvisations, not because the texts were in fact better than improvisations, rather because τέχνη becomes valued more. Should τέχνη and improvisation be divorced? They should not be divorced but Aristotle could not see it that way. Aristotle defines τέχνη at Nicomachean Ethics VI, 1140a as an art, or skill, or applied science. Improvisation was often associated with τύχη (chance) and/or φύσις (natural talent). This point was appreciated by Quintilian about three centuries later, and I think it helps us understand Aristotle’s attitude. In his Institutio Oratoria, Quintilian distinguishes between two kinds of improvisation in oratory: artful and artless. Artful improvisation was a product of much training, education, and practice in his program for oratory. Artless improvisation relied on ingenium, the natural ability that some people possess, and he repeatedly describes it as “mere ranting or fumbling through.” These two categories are labeled with value-laden terms. “Artless” is obviously pejorative. Quintilian even forbade extemporaneous speeches by younger

---


men in training.\textsuperscript{274} Improvised speeches should only be attempted after much learning and training, and significantly Quintilian thinks that artful improvisation was the goal of his program and probably of oratory and rhetoric itself. Obviously, for Aristotle, if the improvisations arise from chance, then there is no agency and thus cannot be lauded.\textsuperscript{275} If the improvisations are the result of a natural talent, then the requirements of knowledge generated by generalizing from previous experiences, and being in accordance with \textit{logos} are not present. The reason for the seemingly dismissive attitude toward improvisations lies in the fact that Aristotle is a developmental evolutionist with respect to artistic and intellectual matters (obviously not in biology).

D.W. Lucas comments on the first appearance of \textit{αὐτοσκεδιάζω} at 1448b 23:

\textit{αὐτοσκεδιασμάτων}, ‘improvisations,’ came first; men gradually developed them \((\textit{προάγοντες})\) until they reached a stage when they became fit to be described as belonging to an art. Though there is no reference to it, this is not incompatible with the view attributed to Democritus that \textit{μουσική} is the product of superfluity … The slowness of development might well be due to lack of leisure in a struggling community.\textsuperscript{276}

Lucas correctly places an emphasis on the gradual and developmental implications of Aristotle’s passage. Ingram Bywater comments on 1448b 23 as follows:

\textsuperscript{274} Ibid., 52-72. Holcomb notes: “[Quintilian’s] discussion of extemporaneous speech has all but been ignored by historians of rhetoric” (p. 54).

\textsuperscript{275} One wonders if the same logic applies to aesthetically meritless improvisations: one should not denigrate them because there is no agency involved in their creation?

On the verb αὐτοσχεδιάζειν = ‘to speak off-hand, without premeditation or previous study’ see Ernesti, Lex. techn. gr. s.v. The fact is described in the Homeric Hymn to Hermes 54 θεός δ’ ύπ’ καλὸν ἀείδεν ἐξ αὐτοσχεδιής πειρόμενος, ἥτε κοῦροι ἧβηταὶ θαλίσα παραβόλα κερτομέουσιν, ἀμφὶ Δία Κρονίδην καὶ Μαιάδα καλλιπέδιον. A similar view of the origin of poetry is implied in Quintilian 9.4, 114 poema nemo dubitaverit imperio quodam initio fusum et aurium mensura et similiter decurrentium spatiorum observatione esse generatum, mox in eo reportos pedes.—Maximus Tyr. 37.4 Ἀθηναίοις δὲ ἢ μὲν παλαιὰ μοῦσα χοποὶ παίδων ἦσαν καὶ ἀνδρῶν, γῆς ἑργάται κατὰ δήμους ἱστάμενοι … ἄματα ὀδοντες αὐτοσχέδια (comp. on 4, 1449a 9, and Bentley, Wks. I p. 250 Dyce). The phallic-song, in which Aristotle finds the germ of Comedy, was sometimes described as an ὀθδὴ αὐτοσχέδιος (see on 4, 1449a 12).277

The Quintilian passage cited—initio fusum et aurium mensura—does not necessarily agree with Aristotle’s αὐτοσχεδιασμάτων. These phrases would simply agree with Aristotle’s account of the human motivation to make poetry (imitation, natural inclinations for rhythm et cetera).

Bywater also mentions the Homeric Hymn to Hermes passage, as Burnet noted with respect to a Plato passage above. Here is Bywater’s comment on 1449a 10:

γενομένης δ’ ὄνω ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς αὐτοσχεδιαστικῆς = γενομένη δ’ ὄνω ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς αὐτοσχεδιαστικῆ. Having begun with γενομένης … αὐτοσχεδιαστικῆς, scil. τῆς τραγῳδίας, Aristotle sees that the same is true of Comedy, and adds a parenthesis to show that; after which he says in α13 ηὐξῆθη, just as though γενομένη … αὐτοσχεδιαστικῆ had begun the clause. For another instance of a gen, abs. in lieu of a nominative see 17, 1455b 3 (comp. Bon. Ind. 149b 26 and Kühner, Gr. Gr.3 2.2 p. 110). A parenthetical addition of very similar form is found in 5, 1449b 12, and also (with

Christ’s punctuation) in Metaph. Θ 10, 1051b 11. ἀπ᾽ ἀρχής is used adverbially (comp. Pol. 7.16, 1334b 29, and Plat. Criti. 112e) in the same sense as εξ ἀρχής. Several of the recent editors and translators, however, accepting the reading γενομένη of certain apographs, take ἀρχή and αὐτοσχεδιαστική together as meaning an ‘improvisational beginning’. This certainly simplifies matters, but it may be doubted whether ἀρχή αὐτοσχεδιαστική would naturally bear that meaning.”

Bywater expresses some skepticism about the reading of ἀρχή αὐτοσχεδιαστική; however, he does not supply an alternative, which would be interesting to compare. No one since Bywater has raised a flag about whether ἀρχή αὐτοσχεδιαστική is the correct reading of the text, nor provided any other potential meanings of the phrase. I have none to offer here, but I am curious.

The history of translation of these words is interesting, and perhaps revealing of the various attitudes toward improvisation through Western aesthetic theory and criticism. Whether these different translations reflect the Zeitgeist or new scholarship is difficult to discern. The early Italian translators and commentators used a variety of phrases from the straightforward improvisation to extemporize, the latter probably coming from various Latin translations of the Poetics and early Latin scholia and commentaries. The 1789 translation of Twining gives “rude and extemporaneous attempts” and “originated in a rude and unpremeditated manner.” Buckley’s nineteenth-century translation gives “extemporaneous efforts” for both occurrences. Cooper (1913, rev. 1947) translates the first occurrence as “naive

---

278 Bywater, 133-134.
279 More precisely, I should say in my research I have not come across any flags since Bywater.
280 Thomas Twining, Treatise on Poetry, Translated with Notes on the Translation and on the Original and Two Dissertations on Poetical and Musical Imitation (London: Payne and Son,
improvisation” and the second as just the neutral “improvisation.” Butcher (1895) contains “rude improvisations” and “mere improvisation.” Whence does Butcher get “rude” and Cooper “naive”? Either they are attaching the Homeric sense or Platonic sense to the translation as it occurs in Aristotle, or expressing the prejudice of the times. But to say that it is only a prejudice of the times would be wrong. For in these passages one may discern Aristotle’s slight disparagement of improvisation whilst still recognizing the process as the origin of the valuable things to be discussed in the *Poetics*. Here is Stephen Halliwell and Kenneth Telford commenting on the passages:

It should not, however, be thought that Ar.’s argument in this passage excludes emotion and spontaneity from the origins of poetry. Indeed, a kind of spontaneity, in the form of improvisation and experiment, seems to be presupposed as a motive force at various experimental stages in the evolution of poetry. But the scope for purely natural improvisation in Ar.’s scheme diminishes as poetic activity is gradually channeled into generic types, which are regarded as embodying the regular (and so repeatable) principles of ‘art,’ without which Ar.’s whole notion of a poetic treatise would be unthinkable. Whereas a Romantic might regard the freshness of primitive spontaneity as a kind of mythical ideal of artistic expression, for Ar. it is a necessary step, but also a first step, in the cultural process which culminates in the much more sophisticated achievements of regular artistry.

Furthermore, the cause of tragedy’s specific properties is found, not in the innate tendencies of men, nor in their acquired dispositions, but in the appropriateness of those properties to a function or form which rises only improvisationally [sic] and more by fortune than by art.

---

282 Butcher, *op. cit.*
Even Halliwell seems to agree that improvisation gives rise to epic and tragedy, but spontaneous creation itself is a stepping stone to better things, “more sophisticated achievements.” Another way to interpret what Aristotle says in these passages is that improvisations of poetry and song in the initial stages of the development of these art forms was valuable at that time; however, when writing and oral tradition became solidified improvisations became less valuable.

Most contemporary translations use the neutral “improvisation(s).” Out of twelve translations surveyed,285 eleven use the term “improvisation.” Grube uses “random utterances.”286 This seems wrong at least conceptually because, as I shall demonstrate and hinted at above already, to improvise or act off-hand does not entail randomness, especially if we use a precise, computing theory definition of random. Randomness implies a lack of intentionality, and improvisation is intentional action. On the other hand, if one is assuming the inspiration theory put forward in Plato (especially in the Ion) and a few other ancient sources, the


Can one provide necessary and sufficient conditions for improvising? Is there a family resemblance relation among the reviewed practices and concepts? I will address these questions in Part II. For now, here are some important features of improvising derived from some prototypical practices and from some of the definitions. The notion of producing something, creating, composing, and making is important. The idea that the producing does not involve planning, or not planning completely, not working from a recipe, specific design, having little if any forethought; to some extent unrehearsed; to some extent unpremeditated, and not completely thought out; all of these seem to be significant to a conception of improvisation. In addition, the properties of being spontaneous, off-hand, off the cuff, in the moment, may be added. Given these features we can already rule out some of the above listed practices. So, let us sort some of this out. Random processes may be excluded, but some aleatory works and methods may be deemed to be \( a \) method of achieving the above features.

To some extent, I have shown what to include and exclude and what is in between or the “it depends” phenomena. In music, there are many specific kinds of improvisation, and some genres are at least partly defined by the presence of kinds of improvisation. Some aleatory music contains improvisation, some does not. It is possible for film to document improvisation and be improvised. Literature may be improvised, but certain techniques of composition are not themselves improvising but may be used in the process of improvising: cut-up, nonsense, stream of consciousness, constraint based composition (e.g., Oulipo). Some oral poetry, oratory, and performance arts are improvised. Dance has many genres that involve improvisation, including
aleatory pieces. Improvisation is central to many genres of theatre, drama, broadcast, including in pedagogical contexts.

Improvisation seems to pick out both a process, activity, kind of conduct, and a product. In Part II: Metaphysics I attempt to make sense of improvising as an activity, and the results of that activity—improvisations as products.

Explanations, Accounts, Methods

The psychologist Philip Johnson-Laird has said that “The problem of free will and the problem of creativity are, in some respects, one and the same. They can both be solved together.” With some minor reservations, I agree. In addition, the core, and most fundamental, questions about improvisation integrally involve the problem of creativity. And the problem of creativity is at bottom about aspects of free will, or at least what we now take to be free will. Consequently, an explanation of the origin of improvisation, both artistic and non-artistic, and its fundamental nature involves the explanation of the origin of language, intentional behavior and motor activity, the solving (or dissolution) of the problem of free will, and the path out of the morass of the presumed mystery of creativity. No small task, to put it mildly. Questions like these have prompted very smart people to classify some of these questions as mysteries beyond the cognitive capacity and ability of humans. The answers to these questions and their concomitant theories are cognitively closed to humans. I will not have

to worry about solving these problems here, nor taking a comprehensive view about cognitive
closure, because my aims are much more modest. I have no doubt, however, that answers to
these fundamental and general questions, if possible for humans, will have consequences for a
philosophical theory of improvisation (or any other philosophical theory for that matter). That
intuition probably derives from my “scientistic” inclinations—a term much abused of late. By
“scientism” I mean an approach to the hard and interesting questions about the world, viz., a
presumption for the scientific method and scientific explanations, an assumption of a robust
version of physicalism, and a background belief that explanations of social and psychological
phenomena will be helped by, if not reduced to, the natural sciences. But I believe that we do
not have to wait for those answers in order to do some theorizing about improvisation. First, we
may be closer to some of those answers than many believe. Obviously, these are controversial,
and opinions vary greatly on their epistemic status and scientific merit. Nonetheless, there has
been a lot of progress—research has been conducted and some hypotheses have been confirmed
or disconfirmed or burden shifting has been warranted. Those putative hypotheses are readily
available and can be used now. Second, an aesthetic theory of improvisation does not have to
solve these colossal questions in some of its elements, and similarly, answers to those colossal
questions may be irrelevant for other aspects of such a theory. This may rattle the more
empirically-minded philosopher, but I count myself among them even though I also accept some
autonomy for philosophy. There is no a priori reason why one cannot believe both
simultaneously—autonomy and a large chunk of scientism (in my sense). A strong example of
what I mean is the following. I cannot see how any advances in any of the sciences (including
psychology), nor new piece of knowledge from them, could help us with the metaphysical
question of what a musical (or work of art more generally) work is, or whether they even exist.
Perhaps I am being naïve in the same way that the neuroscientists and empirical social scientists claim the moral philosophers are with respect to ethics. The scientists say there will be a time when philosophical ethics will dissolve. For example, there cannot be a virtue theory if character and dispositions do not exist. Cooperation is merely reciprocal altruism, the result of evolution by natural selection. The hold-outs (or dead-enders) counter claim that there will always be a need for conceptual analysis, and although not restricted to philosophers, conceptual analysis is in particular the domain of philosophy. I do not believe that all epistemology is psychology (naturalistic), nor all argument rhetoric, nor all reasoning computational, nor all social phenomena reducible to micro-physics (even though much of it may be reducible). All of these fields will eventually explain a lot, but I think there will be room for, and perhaps necessarily so, conceptual analysis at minimum. This entails that there are some problems, issues, or questions that are intrinsically philosophical, thus at least some of the autonomy of philosophy is preserved.

289 For example, see E. O. Wilson, Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998).


Part II: Metaphysics

The second part of this dissertation addresses metaphysical issues in, and problems and questions of improvisation in the arts. I argue that that continuum and genus-species models are the most cogent ways to understand the action-types of improvising and composing and their relations, and I provide a constraint based taxonomy for classifying improvisations. Next, I address the epistemological and ontological issues of the genetic properties of improvisations, and the properties “improvisatory,” and “as if improvised.” Finally, in 2.3, I show that arguments against treating improvisations as works are wrongheaded, and I provide a correct ontological theory of work-hood for improvisations. Following are the sections contained in Part II.

2.1 Action Theory

2.1.1 Thought Experiments and Data

2.1.2 Cognitive Neuroscience and Cognitive Models

2.1.3 Taxonomy

2.1.4 Philosophical Models

2.2 Properties

2.3 Works of Art

2.3.1 A General Critique of “Musical Work” and a Defense

2.3.2 General Challenges to Improvisations as Works
2.3.3 Burden-Shifting: Levinson’s Theory and Improvisations

2.3.4 The Proper Theory for Improvisations as WOAs

A few brief notes about terminology are necessary. There are (at least) two kinds of events: actions and happenings. Actions are the doings of agency, whereas, happenings lack agency. Consequently, by definition, I take “actions” to be events that are distinct from happenings. My concern here is not with vague cases, even though I recognize that there are cases that are vague and those kinds of cases may question the distinction between actions and happenings.1 In fact, there are elements of improvisation that may be classified as vague. I use “action-type” to indicate events of agency that fall under the same category as determined by certain mental states, such as intentions, desires, and other relevant cognitive processes that are necessary for the execution and discrimination of the action, and the bodily movements involved in executing the action (if any). For example, my improvising on the guitar last night at 7:00 pm is an action and event-token; whereas, improvising itself is an action-type. The individuation of action-types can be problematic; however, I am interested in only composing, improvising, and performing.

I use the term “work of art” (WOA) or just “work” to indicate the thing or object, abstract or otherwise, that is produced through artistic action-types, through art making and doing.

---

1 There are many cases and examples used in the philosophy of law and ethics. For example, when investigating the differences in legal and/or moral culpability (fully intentional, premeditated, reckless, negligent, et cetera), certain cases raise problems for such levels of culpability while simultaneously illustrating the need for such distinctions. Here are some cases (which involve counterfactual reasoning as well): the epileptic with his finger on a gun trigger; injury from the lawn of knives which includes a “No Trespassing” sign; damage, morbidity, and morality of Hurricane Katrina and the influence of human induced climate change; damage, morbidity, and morality earthquakes and building codes.
Consequently, there can be musical works, dance works, literary works, et cetera. “Art form” refers to a particular set of artistic actions-types and their products, presumably works of art. In addition, art forms are typically individuated by the primary sensory modalities for which those WOAs were intended. So, music is putatively a sonic art form, while dance, literature, motion pictures, photography, plastic arts (painting and sculpture), and theatre and drama are all in part visual art forms *inter alia.*

Sounds are physical events (in space-time, with specific temporal and location coordinates) in which air is caused to vibrate by some apparatus, including natural and artificial/synthetic sources. A “sound occurrence” is an event in which sounds happen or are produced through agency. A “sound sequence” is a physical instantiation or realization of a “sound structure.” A “sound structure” is an abstract object; it is a set of ordered *n*-tuples that represent properties of sounds. Although there is some debate among philosophers about which properties a sound-structure may represent and possess, in general pitch, duration, rhythm, and meter are accepted. I will argue later that a sound-structure may include timbre and dynamics as well.

Although I concentrate on music in what follows, and mostly use musical examples, the theories provided herein are meant to cover all art forms in which improvisation occurs. When it is useful or important, I do use examples from other art forms. I try not to “cherry-pick” the art form examples to make the theories see better than they are; instead, I move sometimes from one

---

2 Of course, many philosophers and theorists have questioned some of these boundaries and the usefulness of referring to “art forms” any longer. For example, many literary critics (and Peter Kivy to an extent in *The Performance of Reading: An Essay in the Philosophy of Literature*, New Directions in Aesthetics Series (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009)) have made arguments that literature is a performance art form, and Dom Lopes has recently tried to make the case that music is not only essentially sonic but visual as well, see Dom McIver Lopes and Vincent Bergeron, “Hearing and Seeing Musical Expression,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 78 (2009): 1-16.

3 See Casey O’Callaghan, *Sounds* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) on the ontology of sound, which has been a neglected domain in metaphysics.
art form to another because a different practice may be problematic or interesting for what I am proposing and I want to account for it appropriately.

### 2.1 Action Theory

that a human being thinks on the one hand and wills on the other, and that he has thought in one pocket and volition in the other … [Thought and will] are not two separate faculties; on the contrary, the will is a particular way of thinking—thinking as translating itself into existence, thinking as the drive to give itself existence.\(^4\) — G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Section 4, 35.

Movements (object motion) are a sub-set of events. Actions are a sub-set of movements and events. Not all actions are movements (e.g., if thinking counts as an action, then this is true because thinking does not essentially involve bodily movement, assuming we exclude the electro-chemical activity which occurs in the brain while thinking). Conduct is a set of human action-types (and actions). Improvised conduct is a sub-set of conducts, and so is composition. For my purposes here, there are three relevant action-types: composing, improvising, and performing. There are, furthermore, two types of improvised conduct: the mundane (or non-artistic; it does not take place in an artistic context nor wholly for artistic or aesthetic purposes, though it might contribute to aesthetic experience and have aesthetic features), and artistic. Moreover, artistic improvised conduct may occur in two general categories of art forms: the performing arts (e.g., music, dance, theatre/drama, some broadcast (especially live radio and television), and performance or multi-media art) and non-performing arts (e.g., literature, painting, sculpture, architecture, photography, and perhaps most film and video).

This section addresses the distinctions between composing or creating or generating artworks (non-improvised), improvising, and performing non-improvised artworks. For example, in music, a composer creates some type of instructions for producing a sound sequence (usually called a score), while an improviser creates and produces a sound sequence while performing, and a performer uses the previously determined score that was already notated to instantiate or realize a sound structure by producing a sound sequence. In literature, a writer composes over a period of time, which includes revision, editing, alteration, deletion, amendment, and the text is then released or published for audience appreciation; while an improviser would compose more or less spontaneously without, or with very little, revision, editing, et cetera; and a performer might read aloud a poem or story from a text that was previously composed or improvised (if the improvisation was recorded or notated). In the above examples, I have purposely chosen a performing art form (music), and a (putatively) non-performing art form (literature), although some theorists challenge this distinction. So, the question for this section is: What are the differences between composing and improvising, if

---

any? Following are some of the suggested differences between composing and improvising: the availability of revising and editing, making/creating while performing, temporal dimensions of planning (how long and when), the content of planning, temporal dimensions of artistic decisions, and intentions about prescription and performance means. I shall consider these and others, and attempt to construct an adequate action theory of artistic composition and improvisation.

First, it is illuminating to understand whether and why the distinction between composing and improvising is important. Whenever concepts pick out ways in which artistic products are generated, our interests are varied. There are pedagogical, evaluative, metaphysical, and practical concerns. The practical and pedagogical interests concern how to continue artistic practices, how to teach, develop, and foster them for the future. This assumes that we want them to continue. This desire may or may not be motivated by evaluative concerns. The desire may result from low level interests in aesthetic play and variety and novelty. The evaluative concerns derive from the ancient period, when with the rise of writing and notation systems generative practices changed, and concomitantly their products. In the case of music, it makes a significant difference whether a useful notation system was at hand or not. Furthermore, the limits of human memory play a role especially before writing and notational technology. There are, of course, other reasons accounting for certain changes to artistic practices, such as purely aesthetic interests, but we cannot deny that technology, broadly understood, has had (and will have) a significant influence on artistic practices. Knowing whether an agent composed or improvised, or did something involving both, tells us things about the agent, the product (a composition or improvisation), the limitations and constraints under which the agent operated—all of which may be relevant to aesthetic understanding and appreciation, which in turn is necessary for proper
evaluation. The fact that these distinctions were fuzzy or concealed in the past is not a reason for thinking that the distinction between composing and improvising is not important. Rather, fuzziness and concealment reveal reasons why the distinction has significance and merit in many cases, both to the audience and to artists.

Some of the results of this section on action theory (2.1) will have consequences that are relevant to the work of art discussion in 2.3. Unless one defines a priori composition as the action-type that gives rise to works, then the fact that composition and improvisation are two different species will not hinder the conclusion that both of these generative processes can give rise to works of art (in fact, it may help establish that conclusion). In other words, this in and of itself will not show that works are necessarily produced or not produced through these action-types. Whatever the account of the action-types, an independent argument must be given to show whether works are produced through composing and improvising. In addition, there may be instantiations of the action-type “composing” that do not give rise to works, and there may be instantiations of the action-type “improvising” that do not give rise to works. For example, suppose a composer created a score with instructions that were impossible to follow. Such a case may be counted as an instance of composing without the generation of a WOA. In the case of improvising, suppose a person “doodles” on her piano for two minutes. The action-type improvising was instantiated but it may be implausible to categorize the doodling as a WOA. Cases like these and others, however, will be classified according to the account of WOAs (or musical works) one adopts. Furthermore, I can discern no a priori reason for thinking that composition (action-type) must be defined as the generative process that gives rise to works,

---

6 I note that in a clever way one may interpret the instructions for the impossible as a conceptual WOA.

7 Once again, one can imagine a John Cage piece giving such instructions.
either exclusively or not. Additionally, it would be question begging to just assert that
improvisation (action-type) is the (or an) artistic practice that does not generate WOAs. Most
importantly, even if one did define composition in this way, it would still not entail that there
was no other way (an action-type) for works to be generated. \(^8\) These issues will be taken up in
detail in 2.3.

My conclusion is that composing and improvising are two species under the same genus,
but that a continuum or spectrum model is the most useful way of understanding the distinction
between the two action-types. Recall the genus-species relationship and method of definition.\(^9\)
The most important properties both composing and improvising share is that of selection and
selection realization. What accounts for their differences will generate two action-types that are
subsumed under one genus (or kind).\(^10\) Although I recognize below that a different model
accounts best for the action theory, that model, the continuum model, would result in an
indeterminate ontology for WOAs. My goal here is to have the action theory and ontology fit
well together. Since I will later argue (2.3) that improvisations are works, in my account both
composing and improvising give rise to works of art (WOAs), and in the case of music, musical
works (MWs).

I will present three philosophical models for understanding the agency of, and
individuation of, the action-types of composing and improvising. These models differ in
function and breadth from the cognitive psychological models that have been developed (which I
review below). The main purpose of these philosophical models is twofold. The models are

---

\(^8\) I am using the neutral word “generate” instead of “create” in order to not beg the question of
what creation is.

\(^9\) Sometimes this method of definition is called pyramid or tree, which usually produces visual
representations of semantic and/or grammatical relationships.

\(^10\) Some philosophers distinguish between kinds and types. Kinds are more general than types.
analyses and representations of the action-types, which help explain these artistic practices. In some cases, the models serve as the *explanans* of features of the action-types, and in others the model serves as a device to *help* explain the action-types. In short, the models here operate in the same way that models function in the natural and social sciences. The models are the linear (LM), continuum (CM), and species-genus models (S-G). In order to discuss these and other issues (e.g., ontology of works), it will be useful to have a few cases, examples, and thought experiments in mind. These will serve as the data for the theories, and sometimes they will help support the arguments. I want a metaphysical theory that not only helps to explain and understand the history of improvisations and improvising, but will handle future developments. (including the possibility of non-human cases). Thought experiments help one accomplish that.

### 2.1.1 Thought Experiments and Data

(SCI) **The Standard Case of Improvisation.** This case involves a jazz improviser playing some musical instrument or vocalizing with a reference point: the harmonic changes, melodic and other elements of the background tune, sociological, and other possible constraints as discussed in taxonomy section of Part I. Some bits of the realized sound sequence will be recalled exactly from memory. Other bits will be executed and thought of for the first time. Some movements will be from "muscle memory" alone (from lots of practicing of scales, modes, licks, arpeggios, et cetera), and other movements will be (partly) novel. The result is a publicly available, realized sound sequence.

Moreover, it is important to notice that in (SCI) there is much more improvisation going on than one might think (jazz musicians know this). In (SCI), *all* of the musicians are
improvising to different degrees, and all are under various constraints, some of them have the same constraints as the soloist. A standard rhythm section in small jazz ensembles since the 1940s has a drummer, bassist, and pianist (or guitar). The “walking” bass lines of jazz are constrained by the general harmonic structure of the tune, but most of what the bassist is playing is improvised (except in sections of tunes where the chart or lead sheet include a fully notated bass line). The drummer is constrained by meter and tempo, for example, but she is improvising the general “keeping of time.” But even the basic constraints may be changed by the rhythm section. They might do this in response to what the soloist is playing, or they might do it for the sheer aesthetic pleasure such moves provide to performers (and, I would argue, the informed audience as well). For example, the bassist and drummer might change a 4/4 meter and feel for a double-time or a stop-time in two. The pianist is accompanying the soloist and is responsible for, along with the bassist, keeping the harmonic structure of the tune in place. This is called “comping.” Comping is a form of improvisation within the constraints of the harmonic structure, tempo, and other rhythms. A pianist is expected to be creative in her comping. One of the best examples of making comping an “art” itself is Herbie Hancock, especially his years with the Miles Davis Quintet.\footnote{The Miles Davis Quintet of the 1960s (sometimes called the “Second Quintet”), roughly 1963 to 1968, whose members were Miles Davis (trumpet), Wayne Shorter (tenor and soprano saxophones), Herbie Hancock (piano), Ron Carter (double bass), Anthony Williams (drums).} Some compers are known for their unique chord voicings (McCoy Tyner, Bill Evans), chord substitutions, novel rhythms (Tyner, Red Garland, Paul Bley), and fill-ins (Hancock).

(SCI) demonstrates that standard improvisation involves performance. The manner in which content is selected is more or less spontaneously, i.e., occurs in real time during the time of the performance. In the standard case, some of the content is planned and much of it is not
planned. The quantity of content that is planned or outlined before the performance is vague. It is vague in two ways. First, the duration of content (or how much of the content generated) that is spontaneously produced in real time—not planned—is indeterminate with respect to what is necessary for categorizing the performance as improvised. I am assuming that we can know and do know which content is planned and which is spontaneous. Practically, this is difficult, perhaps impossible, because it would require a kind of objective mind-reading; but for the sake of obtaining an accurate metaphysical theory of improvisation, one needs to make this assumption. Second, the determination itself of whether a part of the performance is planned or spontaneous is problematic. For a single melodic phrase (say), there may be aspects of it that are planned and other aspects that are not planned. This problem is part of what will be discussed in this section. In addition, there are other problems of vagueness for each element of the performance as discussed in Part I. Some parts have been rehearsed, some parts have been partly rehearsed, others have been outlined but no specific content has been specified, et cetera. Neither revision nor editing is possible because the intended final product, the *telos* of this process, is the real time performance.

(SCC) **The Standard Case of Composition.** This case involves using an inscription device, such as a writing instrument (pencil or pen), on manuscript paper with perhaps a piano or other instrument nearby. The composer inscribes using a particular notational system to specify and represent sounds, sonic properties, performance means (instrumentation), et cetera. The composer may at any time before the score is “published” revise and edit anything in it. The result of (SCC) is a publicly available score. Editing may alter, delete, or amend anything already notated. In fact, the results of the previous (say) day’s work may be deleted completely. The composer may use, at her leisure, reference items and books, and discuss ideas with others.
The “compositional act” is typically not unitary. Composers compose in fits and starts, just in the way writers do. A composer may be working on several pieces simultaneously, composing each during different times of the day, or different days, or even going back and forth between pieces during a single compositional session. The point is that the temporal and spatial boundaries of the compositional act are not definite and continuous. This even includes finishing a composition. Ludwig van Beethoven is a famous case. Beethoven changed compositions many times immediately before a performance. He changed compositions sometimes years later after supposedly finishing them. There are several different published versions of his piano concerti. It seems Beethoven never accepted any of his compositions are finished. The famous musicologist Joseph Kerman comments on Beethoven and the concerto form:

Those powers [speaking of Beethoven’s improvisational skills] were exercised most spectacularly, of course, in cadenzas, the concerto’s moments of sanctioned carnival. Extended formal cadenzas come near the ends of many movements, while numerous other short ones, ‘run’ins’ (Eingänge), and fermatas, or pauses, are scattered throughout. In addition, improvisation of a different kind continued throughout the score, improvisation carried out against a background of harmony, phrasing, and so on laid down by the orchestra, with the surface spun out extempore by the solo. Indeed the young Beethoven never wrote out--never really ‘composed’--concerto piano parts until he had to, because publication was in the offing. When the B-flat Concerto reached the printer in 1801, the orchestra part, too, was still in flux, subject to the composer’s last-minute tinkering.

At this point the long-bubbling soup of the B-flat Concerto became a text and the composer could put it behind him. Concertos were performing vehicles; they would not be published until they were no longer needed, when they had worn out their welcome with the public and a new one was ready. The autograph of the C-minor Concerto, No. 3, of 1803, about which Plantinga tells us more than we probably want to know, also started life as a ‘performance autograph.’ That is, it contained the orchestral music with, at many places, no more than piano cues to guide Beethoven’s improvisation. The piano part was only fixed conclusively when it had to be, in this case for a performance in the next year by another pianist.\(^\text{12}\)

The “myth” of composition and the compositional act are undermined instructively here. It is especially telling because it involves Beethoven, who regularly ranks in the top three of the “Canon” (along with Bach and Mozart, both fierce improvisers, too). One can discern the clear lines of improvisation and composition blurring. However, musicians today perform using those seemingly always unfinished scores of Beethoven. They are not improvising, and Beethoven’s legacy includes these fixed scores.

(SCC) demonstrates that composing often involves a notation and notational devices. The purpose is to provide a set of instructions for later execution by performers.

Let us compare and contrast (SCI) and (SCC). Typically, the conditions under which these creative tasks occur are different. Typically, composing is not public; it may occur in any convenient location; one does not need musical production tools or instruments; one needs notation technology; and it is prescriptive. Again emphasize typically. Typically, improvisation is public, usually occurs in a meaningful environment (concert hall, jazz club or venue, et cetera); one must have musical production tools and/or instruments; notation technology is optional; it is usually not prescriptive. Both composing and improvising are goal-oriented or goal-directed behaviors, which goals are usually artistic (e.g., expressive, contentful, aesthetic, et cetera).

(IND-1) Indiscernibles Case One. There are two performances, for example, of solo alto saxophone musicians, one after the other at (say) Carnegie Hall. Each performance is by a different musician. The first musician comes out and plays for exactly ten minutes. The other musician comes out and plays for exactly ten minutes. Now the catch: the second performance is (qualitatively) identical to the first except for the following feature. The first musician performed a composition, that is, she rehearsed, practiced, learned, and studied the score of this
solo saxophone piece; whereas the second musician improvised the sound sequence played at the
time of performance, for the most part not knowing precisely what she was going to play before
the actual performance. Both performances’ sonic properties are identical, including pitches,
durations, timbres, and expressive properties. Now the improviser did of course practice and
prepare and warmed up and so forth, but she did not perform a piece of music that was composed
beforehand. There was no score from which the improviser was playing. Suppose further that
the improviser never heard the other musician’s piece, and the first player never the heard the
improvisation. It seems that these features entail that the two performers must be two different
persons; otherwise, one would be familiar with what had gone on before, thereby undermining
the idea of improvising the piece. If the player-performer had heard the improvisation prior to
her performance, then possibly her performance could be considered a performance instantiation
of the improvised sound sequence. This is a thought experiment; however, it is certainly
possible, though highly improbable, that this event could occur. The probability of such an event
decreases with the duration of the sound sequence increasing. So, it is far more likely that a
three second sound sequence could be the subject of (IND) than a one hour sound sequence. But
this is irrelevant for the (IND) thought experiment to work.

(IND) demonstrates that composing and improvising cannot be individuated on the basis
of content. However, I do not pretend that especially sophisticated music and art consumers do
not have intuitions based on their perceptions of what sounds like a composition and
improvisation. Probabilities of composition versus improvisation status could be assigned on the
basis of inductive inferences from people’s knowledge about art and music history,
musicianship, what is possible for musicians to do, et cetera. It may be the case that such
probabilities would be fairly accurate. Nonetheless, an accurate metaphysical theory must take
(IND) cases seriously. I say this while also recognizing the importance of actual, artistic practice.

(IND) is important because it is a way of testing some of our thoughts about what we think is relevant to categorizing and evaluating WOAs, and in determining the differences and similarities between the action-types composing and improvising. It has the potential to reveal what is ordinarily hidden from even our sophisticated, introspective selves. It is similar to what Daniel Dennett is attempting to elicit in constructing the following case:

To see how crucial this excess baggage of ours is, imagine that musicologists unearthed a heretofore unknown Bach cantata, definitely by the great man, but hidden in a desk and probably never yet heard even by the composer himself. Everyone would be aching to hear it, to experience for the first time the "qualia" that the Leipzigers would have known, had they only heard it, but this turns out to be impossible, for the main theme of the cantata, by an ugly coincidence, is the first seven notes of "Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer"! We who are burdened with that tune would never be able to hear Bach's version as he intended it or as the Leipzigers would have received it.

There are many interesting aspects of this case: about how we hear, whether it is possible to have authentic performances, whether it is possible to retrieve initial or original reception circumstances, and the indiscernibility. The knowledge of “Rudolph” and its “baggage,” hopelessly biases our twenty-first century perception. (IND) forces one to consider what the background knowledge of generative processes given in the case does to our thinking about the same sound structure and sound sequence.

Brain imaging studies have demonstrated that different areas of the brain are activated and deactivated during playing from memory as opposed to improvising. There are also shared

---

activations, especially in motor areas of the brain. Neuroscientists have inferred that there are different neural substrates underlying the two cases even when the content is the same.

(IND-2) **Indiscernibles Case Two.** In this thought experiment, everything is the same as above except that the two players are the same person. Suppose that there are two parallel universes, which are exactly the same in every respect except that in Comp World the musician plays the sound sequence from a score, and in Imp World the same musician improvises the sound sequence. These events occur at exactly the same time, which is possible because the two universes share temporal parts, but not spatial coordinates.

Considering such a case is useful for determining exactly which cognitive, motor, and neural processes are different in each case. The fact that the same person both plays from a score and improvises would rule out any differences that may obtain because of differences that exist among different individuals. In fact one brain scan study has attempted to replicate such a case by comparing scans of musicians under three conditions: improvise a sound sequence with the caveat that one will have to reproduce it as best as one can later; play from memory the previously improvised sound sequence; and improvise a sound sequence freely without memorization and reproduction.\(^{15}\)

(IND-3) **Indiscernibles Case Three.** Everything is the same as in (IND-1) except that the improviser, after the performance, decides to score and notate the improvisation. Consequently,

---


a notated score, capturing the salient features of the sound sequence and performance, now exists in addition, to the “composed” score used by the non-improvising musician.

(IND-3) demonstrates that an improvisation, a sound sequence that was initially generated by improvisation, may be prescriptive. The notated score serves as a set of instructions for future reproduction. Of course, the accuracy of the score depends on the memory and other skills of the improviser. These contingencies can be eliminated by having the improvisation recorded, thereby allowing someone to transcribe it later, or the use of some other device that would in real-time notate the improvised sounds. (See “The Notional Device” below.) It does not matter whether the improviser intended the improvisation to be prescriptive or not. The decision to “publish” the score (or even the recording) may be made after the completed performance.

(MusPen) The Musical Pen Case. Suppose there is a pen device such that when applied to music manuscript paper, the pen not only inscribed the paper with notation but also produced the sound and sonic properties of the notation as well.¹⁶ There are computer MIDI devices that are very close to this imaginary example in this thought experiment. There can be two sub-cases here: (1) an audience is present while a person uses the Musical Pen; (2) there is no audience present. Would this be composing or improvising? Would the presence of an audience matter?

(MusPen) demonstrates that a typical compositional act, that of notating a score, could be performing and producing sounds much in the same way someone improvises. It is a contingency of technology and history that people. Would editing be possible? If real-time editing occurred, then the edits would produce sounds in the way the original scoring did.

¹⁶ The first noted case of a similar device was the one invented and used by Pietro Mascagni. It is said that his pianoforte included a device that would notate what he played. I do not know if this has ever been confirmed. See Philip Heseltine, “A Note on the Mind’s Ear,” Musical Times (February 1, 1922).
Erasures would delete notational inscriptions but would not be able to delete already produced sounds. Consequently, editing would give rise to a different realized sound sequence, even though there may be only one score published.

(NotDev) The Notational Device. The Notational Device is the opposite of the (MusPen). This technology exists. As one plays an instrument or sings, a computer simultaneously records and notates the sound sequence. Many composers of popular songs use this technology.

This case, like (MusPen), raises problems for distinctions between performing and composing, especially if the playing that is being notated occurs in a public venue. Additionally, this case raises questions about composition being connected to prescription or giving instructions for future performance. This device would permit a person to simultaneously perform, score/notate thereby providing instructions for future performance. Of course, we need to assume that the person would not edit the notated score from the performance.

(Pure) The Strangely Pure Improvisation Case. Imagine a piano keyboard-like instrument in a sound-proof room. Depressing the “keys” generates sounds. The person depressing the keys cannot hear the sounds generated, and the depression of the keys makes no sound. In addition, all of the keys are uniform, i.e., no black keys, they are all white; and there are 132 keys instead of the standard 88 keys on a piano in order to distinguish this instrument from a piano. The depression of a key could generate a sound of any pitch, duration, timbre, rhythm, In other words, the sounds generated are unknown beforehand to the musician/performer and are random. There is a complete disconnection between the agent depressing the keys and the sounds generated. The agent only knows that she is depressing keys and that there may or may not be sounds generated. Consequently, the agent make no connections, cannot establish
any patterns or relationships between the sounds, and this cannot be accomplished by tactile
relationships because the sound generated is divorced from the intensity used to depress the key,
the rhythm of depression, and the fact that two depressions seriatim will not necessarily generate
the sound. One movement could be in response to another, and relations could be made between
(say) fingerings, but this would not correlate in any way to the sounds produced. (Humans have
a tendency to construct imagined relationships between movements when they do not know the
actual products of such movements.) Therefore, one sound event has no relation to the one
before and after it, save that the same agent depressed some keys to generate the random sounds.

An experiment like this one is not far from actual practices musicians have used to
conjure up ideas and elicit discovery, and eschew tired and well-worn practices. For example,
Richard Taruskin recalls this anecdote: “One musician whom I particularly admire, a lutenist,
once told me that when he began to experiment with improvisatory practices to accompany
medieval song, he deliberately mistuned his instrument so that his fingers would not be able to
run along familiar paths.”17 John Cage has used many methods to generate scores, and his pieces
for prepared piano introduce an element of surprise as one plays the score, especially if one
cannot exactly reproduce the piano preparations each time one performs the piece.18

(Pure) raises questions about agency. In (Pure) the agent is responsible for the “doing,”
which here amounts to selecting which keys to depress and how, and the selection realization
(motor sequence). However, the agent has no idea what is being produced by these selections
and movements. Is the agent responsible for the sound sequence produced and/or notated in
(Pure)? Some extreme critics of improvisation have raised similar doubts about improvisers:

University Press, 1995), 78.
18 See the list of John Cage’s compositions and recordings in Rob Haskins, John Cage, Critical
they are not truly and significantly responsible for their improvisations, so credit (and I guess, blame) cannot be given to the improviser. If an improviser happens to produce a pleasant and interesting sound sequence (say), then this has not been achieved, but arrived at by more or less accident. But, as I have shown Part I, this view rests on assumptions about improvisation that are false, and should have never been taken seriously. A simple experiment could have disabused those holding such a view: try it yourself, that is, if one has (say) musical training, spend some time improvising.

(PP) **Perfect Pair Case.** This thought experiment comes from Lee Brown. Brown set it up this way: “Suppose that an improvisation by Cormac Hackins (H1) just happens to be perceptually indistinguishable from the famous “Body and Soul” solo by Coleman Hawkins (H2). Unlike the pair I described in the previous section, this pair not only parallel each other perceptually, but they are equally spontaneous. I shall call such a pair a perfect pair.” This case is similar to (IND), except that both sound sequences are spontaneous (improvised). This is improbably but possible. I think we need to also suppose that Cormac and Coleman have had no contact and do not know of each other’s improvisation. So, neither one has influenced the other. (PP) demonstrates that at least two spontaneous performances may result in the same sound sequence (content), and that perhaps improvisations should be individuated based on agent and time of performance. Putatively, the two sound sequences in (PP) possess different artistic properties: one may influenced by Louis Armstrong, the other not; one may be “retro,” the other revolutionary.

Some of the elicited intuitions and salient features that arise from these cases will make some of the basic data for the models and theories developed herein.

---

2.1.2 Cognitive Neuroscience and Cognitive Models

Creativity is like murder—both depend on motive, means, and opportunity.20
—Philip Johnson-Laird, “Freedom and Constraint in Creativity”

The cognitive models of improvising posit selection as the fundamental process or function of improvising. Notice that this function could be the same for composing. What is the difference? When one improvises or composes one essentially selects something from a set of possibilities. The set of possibilities is tacitly or explicitly recognized during the selection process.

My purpose in giving an exposition of cognitive models of improvising is two-fold. First, the models are intrinsically illuminating about the nature of improvising and creation itself. Second, the models give evidence for a key premise in my argument that composing and improvising fundamentally share the same cognitive mechanism. All of the models begin with selection. The models however do not address precisely what selection is. I will fill in this gap. In addition, in terms of giving an account of creativity, the models show how, after the creative process begins, choices (selection) are made by artistic agents. The significant omission is how the process starts—the first creative selection. Often, this starting choice is explained away by referring to some inane heuristic rule (as in the case of artificial intelligence programs for improvising, and in others it is explained by a random generator given certain parameters. For my purpose here, I do not have to solve the problem of creativity, even though it would be nice

to have such an explanation. I do not believe that these models take away the value of art, nor
genius, nor the “mystery” of creation.

Many methods have been used to study improvisation: sociological, economic,
phenomenological, computational, cognitive science, and neuroscience. Many models of
improvisation are nested within models of creativity more generally.21 This fact itself is
illuminating, and I think provides some presumptive support for my claim that creation/selection
is the basic state underlying both composition and improvisation. Four main models have been
proffered. Many theories of creativity use musical improvisation as their test case for the theory,
and as one of the best examples of creative behavior. I will review Philip Johnson-Laird’s
computational model, Jeff Pressing’s cognitive model, Csikszentmihalyi and Rich’s systems-
based model, and Eric Clarke’s three-stage cognitive model.22 Pressing says: “The central core
of this model is the generation of a new set of array components for \( E_{i+1} \) from those preceding
it.”23 Johnson-Laird says: “The principles that I have described amount to a theory of creativity
at the computational level—a theory of what has to be computed, namely, nondeterministic
choices among options characterized by a set of criteria. A theory at the algorithmic level must

---

21 This is the case for Johnson-Laird, and Csikszentmihalyi and Rich (see below n. 22).
Robert Sternberg, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 202-219; Jeff Pressing,
“Improvisation: Methods and Models,” in Generative Processes in Music: The Psychology of
Performance,” in Generative Processes in Music: The Psychology of Performance,
Improvisation, and Composition, ed. John A. Sloboda (New York: Oxford University Press,
Clarendon Press, 1988), 1-26; Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Grant Rich, “Musical Improvisation:
A Systems Approach,” in Creativity in Performance, ed. R. Keith Sawyer (Greenwich, CT:
Science and Psychology of Music Performance: Creative Strategies for teaching and Learning,
eds. Richard Parncutt and Gary E. McPherson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 117-
134.

23 Pressing, 162.
specify how the choices are made.” The models admirably handle the selection process from one selected sound-sequence to the next; however, where all of them show difficulty is how the process gets started. In other words, how does that first sound, the first string get chosen. Essentially, this is the problem of creativity. Johnson-Laird says that the starting point for getting the process going can just be arbitrary selection within the constraints of the particular context in which the improviser is improvising. Once the process gets going, the models have explanatory power, and are illuminating.

Selection can occur by an agent simply cognizing: that is, in one’s mental ear, or mind’s eye, et cetera. I use the term “virtual sounding” for the willed mental production of a sound sequence in the mind’s ear. Auditory hallucinations and phenomena such as tinnitus are not virtual soundings. When composing, the selection may occur in the form of notation by writing with some utensil on some medium, or even by memory by actually producing the sound-occurrence. In improvising one mainly produces the sound-occurrence simultaneously with the selection. In order not to be dualistic about this process, one must understand that cognitive models are rational reconstructions, which include the specification of sub-conscious mental states and computation, and are not intended to mimic or reflect the phenomenology of the actual practice. Thus, when selection is posited as the fundamental state of creation, one is not committed to the idea that the agent recognizes such a state as selection, nor is it meant to be interpreted as an actual, separate state in thinking or action. Selection can occur in something we think or do. These are all standard ways of understanding cognitive science and the models to which it gives rise.

---

24 Johnson-Laird, 209.
There are no brain studies comparing imaging of the brain during improvisation and composition. I conjecture that one reason for this is because the compositional act is vague, nebulous, and temporally ordered in a way that is inconvenient for imaging studies. Improvisation, on the other hand, can be more realistically reconstructed in laboratory conditions. In other words, the improvising that occurs during brain imaging in a laboratory is sufficiently similar to improvisation that occurs in normal settings. Compositional tasks, however, could be reconstructed in the laboratory setting. The reconstruction of the tasks would have to sufficiently match what occurs in real composing. Surely, there will be artificiality to the tasks, but it may not matter much for imaging studies. Of course, asserting that these differences do not matter begs the question, but all studies have this problem to some degree. Another problem is the varied nature of how composers compose. Some compose on an instrument, some without an instrument, some hum to themselves; many combine several different methods at different times and locations. Consequently, the motor component can be different and this would have to be held constant for an imaging study to be valid. This could create more artificiality. In improvising studies, the subjects always play and improvise on the same instrument in order to keep the motor components constant.

Improvised playing of instruments (usually piano) has been compared to non-improvised playing, such as reading from a score. In addition, some studies change the degree to which the subjects have familiarity with the score material. Subjects memorize some sequences, sight read some, et cetera. In one major study from 2008, Berkowitz and Ansari report that imaging analysis revealed that improvisation involves the dorsal premotor cortex (dPMC), inferior frontal gyrus/ventral premotor cortex (IFG/vPMC), and the anterior cingulated cortex (ACC). Berkowitz and Ansari report that

improvisational processes seem to be subserved by these areas of the brain. They define improvisation as “Improvisation involves the generation of possible musical phrases, selection among these at any given moment, and execution of the decided-upon motor output.” The dPMC is implicated in motor tasks. The ACC is implicated in voluntary selection, internally selected action as compared to externally stimulated actions, conflict monitoring, decision making, unrehearsed movements, and willed action. The IFG/vPMC is part of Broca’s area, and has been implicated in language production and processing, sequence processing, selection and retrieval, and maintenance of rules and task selection.

The most notable finding in another 2008 study by Limb and Braun is focal activation of the medial prefrontal cortex (MPFC). Associations have been found between MPFC activity and autobiographical narrative. Limb and Braun find this germane because “one could argue that improvisation is a way of expressing one’s own musical voice or story. In this sense, activity of the MPFC during improvisation is also consistent with an emerging view that the region plays a role in the neural instantiation of self, organizing internally motivated, self-generated, and stimulus-independent behaviors.” This is very interesting and coheres well with some phenomenology of improvising. Many first-hand phenomenological accounts of expert improvisers reveal that especially in extended improvisations players “go into their own isolated worlds,” and improvisers sense they are telling stories (but not necessarily propositionally). For

---


28 Limb and Braun, e1678-e1679.
some improvisers the sounds that they are generating and selecting have no non-sonic mental image associations.\footnote{On this, and similar phenomena, see David Sudnow, \textit{Ways of the Hand: The Organization of Improvised Conduct} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), and David Sudnow, \textit{Ways of the Hand: A Rewritten Account}, foreword by Hubert L. Dreyfus (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).} In other words, the selection of sounds is purely sonic.\footnote{Limb and Braun, e1679.}

Limb and Braun summarize their findings as follows: “Our data indicate that spontaneous improvisation, independent of the degree of musical complexity, is characterized by widespread deactivation of lateral portions of the prefrontal cortex together with focal activation of medial prefrontal cortex. This unique pattern may offer insights into the cognitive dissociations that may be intrinsic to the creative process: the innovative, internally motivated production of novel material (at once rule-based and highly structured) that can apparently occur outside of conscious awareness and beyond volitional control.”\footnote{Ibid.} The last part of the sentence is significant. One aspect of “outside of conscious awareness and beyond volitional control” is that self-monitoring is decreased during improvisation. Self monitoring has been shown to “inhibit spontaneity and impair performance.”\footnote{Asunción Gonzalez Pinto, Verónica Sanmartin, Virginia Guillén, Carlota Las Hayas, and José Guimón, “Shamelessness and Creativity,” \textit{Advances in Mental Health} 2, no. 3 (November 2005).} This is further confirmed in a study that correlates high creativity and general disinhibition, sensation-seeking, and shamelessness.\footnote{Geoffrey I. Wills, “Forty Lives in the Bebop Business: Mental Health in a Group of Eminent Jazz Musicians,” \textit{British Journal of Psychiatry} 183 (2003): 255-259.} These traits have been found specifically in jazz musicians.\footnote{Ibid.} Disinhibition requires less self-monitoring. It is unclear whether increased spontaneous creative behavior causes increased general disinhibition (this would be strange) or vice versa.
Johnson-Laird also includes an element that is outside of conscious awareness in his computational model of creative behavior and improvisation. He says, “In the same way, the tacit criteria for generating ideas are not available to conscious critical processes. Because critical criteria are easy to communicate to other people but insufficient for creation, whereas generative abilities are unconscious and ineffable, critical judgment tends to be considerably in advance of the ability to create works of the imagination. The paradox of creativity therefore leads ineluctably to the view that there are many criteria on which the creator must rely and that by no means all of them are available to overt inspection.”

Here he addresses the issue more specifically to improvisation:

What is common to most forms of improvisation is a reliance on two quite separate mental components: first, a long-term memory for a set of basic structures, such as the chord sequences of modern jazz or the ragas (scalar patterns) of Indian music; second, a set of tacit principles that underlie the improvisatory skill. We know that these two components exist because the basic structures are accessible to consciousness, and musicians can talk about them, write them down in a suitable notation, and teach them to neophytes. But, this explicit knowledge is not sufficient to enable a musician to improvise. Hence, there is a second component, which is relatively inaccessible to consciousness. Some musicians are aware of a few of its principles, but no one has complete access to them. Musicians learn to improvise by imitating other virtuosos and by experimenting with various possibilities. They learn to improvise by improvising, and they thereby develop their own particular styles within a genre.

In addition, this coheres well with important typology in action theory. Creative actions, especially improvising, are often like actions that have been called “half-intentional.” Myles Brand identified two kinds of actions: “intentional actions” and “actions simpliciter.”

---

34 Johnson-Laird, 209.
Dipert has re-named these “fully intentional” actions and “half-intentional” actions. Dipert defines half-intentional actions as,

A half-intentional action is typically one in which conscious deliberation and decision may not be the immediate cause of this behavior but for which I may nevertheless in some sense be “responsible.” An example of a fully intentional action might be my writing an essay on artifacts. An example of half-intentional actions might be many of my word choices, the keys I am striking when typing, and so on. These are activities of which I am not fully conscious at the time of the activity and have not immediately prior deliberated about. Roughly speaking, a half-intentional action, to be an action at all, must be a habit that has arisen (1) from the repetition of prior, fully intentional actions; (2) is a revocable habit; and (3) is activated by a current fully conscious intention. Most of our actions are half-intentional: our motor behavior, driving on the right-hand side of the road, and so on. Some few of our actions now, the “big choices” we make and occasional intervention in normally habitual activities, are fully intentional. … Beethoven’s basic musical style, described within broad parameters, was not something Beethoven in middle age and later had to contemplate each time he sat down to compose. Although highly complex, certainly, it became a habit or style of composition that need not always have been consciously contemplated with the creation of each work.

For musicians who have achieved excellence, improvising, at least in certain genres with a particular set of constraints, becomes partly, in some cases mostly, habitual. Habitual behavior involves agency, but not in the full volitional sense. Habituation is achieved through training, practice, experience, and imitating. The level of volitional control in improvising is vague. Notice that Dipert gives the example of composing as half-intentional. This is surely correct, and further substantiates my view that the fundamentally composition and improvisation share the same cognitive state—selection—and that their distinction will be one of degree, not always kind (a continuum or spectrum).

38Ibid.
Another Berkowitz and Ansari study compared expert players with non-musicians. They infer from an analysis of the imaging that trained musicians (experts) improvise in a more top-down fashion than non-musicians. Non-musician improvised playing is more stimulus driven response to what they are playing. Hence, trained musicians are able to inhibit attentional shifts to irrelevant stimuli thereby allowing a “more goal-directed performance state that aids in creative thought.”39 They also have evidence that confirms that musical training changes structures within the brain.

The lack of brain studies comparing the two relevant action-types here can be ameliorated by considering brain studies of similar tasks to composition, or at least tasks that can be relevantly compared and contrasted to improvisational tasks.

All of the brain studies of improvisation establish that areas of the brain that are implicated in “free response selection” or “free generation of responses” are integrally involved. Thus, improvisation fundamentally involves selection. Externally motivated motor tasks include playing music from a score. Creative acts involve internally motivated selection and motor execution of the selection. In performing without creating, one is not selecting. Spontaneous and non-spontaneous creation involves internally motivated selection at its heart.

Jeff Pressing’s cognitive model of improvisation is the most complex and comprehensive. This cognitive model is supposed to be a description of the process of improvising. Improvisations may be partitioned into sequences of over-lapping sections. Each section contains a quantity of musical events, which Pressing calls event clusters \((E_i)\). Thus, a single improvisation \(I = \{E_1, E_2, E_3, \ldots, E_n\}\). The sub-numerals refer to time points, which may be

---

interpreted as the point at which an agent’s decided action begins to be executed. Thus, $E_0$ is silence, viz., the time point before the improvisation begins. Next, event clusters must be explained and described. An event cluster generation for a solo improvisation is $( \{E\}, R, G, M )_i \rightarrow E_{i+1}$, where $R$ is a referent, $G$ are current goals of the agent, and $M$ is the long time memory of the agent. An event cluster $E$ has the following aspects: acoustic, musical, movement, visual, emotional, and perhaps others. Each aspect $A$ has two states: intended and actual. Since intentions and goals are not always realized or executed properly there may be a disparity between an intended aspect and the actual aspect that is executed. Thus, the aspects are all correct descriptions of $E_i$ and are redundant. When an event cluster $E_i$ occurs, $E_i$ is triggered and executed by the agent, and each aspect of $E_i$ can be decomposed into three types of analytical representations, which are representations of $E_i$ from different perspectives. These representations constitute a sufficient amount of information for the agent’s decision-making, which I call selection. The object representation $O$ is a unified perceptual or cognitive entity (e.g., chords, bodily movements, a sound). “Features’ are parameters that describe shared properties of objects, and ‘processes’ are descriptions of changes of objects or processes over time.”40 Each analytical representation is further decomposed into arrays, which possess values and cognitive strengths. Cognitive strength tracks attentional loading and indicates the importance of a particular value in the agent’s internal representations. So, these will be different given different agents. The selection of $E_{i+1}$ is the next event cluster.

---

The production of $E_i$ is based upon “long-term factors ($R$, $G$, stylistic norms, and ongoing processes), and by the evaluation of the effects and possibilities of $E_i$.\textsuperscript{41} My account fills in what these possibilities are, and my taxonomy (below) provides a partial explanation of stylistic norms.

Once the process begins there are two methods by which an agent continues, i.e., produces $E_{i+1}$. Associative generation is selection based on a previous $E_i$. Interrupt generation is locally novel selection. The only thing left to explain is the choice between associative or interrupt generation. Pressing accounts for this formally with a time-dependent tolerance level for repetition. Let $L(t)$ be the agent’s time-dependent toleration level for repetition, and let $Z(t)$ be the current level of repetition. If $Z(t) \geq L(t)$ then the agent institutes an interrupt generation, otherwise the agent continues with associative generation. There may be other reasons why an agent chooses one kind of generation over another, but Pressing is correct to assume that repetition toleration is a significant factor in deciding whether to associate or interrupt.

Additionally, Pressing omits the fact that an agent’s $L(t)$ may change over time, both external to the time of one improvisation $I$ to another, and even within (internal) a single $I$. The internal change in $L(t)$ may be influenced by the previous event clusters. Cognitive and motor sub-programmes generate a specific action design. The remaining event clusters are generated by iteration from the above components until the agent is done with the improvisation.

Pressing’s model incorporates all of the important elements of improvising from the agent’s point of view. Improvisers do in fact make decisions about what to do next based upon what they just did. Improvisers focus their attention on different aspects of the artistic content (and sometimes non-artistic, such as amount of fatigue, motor patterns), and given specific

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 155.
conditions and contexts, their attention will shift. Now of course an improviser is not thinking of her decisions consciously as associative or interruptive. Consequently, the phenomenology of the improvisational process does not necessarily include the agent being aware of such states; however, the explanatory fecundity of cognitive models is to at least cohere well with the phenomenology, being consistent with the agent’s output, and those generative principles of which the agent is consciously aware.

Eric Clarke’s three stage cognitive model takes as its object performing music, of which improvisation is a species. Once again, fundamentally, the model uses selection. For improvised performances, Clarke identifies three principles of improvised musical phrase generation: hierarchical, associative, and repertory-based.

The various representations underlying an improvised performance can be brought together by considering the abstract representation of an improvised performance in its very earliest states ... All that exists is a low-level musical unit, characterized here as a small-scale, hierarchically organized event. A complete performance will consist of a large collection of such events, organized in different ways, and related to this first event according to three possible principles:

1. The first event may be part of a hierarchical structure, to some extent worked out in advance, and to some extent constructed in the course of the improvisation. …
2. The first event may be part of an associative chain of events, each new event derived from the previous sequence by the forward transfer of information. …
3. The first event may be selected from a number of events contained within the performer’s repertoire, the rest of the improvisation consisting of further selections from this same repertoire, with a varying degree of relatedness between selections. …

Johnson-Laird’s (J-L) model is computational. He thinks that there are three possible procedures for creative tasks: creation within a framework or genre in real time, creation

---


43 Ibid., 8-9.
intended to produce a new framework, and creation based on whether or not there is an opportunity to revise the creative product (creation within a framework in stages). Most improvisations are going to be classified into the real time framework and new framework categories, and composition seems to fit into revisable creativity. Frameworks may be interpreted to be artistic genres and the like. Johnson-Laird builds a model of creation within a framework in real-time—improvisation. There are two separate mental components for generating extemporaneous performances: long-term memory for a set of basic structures, and tacit principles that underlie improvisational skill. He says, “We know that these two components exist because the basic structures are accessible to consciousness, and musicians can talk about them, write them down in a suitable notation, and teach them to neophytes.”

\[ (\{E\}, R, G, M)_i \rightarrow E_{i+1} \]

where \( R \) is a referent, \( G \) are current goals of the agent, and \( M \) is the long time memory of the agent. The referent in a case like (SCI) will be the tune, which includes a harmonic structure, melodic pattern, tempo, and a wide range of stylistic options. As Johnson-Laird notes, an improviser learns to improvise by improvising. He says that musical improvisation is syntactic organization of sounds into patterns without being concerned with what they represent. So, “[t]he computational problem in improvisation is therefore to produce in real time an acceptable melody that fits the chord

\[ \text{footnote} \]

\[ \text{footnote} \]


45 Ibid.
sequence, and the tempi of modern jazz call for melodies to be extemporized at an extremely rapid rate (e.g., 10 to 12 notes per second)."\(^{46}\) In addition, creating in real-time like improvisation requires low computational power, because intermediate internal representations are not necessary. Johnson-Laird substantiates this by giving an existence proof. He constructs a model and uses other models that have produced computer programs that produce passable melodic and jazz bass line improvisations. On the other hand, he says that “if there is time to revise or to reject the products of a generative process, then the ultimate results are likely to rely on a high degree of computational power. That is, they can be produced making considerable use of a memory for intermediate results.”\(^{47}\)

Now the key is that even in the computational model selection is at the foundation. J-L says: “The tacit skills have to run efficiently in real time. They govern the choice of notes to fit the harmonic implications of the chord structure and to make a good melody.”\(^{48}\) Notice his use of the term “choice.” In another place he says, “Freedom of choice occurs par excellence in acts of creation. … When a musician improvises a melody, at each point there are several possible notes that could be played.”\(^{49}\) The goal of a computational theory of creation includes specifying what has to be computed, which J-L describes as “nondeterministic choices among options characterized by a set of criteria.”\(^{50}\) Choices among options are sometimes determined by the tacit and sometimes explicit principles and rules musicians learn, practice, and internalize; sometimes the choices are arbitrary. If there was not an arbitrary element, then the undesirable

\(^{46}\) Ibid.
\(^{47}\) Ibid., 213.
\(^{48}\) Ibid., 210.
\(^{49}\) Ibid., 207.
\(^{50}\) Ibid., 209.
and false result would inevitability. An arbitrary choice here and there in a sound sequences allows for different principles to be invoked and influence the future choices the improviser makes. Importantly, J-L points out that the human mind does contain a mechanism for making arbitrary choices.

The principles used for making many of the selections are computable because they are programmable. Computer programs generate novel sound sequences given a set of inputs. The program contains some random generators thus allowing for different sound sequences to be produced given the same inputs. Recently, David J. Mendonça and William Al Wallace have both reviewed artificial intelligence programs of improvisation and constructed their own.\(^{51}\) Now there is also some empirical data that provides support for the idea that improvisers use a set of basic principles to generate novel sequences. In one neuro-scientific experiment a template of a melodic pattern was given to trained musician subjects as a source for improvisation. A qualitative analysis of the improvised sound sequences produced revealed that all of the modifications made by the musicians to the melodic template could be classified in eleven categories: “(i) insertion of a fast group of one or more grace notes before a template note; (ii) substitution of a template note for another note; (iii) figuration, that is, expansion of the original template into melodic figures; (iv) insertion of a trill on a template note; (v) filling in, that is, insertion of chromatic or diatonic scales between template notes; (vi) repetitions of template notes; (vii) elimination of template notes; (viii) insertion of figures giving a broken two-part polyphony; (ix) rhythmization of the template; (x) insertion of tremolo, that is, a trill-like figure between two notes with a larger interval than a second; (xi) switching of tonality from major to

minor.”52 This is empirical evidence that humans use rules, to a large degree, to produce improvised novel sequences based on an input referent. The timing of the rule applications varies, and the exact content of the rule application is contingent. For example, two improvisers may choose to modify by grace note insertion but insert different grace notes.

In free improvisation,53 that is, when there is no referent such a melodic or harmonic template provided, the improviser will usually establish a referent or set of referents early in the playing. These can be brief figures or phrases, or the improviser imagines following a harmonic structure. In fact, one interesting exercise in ear training and jazz transcriptions courses is to listen to a master improviser play alone, solo. The task is to determine what the “changes” are. In other words, the listener must determine the implicit harmonic structure the improviser is following and using as a referent for the melodic improvisation. Some structures are easy to detect for trained musicians: rhythm changes, twelve and sixteen bar blues structures, and certain fecund jazz standard changes (e.g., “All the Things You Are,” “Autumn Leaves,” Classic tunes by Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, Wayne Shorter). In the genre known as “free jazz,” the musicians will often have a loose or vague idea beforehand with which to work. It might as vague as a tempo, or chord, or an abstract, non-musical idea. In the latter case, the improvisers are expected to improvise according to their own self-expression aroused by the idea. Once the performance gets going, then associative principles are used based upon triggers the improviser hears the other improvisers playing.54


53 Some call this “motivic improvisation.”

In what some call formulaic improvisation, as in the Parry-Lord interpretation of epic poetry, the basic generative rules will be simpler and possibly fewer in number. The content will be drawn from the improvisers repertory stored in long-term memory. Nonetheless, it is not very different from referent-based improvisation.

Now Johnson-Laird thinks that composition and improvisation must have different underlying processes because there are “composers who cannot improvise and improvisers who cannot compose.”55 Suppose that this is true (which I am not willing to assert without further clarification). Beethoven was a great improviser by all accounts,56 though there is evidence that he composed with great difficulty. But what was the source of such difficulty? I think there are a plethora of other explanations for such a case, and most of it will be speculation with respect to composers like Beethoven and Mozart. The speculation, however, does have some foundation in historical documents: first-hand and second-hand accounts of Mozart and Beethoven improvising, performing, and composing, and the personal accounts, such as Mozart’s letters.57 Perhaps studies can be done on present day composers. One need not be constrained by historical cases. We do not know for certain that Beethoven found composing difficult. We also


56 See, for example, an account of a public concert by Beethoven in Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung, III (1800).

do not know whether Mozart and Beethoven experienced a creative blocks that inhibited both their composing and improvising. If there were cases of creative block in composing and not in improvising, then this can be explained by the fact that each task operates under a different set of constraints and goals. One can be blocked under one set of circumstances and not blocked in another, even when the underlying processes are the same. One can make sports analogies here. For example, professional runners perform differently in the Boston marathon versus the New York marathon even though both are the same distance and involve long distance running.

Another explanation is that Beethoven could have been more easily satisfied while improvising, i.e., the sound sequences he generated were more acceptable to him because of the difficult constraints that exist when improvising. Composition involves open time, perhaps a lot of it, and there are possibilities of editing and revision at every turn. Open time and many choices create paralysis. This is substantiated by studies of choices in consumption. Psychologist Barry Schwarz has shown that when consumers (choosers, deciders) are given longer periods of time to make choices and many choices, they become paralyzed (do not choose) or resort to random choosing but only after much agonizing.\textsuperscript{58} We become paralyzed.

Given that Schwarz used many different examples in many different domains makes it plausible that there are general psychological tendencies and strategies that humans employ, and these are relevant to art-making and artistic selection. Therefore, the above examples do not give much evidence for different underlying processes. Even if the underlying process is the same, the manner in which it is executed along with the concomitant constraints may be sufficient to account for those who can compose but not improvise and vice versa. In addition, when one considers the most significant improvisers in the history of jazz (e.g., Louis Armstrong, Coleman

Hawkins, Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, Bill Evans, Miles Davis), one finds that all of them composed, even though the compositional output of each varies. In some cases the compositions were melodic and harmonic structures—tunes—that served as springboards for improving. To substantiate Johnson-Laird’s point, the inquiry that would provide better evidence is to determine whether good composers are also good improvisers. In the history of Western art music, we have three extraordinary examples (Bach, Mozart, Beethoven) wherein the answer is an emphatic yes. The difficulty they might have experienced in composition can be accounted for by differences between the two contexts of improvisation and composition, especially those that existed and were conventional in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Is that enough evidence to undermine J-L’s hypothesis? I do not think J-L provides sufficient evidence for the hypothesis that composition and improvisation have different underlying processes. In addition, it is unclear why J-L does not consider selection itself to be the underlying process of all (at least) artistic creativity, doing, and making.

The systems model looks to personal, social, and cultural factors in determining creativity. The systems model differs most from the cognitive and computational in that it places an emphasis on the external environment, rather than the internal states, of the agent. Csikszentmihalyi and Rich identify two components of the environment: domain and field. Creativity is a certain set of interactions between individual, domains, and fields. Of course, they address the agent as well. “At the micro level, the systems model suggests that the creative process involves a person’s ability to innovate while interacting mentally with the rules or practices of a domain, and while keeping in mind the judgments and practices of the field.”

The systems model is compatible with computational and cognitive models because these latter

---

models can be viewed as providing the details at the micro-level of the agent’s internal states, and the systems model provides the details of the context in which the agent operates.

In summary, all of the models either posit, or assume, or otherwise use selection as a fundamental unit of the rational reconstruction of creative acts, of which many theorists see improvisation as the example par excellence (that is why many of them use improvisation as their test case for their theory or model). Part of my contribution to understanding the nature of the basic rules the agent uses and has available for use is provided in the next section on taxonomy. I attempt to achieve two goals. First, provide an economical and precise way of classifying all of the variegated behaviors, practices, and genres involved in improvisation. Second, provide a way understanding the basic rules improvisers use and the constraints that determine and are constitutive of those rules.

2.1.3 Taxonomy

The only one of the imaginative arts in which I had from childhood taken great pleasure, was music; the best effect of which (and in this it surpasses perhaps every other art) consists in exciting enthusiasm; in winding up to a high pitch those feelings of an elevated kind which are already in the character, but to which this excitement gives a glow and a fervour, which though transitory at its utmost height, is precious for sustaining them at other times. This effect of music I had often experienced; but, like all my pleasurable susceptibilities, it was suspended during the gloomy period. I had sought relief again and again from this quarter, but found none. After the tide had turned, and I was in process of recovery, I had been helped forward by music, but in a much less elevated manner. I at this time first became acquainted with Weber’s Oberon, and the extreme pleasure which I drew from its delicious melodies did me good, by shewing me a source of pleasure to which I was as susceptible as ever. The good however was much impaired by the thought, that the pleasure of music (as is quite true of such pleasure as this was, that of mere tune) fades with familiarity, and requires either to be revived by intermittence, or fed by continual novelty. And it is very characteristic both of my then state, and of the general tone of my mind at this period of my life, that I was seriously tormented by the thought of the exhaustibility of musical combinations. The octave consists only of five tones and two semitones, which can be put together in only a limited
number of ways, of which but a small proportion are beautiful: most of these, it seemed to me, must have been already discovered, and there could not be room for a long succession of Mozarts and Webers, to strike out as these had done, entirely new and surpassingly rich veins of musical beauty. This source of anxiety may perhaps be thought to resemble that of philosophers of Laputa, who feared lest the sun should be burnt out. It was, however, connected with the best feature in my very unromantic and in no way honorable distress. For though my dejection, honestly looked at, could not be called other than egotistical, produced by the ruin, as I thought, of my fabric of happiness, yet the destiny of mankind in general was ever in my thoughts, and could not be separated from my own.\footnote{John Stuart Mill, \textit{Autobiography and Other Writings}, Riverside Editions, ed. Jack Stillinger (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1969), chapter V, 87-88.}

—John Stuart Mill, \textit{Autobiography}, Chapter V

John Stuart Mill was tormented by the thought that humans may exhaust all of the possible musical compositions, at least interesting and beautiful ones, thereby effectively bringing an end to music as a growing art form. Mill explicitly indicates in the above quotation that this problem, if it be one, was generated by thinking mathematically or ideally about Western music. To be more precise than Mill, there are a finite number of permutations of pitches with durational, rhythmic, and dynamic dimensions combinations. This is the case only when one (arbitrarily) caps the duration of time the permutations are notated or played. The number is enormous, perhaps inconceivable. The number is obtained by an algorithm involving exponents and factorials. Even if we cap the duration at thirty minutes, the number is so enormous that Mill’s worry is rendered moot. Even if Mill’s concern is with good or pleasant sounding sequences only, the number is very large and listening to these possible sequences of sounds would practically take many human lifetimes. Nonetheless, I wish to use Mill’s fundamental intuition as an impetus for the taxonomy of improvisation.

There are many ways of categorizing things, and metaphysics has made an industry of such tasks. Very often, a categorization is based upon its purpose. The idea that \textit{truth} should be
the purpose of all taxonomies and categorizations makes sense to me, especially when doing natural science, but then we also have to admit that there can be several truths here, especially when the objects of taxonomy are social phenomena and artifacts. So, what one wants is a taxonomy that is true to the ways things are in the world but also answers to our interests in doing the classification in the first place, which often goes beyond merely describing the world. This is not to say that “answering to our interests” is going to conflict with truth. Simply, it means that there can be many different categorizations, all of which are true, and each giving us different foci.

Below I construct a very general taxonomy with a high level of abstraction. Doing this will achieve my purpose in providing a taxonomy that fits all art forms, genres, aesthetic tastes, et cetera. This taxonomy will be compatible with other classifications whose interests will be more specific. Moreover, this taxonomy serves as a logical geography of improvisation. It helps one to understand and classify activities (or practices) and improvised works. Even though it is meant to cover all art forms, I will focus on music as my example. Furthermore, this taxonomy of improvisation is not just about classifying already documented and executed improvisations; although, as a byproduct, recordings (or other documentations) of improvisations may be classified according to this taxonomy. The purpose here is to give a highly general classification system of the possibilities open to individuals who improvise.61

I think the best way to achieve this is by a constraint-based system. By “constraints,” I mean restrictions on what can be done, should be done, and can be employed by the artists

---

61 Here I do not yet take a position on whether there can be non-human improvisers, such as non-human animals and robots. As mentioned above, there are computer programs that “improvise.” See David J. Mendoça and William Al Wallace, “A Cognitive Model of Improvisation in Emergency Management,” *IEEE Transactions on Systems, Man, and Cybernetics* 37, no. 4 (July 2007): 547-561.
themselves within an environment, particular institution, and tradition. Constraints may be expressed in the form of rules. I do not call it a rule-governed (or a rule-based) system because of the unwelcome commitments that term would bring. Thus, for an actor to improvise any number of constraints are and can be placed upon her in improvising. These could restrict what she says and what she does, how she moves and the like. A musician could be constrained by the physical limitations of the chosen instrument. Once the logical possibilities of constraints are set out, any number of these may be combined to form particular classifications. Of course, very generally, there are also the constraints on human beings in terms of shared physical and cognitive limitations, individual physical and cognitive limitations, spatio-temporal limitations, technological limitations, the materials available to the artists, et cetera. Artificial Intelligence (AI) experiments with improvisation have had some success. What counts as success here? The computer with the improvisation program generates a score or sounds that “sound like” moderately skilled human improvisations. One can take as inputs musical sounds or scores (or even other representations of sound-occurrences) and compose computer programs that would analyze these inputs. One kind of analysis is based on constructing rules that explain why the input is the way it is. These rules can then be used in the other direction: to generate novel outputs of scores or musical sounds. In other words, the only way a programmer would be able to invent computer programs that generate novel musical sequences is to analyze musical patterns that have already been composed or improvised by humans. The rules must be highly abstract and general in order to be able to be performed on a wide variety of new inputs. The inputs may be an inventory of notes based upon key, style, et cetera. (Pressing’s cognitive model calls this the “referent.”) My taxonomy is a way of making those inputs clear.
Since improvisation (and composition) is fundamentally cognitive and motor selection, then this presupposes a set of things from which to select. One can only select if there are options, choices. Now, it seems that whether a person (agent) is aware (conscious or cognizant of the options (all or even some)), one may always post facto reconstruct the set of choices which were available or present to the agent at the time of selection. By this I mean the set of choices that were available to the agent from an objective point of view. This set has little to do with the actual, individual conscious states of the agent; however, it does involve many specific conditions of the agent and the agent’s environment. For example, a musician $S$ may say that “it never occurred to me to play that B-flat after the A,” even though objectively that choice was available to $S$. Sometimes, however, we describe others, and even ourselves, as just doing something—no other options presented themselves to consciousness. So, “selection” may seem like an inappropriate term or concept for what is going on in improvisation. It may, however, seem more accurate in composition. When humans perform actions in quick succession, consciously it does not seem like a choice or decision is being made for each separate action. In fact, in some cases it may be difficult to individuate the rapid succession of actions into discrete units. It seems to be a unitary flow of movements. These are half-intentional actions. Beside the (SCI) case, examples of this kind of phenomenon are playing sports, talking, and just mundane actions like walking to the market. From a phenomenological perspective, in some moments the choice or decision aspect can be discerned, while other moments “feel” automatic. Consequently, it is in these seemingly automatic moments that selection may be an erroneous description. But there are several pieces of evidence that suggest that in both cases similar or the same processes are realized. First, it would be impossible to account for talent and skill if some sense of choice or selection or decision was not involved. Indeed, psychologists and others
indicate that some people are better than others (usually in some specific domain of behavior) in their speed of thinking, choosing, and moving in situations that require rapidity. In other words, if we cannot attribute responsibility to selection or choice, even in an attenuated sense, training and effort would be diminished or demolished. Why would one train if one could not control the automatic thinking or moving? What would be our understanding of talent and expertise? Second, there is reductio ad absurdum argument that can be given here, analogous to the one Thomas Nagel presents in the classic “Moral Luck” article. One could argue that artistic agents are never responsible for anything they do; they have no agency because all novel thoughts impinge. Humans do not cause their thoughts and selection. My only response is that creativity is still a mystery, and we are not yet epistemically entitled to run this argument to the point of absurdity. Furthermore, cognitive science has informed us that even in these moments sub-conscious motor and kinetic programs or mechanisms are running. Some of these were delineated for improvisation above. This is one reason why a phenomenology needs to be appended to cognitive models and the like. One should also be interested in what is present to the consciousness of the agent, and what is consciously occurring while playing (if anything), not only the underlying processes posited by a cognitive theory, nor what could be going on as argued for in a philosophical theory.

David Sudnow is perhaps the best example of a phenomenological approach to improvising. By introspecting on his improvised piano playing and his learning how to play

---

62 For example, see Sian Beilock, *Choke: What the Secrets of the Brain Reveal about Getting It Right When You Have To* (New York: Free Press, 2010).


piano and improvise, Sudnow gives excellent descriptions of the process and actions. One of the most important insights he gives is that selection in jazz piano improvisation is in large part about fingering and the way one’s hands and fingers move across the keys. I can attest that the same is true for stringed instruments, like guitar. Often, when I improvise, my attention is on finger patterns that I know work (with embellishments) over certain “changes.”

How strongly the phenomenology of playing an instrument comes to play in thinking about creativity and improvisation in particular comes to the fore in this extraordinary account of a conversation with the famous, brilliant pianist Bill Evans.

... I [Gene Lees] kidded him [Bill Evans] about his rocking a finger on a key on a long note at the end of a phrase. After all, the hammer has already left the string: one has no further physical contact with the sound. ‘Don’t you know the piano has no vibrato?’ I said.

‘Yes,’ Bill responded, ‘but trying for it affects what comes before it in the phrase.’

Evans reveals that there are motor selections that do not enter into the perceivable product (in this case sounds) but yet affect properties of that product. Not all selections will be perceivable in the final product (e.g., performance, recording).

One should also be aware that selection may be coerced in both a literal and metaphorical sense. External factors such as authorities may constrain what artists do, thereby eliminating or reducing choices. I may only have the resources to learn one instrument. If I only know how to play saxophone, I am not going to pick up a trumpet.

At any given time $t$, the agent (improviser, player, performer) has twelve pitches available in the range physically determined by the instrument. This range is vague because

---

given certain techniques, which some musicians are able to do and others not, and physical
enhancements to instruments, the range can be extended, both to the top and bottom of the
frequency or pitch range. But it would wrong to suppose that this complete selection options set
is fully available every time, in every context to an improviser. What decreases the possibilities
of the selection options group are the constraints that are given and/or accepted by the player, the
genre, context, et cetera. Now, the agent may at any point deviate from these constraints
(intentionally or otherwise), but she may not deviate from the complete selection options group,
unless she changes instrument or technique.

The idealized selection options group is coextensive with the set of all physically
realizable pitches and all possible durations. This set may be expressed in many ways. For
instance, one could simply give the Hertz (Hz) cycles (frequency) of the pitch indexed to a timed
duration, such as eight seconds or two seconds. Obviously, this is an infinite set, because the
duration of a produced pitch could be infinitely long, and the sound waves, although severely
limited by human audibility capacity (even non-human animal audibility) could be infinitely low
or high, although there are frequencies which we cease to call sounds. Practically, in Western
music theory, the accepted range of pitches is the human audition range (called audio or sonic),

\[66\] I am assuming the agent is using the Western Equal Temperament (ET) tempered system. On
the drawbacks of the exclusive use of the ET system that was more or less codified in the
eighteenth century, see Ross W. Duffin, *How Equal Temperament Ruined Harmony (and Why
You Should Care)* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007). Scholars have identified at least 150
different temperament tuning systems in Western art music. Of course, ET does not apply to
many non-Western music systems. The *locus classicus* is J. Murray Barbour, *Tuning and
which is approximately from 20 - 50 Hz (the lowest pipe organ sounds) to 20,000 - 30,000 Hz; while the accepted range of durations caps out at 128\textsuperscript{th} notes.\textsuperscript{67}

Selection is the process of choosing an output. The output may be physically realized or produced sound, or a notation for a realizable sound, or both. A single selection is actually an array of various factors as explicated in Pressing’s cognitive model. In using the term “choosing,” or “choice,” again I make no commitment to a theory of free will. This theory and taxonomy may remain neutral. If free will is false, then the selection process will be a product of some set of causal laws. Those causal laws will still have to operate within the taxonomy. Moreover, ideally a selection may be viewed as a choice of each discrete unit with relevant arrays, even though phenomenologically one may not be aware of all of the arrays. A musical phrase or lick may be played wherein the agent chose to play the lick \textit{as a whole}. The entire phrase, then, which may consist of several pitches of different durations, dynamics, rhythms, and attacks, is the unit of selection—not each discrete pitch et cetera.

Following are the selection options sets for musical sound generation (although I include a few examples from other art forms).

Music is a subset of sound. Musicians produce sounds. Thus, the constraints will involve the production of sound and its properties. The fundamental properties of sound are pitch (frequency), timbre, duration, rhythm, volume. Properties of music which supervene on those of sound are harmony, melody, counterpoint, phrase, theme, large-scale structural/organizational properties (such as AABA forms), expressive properties, dynamics, time signature, beat, key, and mode.

\textsuperscript{67} Obviously, the actual time length of a 128\textsuperscript{th} note will depend upon the meter and metronome or tempo marking.
**Master Set (MS):** the idealized selection options group of all possible sound frequencies, all possible durations, all possible timbres, et cetera. This set is infinite because it is not constrained by what is physically possible at a given location, time, and context. The infinity mainly derives from the duration function. Ideally, a pitch may be generated for an infinite amount of time.\(^6^8\)

Agent centered constraints divide into constraints that are externally imposed and not chosen by the agent, and those that are internally imposed. The latter may be deliberate or not. Agents are not always explicitly aware of these constraints. To repeat: this is an idealization.

**Human Master Set (HMS):** the set of selection options group of all sounds, timbres, and durations that humans are physically capable of auditing (including prosthetic hearing devices) and physically producing with or without devices. It might be desirable to remove the audition qualification here because (say) a dog whistle could be included in a composition. In such a case, for example, humans could “view” the sound on an oscilloscope. (HMS) includes human species-wide physical limitations. The human body has many kinds of limitations. Perceptual systems are limited, our facility, dexterity, et cetera are limited by anatomy and motor functions/capacity. Specifically, this results in the limits of hearing and seeing, singing and playing, and moving. Other physical limitations obtain because of environments. For example, gravity limits motion, weather and atmosphere limit sound production and perception.

---

\(^6^8\) The only physical assumption being made here is that the temporal dimension of the universe is infinite.
**Occurrent Set (OS):** the set of the selection options available to the agent indexed to the instrument, abilities, time, place, genre, and all other constraints accepted by the agent at the time of production. These include individual physical limitations. Some humans have physical limitations not shared by the species as a whole. For example, some humans cannot walk, or talk, or see colors. For those that possess such limitations, their (OS) will be restricted and constrained accordingly. Some of the limitations of the OS will be deliberately chosen by the agent, and others will not. Some of the constraints are merely a product of contingencies over which humans have no, or very little, control, such as some aspects of location, natural talents, some elements of social and cultural exposure, and the like.

(MS), (HMS), and (OS) are always overarching. They constrain and limit any other constraints and limitations that might be present. These selection options sets are representations of possibilities.

Next are the (more or less) internally imposed constraints that agents adopt. There are Macro- and Micro-level.

**Large-Scale (Macro) Form Constraints**

Examples include composing a sonnet, haiku, sonata form, rondo, samba, bossa nova, Afro-Cuban, AABA, not using any words that contain the letter ‘e’. All of these have structural or formal constraints, and some have content constraints.

**Micro-level: Genre and Sub-Genre Constraints**
Genres and sub-genres have conventions. Often, these conventions define the genre. If one wants and intends to create an individual work that is a member of a genre kind, then one must obey constraints and conventions. Examples include Film Noire, comedy, tragedy, opera buffo, blues, bebop, epic, pastoral, concerto, symphony, chamber music.

Micro-form Constraints within constraint sets above:

Examples include being in the key of C, the meter of 3/4, using the Dorian mode, playing happy sounds only, and playing without expression. Some examples of rules are as follows:

- play loudly
- play only c’ of any duration any rhythm you want
- play only eighth notes
- play in 3/4 waltz style
- play in the dorian mode
- play sounds expressive of sadness
- play in key of A Major
- hold any note for one minute
- play in a syncopated way
- play variations on X (melody)
- ornament the following basic theme $T$

Some of these are very vague, and I am not suggesting that these would be actual rules adopted (although the second one is close to Terry Riley’s famous piece *In C*). It is not clear
what would count as success in keeping under the constraint. But this is in part what criticism is about: showing us how why an artist is successful or not given the constraints. The critic will also make us aware of the constraints, though not using this taxonomy language.

Any number of these may be combined. For example, a bebop jazz player playing a “standard” would be under the following constraints (who and why these constraints are not important here): harmonic constraints given by the chord changes and progression of the tune, tempo and meter constraint established by the musicians performing and kept by the rhythm section of the ensemble, key and scales, and modes associated with the harmonic structure, to some extent playing only certain rhythms and syncopations, and then something we may call the vocabulary of bebop or straight-ahead jazz.

Finally, operating under the above constraints, the final product—an improvisation—results in the:

**Realized Set (RS):** the set of media with arrays actually chosen/selected by the agent and realized in a medium or notated in a medium (including an intentional mental states of remembering the selections).

There is a relationship between the selection group, the set of pitches, durations et cetera that are produced thereby chosen or selected by the agent, and the various sets of selection options groups. Rules may be formulated to represent these sets’ relations. Here is an example of a rule:
Rule: the physically realized selection group must always be smaller in number of selections than the number of elements in any of the selection options groups. If a selection options set is infinite, then this rule is necessarily true because humans cannot carry out any action for an infinite amount of time (if infinite time is even intelligible). If a selection options set is finite, then the only way it is possible for this rule to be false is if the physically realized selection group is equivalent to the idealized selection options set. There would be a one-to-one correspondence between the selected sounds in the realized group and the idealized selection options set, but not necessarily in any particular order since these are sets and not ordered $n$-tuples. Here are examples of theorems upon which rules are derived:

Theorem: (HMS) is a subset of (MS);

Theorem: (OS) is a subset of (HMS) and of (MS);

Theorem: (RS) must always be a subset of all of the selection options groups (sets) (MS, HMS, and OS);

Theorem: (RS) will always be a set of ordered $n$-tuples because it is a sound-sequence (and abstractly, a sound-structure).

The subset relation is determined by constraints. For example, (HMS) is a subset of (MS) because there are things that humans cannot do.

What are the philosophical consequences of such a taxonomy? First, this constraint based taxonomy provides additional evidence of the inherent vagueness of the boundaries between composition and improvising. This is the case because composition operates under similar constraints. Second, this taxonomy provides a fairly finely-grained system by which
improvisations can be classified. Improvisations are classified according to a specification of the constraints under which. This can be represented as structures, each element of the structure mapping onto idealized options sets and lower level constraint sets.

Now the important point for composing versus improvising is that these selection options sets are exactly the same for the composer in (SCC) and the improviser in (SCI). The OS for composers will be in general broader than for an improviser because in composition one is not limited to an instrument one is playing. But I would submit that composition is like make-believably being in a situation in which one is playing the instrument one is composing for at that specific time. The (MusPen) case establishes that in principle there is no difference between playing the sound, as in (SCI), and inscribing it, as in (SCC). Furthermore, from a phenomenological point of view, composers often experience their composing for various instruments in this way, although this is not always possible because composers usually cannot play (at least competently) all of the instruments for which they compose. Even if the composer cannot play a particular instrument, the composer’s familiarity with the way the instrument sounds would allow the composer to “hear” the composed lines in the composer’s mind’s ear. The fact that ideally both action-types have available to them the same resources is another piece of evidence in favor of a shared fundamental state. This fundamental state is best interpreted as selection because that is essentially what one does when one composes or improvises.

Both composing and improvising involve the same fundamental cognitive and motor states: selection. The motor components will be different depending on the instrument, notation device, et cetera. Selection gives rise to both action-types; selection is a necessary condition for both action-types. In music, the composer and improviser select pitches, durations, rhythms, 

---

timbres et cetera under constraints (as those discussed in the taxonomy section) from a set of possible options (which are also formed by constraints). One cannot imagine cases of composition or improvisation that do not involve some form of selection. On the other hand, selection is also involved in many action-types (and their tokens). One might say that all deliberative actions involve selection in the sense that the agent decides, chooses, that is, selects an appropriate action from a set of possibilities. Artistic selection differs from the selection that occurs in other action-types by its goals (aesthetic) and vehicle or media (paint, marble, words), and motor components (e.g., depressing keys on a keyboard).

2.1.4 Philosophical Models

Nicholas Wolterstorff has argued for a strong and categorical distinction between composing and improvising. This distinction results from his formidable account of what constitutes a musical work. Wolterstorff says,

A corollary to this understanding of the nature of composing is that to improvise is not to compose. That corollary is clearly correct. Suppose that someone has improvised on the organ. And suppose that he then goes home and scores a work of such a sort that his improvisation, judged by the requirements for correctness specified in the score, is at all points correct. In spite of that, the composer did not compose his work in performing his improvisation. In all likelihood, he did not even compose it while improvising. For in all likelihood, he did not, during his improvising, finish selecting that particular set of requirements for correctness of occurrence to be found in the score. Suppose, for example, that at a certain point in his improvisation he introduced a bit of rubato, with full consciousness of doing so. In so doing he has not yet decided whether to select rubato at that point as required for correctness of occurrence. One cannot uniquely extract a work from a performance.70

Wolterstorff here reveals that a necessary condition for composing is that the composer must select “that particular set of requirements for correctness of occurrence to be found in the score.” There are two, not mutually exclusive, meanings possible here. First, it could mean the implausible condition that something is composed only when written down, or inscribed somewhere. I derive this from the “score” part of the phrase. There is no a priori reason to exclude scoring without inscription from the process of composing. The way scores are written is an historical accident; the process could have been quite different (as I shall point out in 2.3 below). In short, composing by writing physical inscriptions of notation on manuscript paper is a historically contingent practice. People can “score” mentally, so to speak, it is in their heads, and they remember it. In addition, there are new computer technologies that score and orchestrate from inputs from various devices and instruments as in (MusPen) and (NotDev). This meaning should be rejected.

Second, Wolterstorff makes selecting features central to composing. I take “selecting” and “selection” to be a form of choosing and deciding. So, the composer makes decisions about what features shall be included (and sometimes excluded too); and in making decisions, the composer decides, sometimes by considering a set of alternatives, sometimes a bit more impetuously by just accepting what has impinged his mind as agreeable enough not to warrant considerations of other alternatives. But even if the composer did not consciously select from a set of alternatives (half-intentional), this is the best logical and cognitive reconstruction of what occurs (as shown above), and as was indicated the process can be below conscious awareness. For example, if I sit down in the seat to the left, I could have sit in the seat to the right, even if I never considered it. The fact that there are two alternatives makes this the case. Deciding is a
part of deliberating, and decisions, because logically tied to deciding, are deliberate. Now, to recall J. L. Austin,\textsuperscript{71} just because some act was spontaneous does not mean that the act was not deliberate. Austin says, “If I acted not even on impulse, but quite spontaneously (rather, tricky, this), and so even more evidently not deliberately, it is at least plausible to say that I still acted intentionally (cf. Sir Walter Raleigh). Again, a man put unto agony of mind and fearful indecision by some crisis may adopt some course such as running back into the blaze. No doubt he runs back into the blaze intentionally enough; he even (perhaps) decides to run back—though of course this is not necessary for him to do so ‘intentionally.’ But I think it might well be agreed he did not do so deliberately.”\textsuperscript{72} This does not mean that all spontaneous actions are deliberate; spontaneous actions, including improvisations, can be deliberate. Therefore, because Wolterstorff makes selecting a necessary condition for composing, and makes this a basis for distinguishing between composing and improvising, either (1) selecting in his sense is not a necessary condition for composing; or (2) selecting is not the condition which distinguishes composing from improvising; or (3), more radically, if Wolterstorff’s account of composing is correct, then there is no categorical difference between composing and improvising (or it is a matter of subtle degree, not categorical). Unfortunately, in his brief consideration of improvising, Wolterstorff does not discuss any other differences which might distinguish the two action-types.

If one counts the aleatory works, as discussed in Part I, as compositions and composing, then selection must be interpreted more loosely than how Wolterstorff uses it here. The selection


\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 277.
in aleatory compositions is not setting down requirements for correctness because in many cases there is no repeatable “correct” instantiation of the instructions. Moreover, the selection itself sets up the conditions for the performed work, but radically underdetermines what will be instantiated. I am inclined to say that (1) is false because a broader conception of selection is needed. A broader conception of selection is a necessary condition for composing. Consider Yasunao Tone as an example. I think there is selection but it is not in the way Wolterstorff intends. The compositional process used by Tone is as follows (for the relevant works that concern me here, which are *Solo for Wounded CD* and *Musica Iconologos*). Tone converts photographic images of Chinese/Japanese characters into sound files via a software program. Essentially this amounts to digitally encoding the images (if they are not already in digital format) and then converting that encoding into digital sound encoding. One could do this by making the image information map onto random bytes to form a sound file\(^{73}\), or use some algorithmic process, which would map image encoding to some sound encoding. Now, the software used for this conversion could be programmed such that tonal sound sequences would result, but Tone does not do that. He lets stand whatever results from the encoding. Then Tone burns this digital encoding onto a CD-R or the like. The compact disc is then “prepared” to override the error correction function on a CD player. The result is more or less random bursts of sound—noise. This playback is then recorded on another medium (could be another CD-R). So, the final recording is a documentation of the “wounded” CD playback. If this is done repeatedly, the result of the playback will never be the same because the error correction override

---

\(^{73}\) Notwithstanding that, one would have to specify whether it was 8 bit or 16 bit, and the sampling rate, et cetera.
will almost always produce a different noise burst. These playbacks may be considered performance tokens of the compositional process. So, what is the work? The work may reside in the instructions of the generative procedures that give rise to the sound sequences. But there is no selection of “that particular set of requirements for correctness of occurrence to be found in the score.”

Furthermore, one can extract a unique work from a performance. Consider (MusPen) in which a performance takes place, and a notated composition. Granted (MusPen) is far from (SCC), but what matters for a theory of composing and improvising are not just standard cases but logical possibilities. We do not want a theory to be limited by historical contingencies. Also, Wolterstorff here begs the question because he is already assuming that performances themselves cannot be works. Later I will argue that performances can be works. If performances are sometimes works or can be works, then why not allow performances themselves be the compositional process? One can decide that no changes will be made to what the performance specified. Of course (MusPen) can have the following consequence. Why not allow revision and editing in the (MusPen) case. This would be part of the performance, but this would not be allowed because the inscription process would not halt and then it would take additional notation to indicate whether the parts that are putative edits and revisions should not become part of the work proper, meaning that they would not be requirements for correctness for future performances or instantiations. From what Wolterstorff says here, he would be most concerned in the (Ind-1) case with the different intentional states in performing the (composed) sound sequence, improvising the sound sequence, and composing the sound-sequence. The one that would matter here is between the composer’s intentional states and the improviser’s...

74 In addition, if the conversion program contained a random element, the image to sound encoding could also be different every time a new conversion takes place.
intentional states. The composer intends to set down requirements for correctness, whereas the improviser does not. It should be noted that although it is not standard, improvisers can intend by their improvising to set down requirements for correctness—this is logically possible and there are actual cases of this.

In addition, Wolterstorff does not give us any reason to rule out the following possibility. Suppose our improvising organist decided before his performance to accept whatever features and notes et cetera that he happens to perform (and decide on) as the particular set of requirements for correctness of occurrence for his later scoring (inscribing) of his “composition.” Here the performer has made a selection of criteria, albeit a general one, and thereby meets Wolterstorff’s condition. In fact, there have been many compositions “composed” in this manner. Although what our improvising organist does may be indicative of compositional practice for the most part, calling this kind of activity “pre-composition” is begging the question. Often, such improvisation may be function as pre-composition, but such improvisation can be, and in some cases is, composition tout court.

An objection to my account of selecting here is that there are two (putatively different) intentional states, and thus possibly two different actions (or action-types) taking place. One is selecting with a score or “composition” in mind, which will be used for subsequent performances of the “work,” while the other admittedly qualifies as selecting but is not directed toward composition or subsequent performances or whatever. But this just shows that Austin is right: for the difference here is that there is selecting in both cases but in each case the purposes of selecting are different, but both are in fact deliberate and on purpose, or purposeful. Wolterstorff does not say much about purpose explicitly, but implicitly the notion of requirement for correctness which he does use in some sense entails future instantiations. But one can have
criteria (requirements) of correctness of occurrence without there ever being an occurrence.

What does this mean for my objection to Wolterstorff?

The answer, I think, is that (2) and (3) are correct, because the difference between the selection of composition and improvisation is a matter of degree. With regard to (2), for example, one might say that selecting occurs in both composing (obviously) and improvising, but more features are typically selected for prescription in composing than in improvising. This continuum between composing and improvising is what needs to be reflected in a philosophical understanding of the relationship between the two action-types. Consequently, we need an accurate philosophical model.

Next, I consider some alternatives for such models. Each model has its advantages and disadvantages. My evaluation of the models is based upon intuitions we have when considering the cases and thought experiments above (and others), the cognitive models, and our ordinary, informed understanding of composition and improvisation. I say “informed” understanding because many people’s conceptions of these action-types derives from what I call mythical anecdotes and stories of these processes, and the fact that many people have no direct experience of either composing or improvising in the formal sense.\footnote{Without intending to be arrogant or condescending, I want to point out that many characterizations of performing, composing, and especially improvising in the philosophical aesthetics literature are naïve, and consequently inaccurate. Aestheticians with backgrounds in music performance (not just musicology and history) tend to have more accurate descriptions.} However, one of my contentions is that a lot of what people do and have done in particular circumstances should count as composition and improvisation. Doodling is improvisation. Playing around on a piano more or less randomly is a form of improvisation. Writing an essay or poem is composition; making up a simple tune for a child to play during music lessons is composition. Which model or theory is correct?
Now I will introduce the linear model. Following is a diagram of (LM).

The line should be interpreted geometrically, and represents the flow of time or temporal coordinates. Reading from left to right, improvising is the first, solid part of the line, and the dotted continuation line represents composing. The linear model captures the notion that all artistic production (creation as selection) begins as improvisation. The difference between moving from the solid to the dotted part of the line is a function of time. The element that causes a different description of the action in time is when the agent decides to revise or edit what has been selected at previous points of the line. So there will be changes from solid to dotted lines throughout the process. It makes no difference whether the process is interrupted or not; although, significant amounts of interrupted time will favor composition because it is odd to think of an improvisation that would go on hiatus too many times, or is interrupted for long periods of time. The individuation of different action-tokens of a single action-type event may be determined by a chunk of time, as in duration, specific date and time, or by product. So the length of a jam session or concert, or the Beethoven’s Third Symphony could be ways of individuating action-tokens. (LM) may be interpreted as being a sub-diagram of a more general radial model. Thus:
The linear model line is a representation of each line “radiating” from the central bubble. Lines represent an action. Some lines will be improvising, and some will be composing. The central bubble is a representation of the fundamental property composing and improvising share.

Even though I did not conceive of this model from these sources, the Continuum Model (CM) has been hinted at, albeit non-philosophically, by musicologists. For example, Arnold Whittal says, “As is often the case with categorizations in music, however, absolute distinctions between improvisation and non-improvisatory activities cannot be sustained.” Bruno Nettl, one of the few scholars (an ethnomusicologist) to study improvisation seriously before the 1990s, comes close to expressing the (CM) model in this passage:

Improvisation and composition are frequently regarded as completely separate processes, but they may also be viewed as two forms of the same kind of thing (Nettl 1974b). The

---

phenomenally quick though by no means careless composition of a sonata by Schubert may well be related to the rapid combination and rearrangement of materials in an Indian improvisation, and the fact that Schubert used paper and pencil may in some respects be incidental. On the other hand, the gigantic labor involved in the careful composition of a symphony, with the use of sketches and planning diagrams, has just a bit in common with the technique of the Yahoi Indian composer who, within the strictest possible limits, nevertheless finds a large number of ways of relating to each other two short phrases that make up a song. For that matter, the many readings of a Beethoven sonata by a Horowitz are comparable to the twenty different ways in which an Arabic musician may render maqam in the *taqsim* form in the period of a year, or of his life. It may be rewarding to consider improvisation and composition in essence, if not in specific nature, as aspects of the same process. The extreme forms of both appear at opposite ends of a continuum. The one relies on speed, quick decision-making, and risk-taking in public, in front of an audience that wants to see the musician deal with his issues immediately. The other is characterized by laborious processes and the careful, thoughtful solution of complex problems.77

In addition, D. Gary Miller in a section called “Improvied/Non-improvied: Typology of Oral Poetry,” develops a continuum model for oral epic poetry: “The above examples suggest a continuum of relative fluidity ranging from completely fixed to completely free, with most oral traditions somewhere in between [sic], the degree being contingent primarily on social assumptions and the function/content of the text …”78 Miller then says that the distinction in the oral/written debates of ancient epic poetry, especially Homer, is not really about whether the texts were oral first then written down, but about the improvised/non-improved distinction. Miller’s “typology” is drawn thus:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>non-improvised</th>
<th>improvised</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stable</td>
<td>--------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Continuum Model says that composing and improvising are actions that inhabit a point or points on a continuum or spectrum. So a finite, geometric line with an infinite number of points between two set end points will represent this model. The upshot here is that there will be (or are) cases in which it will be difficult or impossible to determine whether an activity should count as composing or improvising. This may turn out to be a desirable consequence because given what we know about human action there may be no fact of the matter with respect to classification in a conceptual scheme that assumes these distinctions. There will be middle, grey area; but the location of a particular selection action being nearer one end point (either composing or improvising) could be used for classification purposes (with a “more or less” attached). For example, if an action is not at the end point of composition, but near it, it would count as composition and less as improvisation (and vice versa). The advantage of (CM) is that there seems to be cases where it is legitimately difficult to determine whether the artistic agent is purely improvising or purely composing (assuming we know what that means). Furthermore, even when considering (SCI) and (SCC), there are ambiguities. For example, one cannot rely solely on produced content to determine whether something was improvised or composed, as (IND-1) demonstrates. Imagine an audience being present while Bach or Beethoven was “composing.” One can easily imagine a case of a musician improvising (even with an audience) in order to create a prescriptive work. This method may seem unorthodox but it is not too far from what we know about Bach and other composers. In the case of Bach we definitely know certain works were directly derived from performed improvisations.\footnote{For example, the three part \textit{ricercar} from the \textit{Musical Offering} by Bach we know originated in an improvisation.} David Schulenberg writes, “What Bach and other keyboard players of his day actually did in fulfilling their professional obligations involved a great deal of improvisation: the realization of figured-bass
accompaniments, the performance of preludes during a church service, and so forth! Written-out solo pieces were employed principally for teaching and study …”  

Improvisation was central to ordinary musical practices during Bach’s time period, and this practice grounded what we now call composition. Peter Kivy writes, “We know, furthermore, both from anecdote and from fairly trivial inference, that a lot of the composer-performer’s musical compositions must contain material that had its origin in improvisational performance, thus, of course, further collapsing the composer-performer distinction.”  

Here Kivy does not go far enough. It should also be a trivial inference upon reflection of what composition is that improvisation is often the first stage of composing: new musical thoughts and expressions arise from somewhere, but in the same way as they do when improvising. The problem here is that Kivy, like so many others, necessarily associates improvisation with performance. Performing is in front of an audience. If one is sitting in front of the piano with manuscript paper and pencil, and trying things out on piano and writing down the ones that sound good, one is improvising and them writing down. Why restrict improvisation in such a narrow way? Simply, it is inaccurate to think improvisation necessarily involves an audience and performing. Therefore, Kivy is correct is correct that the composer-performer distinction collapses, but the composer-improviser distinction also collapses.

The current classical music culture does not appreciate this history, or if it does, then it rejects it. Classical performance music practice has reified these distinctions as if they were historically always the case. Reasons for this phenomenon, although beyond the scope of this project, should be investigated. Some have speculated about it. Some lament this situation.

Presently, Robert Levin, an extraordinary pianist, improvises. Levin expresses his wish in liner

---

notes to his own recording of Mozart piano concertos: “When improvisation regains its former position at the center of Classical music-making, perhaps the gap between composer and performer, between old and new music, between vernacular and art music, and between Classical performer and audience will narrow.”

Improvisations may become, or part of, a composition. But compositions can be parts of improvisations in only limited fashion. For example, in an (SCI) case, playing a quotation from a famous composition should count as improvised because the particular placement in the temporal order of playing, in addition to the harmonic implications (inter alia) are creative and novel. In addition, its placement in the temporal order of the sound sequence would not be prepared beforehand. Hence we have a slippery slope. Suppose the musician planned when to play the composition quotation before the putative improvised performance. This, then, would not be improvised. Both the content of the placement and the temporal ordering would be planned—that is too much planning to be categorized as improvised. In addition, I rule out cases in which a performer plays a previously improvised sound sequence. This case demonstrates that improvisations may be prescriptive, but the reproducing of the sound sequence is not an improvisation. Initially, the sound sequence was improvised; thereafter, it is the performance of an improvisational work (sound structure).

(CM) handles some difficult cases very well, but it also does not capture some fundamental intuitions we have about composing and improvising. (CM) seems to be correct for the Quick Muse case (mentioned in Part I). Quick Muse is an online poetry “competition” in which two poets are given a quotation as a theme to compose (read: write) a poem. This is the

---

only constraint imposed on them, except the time limit and the actual time of the competition. Thus, the poets may write in any poetic form they choose: sonnet, rhyme or no rhyme, free verse, meter et cetera. The poets have fifteen minutes to write the poem, and every action of the keyboard is “recorded” in real-time. Consequently, one may view the composition process itself: deletions, amendments, delays, et cetera. There are many things to discuss about this kind of case, but here I want to address the issue of whether the poets are improvising or not. It certainly is not the standard case of writing (or creating) a poem. It seems that this case has elements of composing and improvising. The poets may revise and edit within the time limit, but this constraint forces poets to write more spontaneously, to extemporize. What is one to do with such a case? Having a continuum allows one to locate such a case on the line in the grey area, and with changing constraints one can move the point more or less towards one end point of the line.

On the other hand, (CM) does not capture some features of improvising we might think are necessary. For example, that improvising must be a performance event (token) distinguishes (SCI) from (SCC). On (CM), this kind of necessary condition would be available only for the end point “improvisation;” the grey area section of the line could not make a categorical distinction in this way. Here the salient features of composing and improvising are slippery, which is desirable with respect to temporal dimensions of the creative act or acts, the amount and nature of preparation and planning, and the amount of editing and revision.

The linear model captures the initial stages of composition and improvisation as the same, viz., selection, but has the unfortunate consequence of calling all initial selection improvisation. (CM) captures the vagueness of composing versus improvising, but does not indicate the fundamental property both actions share. This is the case because an action located at either end point, definitely composing or definitely improvising, would not reflect sameness of
process in the initial stages. This is undesirable, as I will show when I discuss the third model: Genus-Species.

The genus may be called creation or selection. There are two ways to create art (I am eschewing the term “work of art” for the time being). Creating art is essentially a process in which an agent makes choices with respect to materials and how to put together or manipulate those materials. One creates relationships between elements of the materials. In painting, sculpture, and other plastic arts, this is obvious. In music, the material is sound production devices, sounds, and sonic properties.

Typically, the genus-species relation would look like this:

```
Genus
Creation/Selection

Species
Composition

Species
Improvisation
```

However, the genus-species relationship between composition and improvisation may need to be modified. This modification reflects the claim that in a fundamental sense improvisation is prior to composition. The diagram then needs to reflect that improvisation is the first step in composition in the sense of the production of original ideas, or the initial production of an idea,
but that composition also involves non-improvised determination or selection. An example of the latter would be the case of an agent (artist, composer) who after marking down initial “ideas,” proceeds to change them or put them together. Here the basic artistic content is present already, not created in the initial sense, but is rearranged. This still counts as composition and does best not considered editing or revising because editing/revision requires at least an intermediary finished sequence of manipulation, which is then altered, deleted, or amended. I define editing and revision as the altering, deletion, or amendment of content or form. That feature is an important phase of composition. As a result, the proper diagram might look like this:

Consequently, the creation-improvisation-composition relationship is not a strict genus-species relation (at least not in the traditional sense). The advantage of this model is that it reflects some historical facts about the relation between improvisation and composition (as distinct activities) in the Western musical tradition. From the late eighteenth century onwards, composition, like writing, has been privileged. This results in seeing improvisation as parasitic on composition.
Roger Scruton, for example, says that “The jazz performer is, in a sense, also a composer, or one part of a corporate composer. But to describe free improvisation in that way is to assume that composition is the paradigm case, and improvisation secondary. It would be truer to the history of music, and truer to our deeper musical instincts, to see things the other way round: to see composition as born from the writing-down of music, and from the subsequent transformation of the scribe from recorder to creator of the thing he writes. Jacques Derrida has famously criticized Western civilization as ‘logocentric’—privileging speech over writing, as the purveyor of human intention. The criticism is the opposite of the truth: writing has been so privileged by our civilization, in religion, law, and politics, as well as in art and literature, that we tend to lose sight of the fact that written signs owe their life to the thing which is written down.”

83 Now I think Scruton is being too simplistic about the relationship between speaking and writing and the contents that either can generate, but the point is that there had to be musical ideas communicated first otherwise there would be nothing to record, notate, and write down. It is also important to note two different questions here. First, there is an historical or anthropological question about which generative practice came first. Scruton seems to be addressing that question. Second, there is a theoretical question about the two action-types and their relation.

The reason why the above model of (G-S) is problematic is that it seems to equate creativity with improvisation. But we already have a state that accounts for the productive capacity of the creative process, and that is selection. So, we should let selection do its work and reject this enhanced (G-S) model.

The correct elements of (G-S) and (CM) need to be combined. Thus, the selection mechanism, which underlies both composing and improvising, needs to be understood as having

a potential infinite number of dotted lines emanating from basic selection to a point in the continuum line lying between the two end points—composing at one end point, improvisation on the other. Thus:

improvising    |-----------------------------------------------| composing

In one common definition of improvisation, that it is “composing in the course of performance,” there is a potential implication that improvising is a species of composing. Philip Alperson seems to champion this view. But this idea is faulty because it fails to see that the way in which improvising is like composing is in the fact that both action-types share the same process but do so in a different manner, which Lee Brown calls “modal” considerations. According to my account, the issue of whether composing is a species of improvisation, or improvisation is a species of composition, is a nonsensical question because both practices share a fundamental process called selection. Selecting is where the agency is. Selecting itself is neither composition nor improvisation. Of course, selection by actual human agents always occurs in either composing or improvising, or in the continuum between them. Consequently, to posit a process called selection is a theoretical construct, an abstraction.

The distinction between composing and improvising is one of degree. There is a spectrum or continuum of actions having improvisation to one side and composition on the other. Whether any one action lies categorically to one side with a firm degree of confidence is yet to be seen. So, my view is that the composition-improvisation distinction is not hard and fast but a

---

84 Thus, the title of the Bruno Nettl and Melissa Russell volume: *In the Course of Performance.*

continuum or spectrum. Consequently, it is vague. This does not mean that the metaphysics of the work must be vague too. What I will do in the work section is build the theory based upon those actions that are on the end of the spectrum, the ones we know, or think at least more probable, are improvisation.

If both composition and improvisation involve selection as their base cognitive/motor constituent or process, then one may wonder why we should have two action-types. Why not consider an adverbial theory of composition and improvisation. This would involve linguistic revisionism, but I do not think that that is a knock-down argument against such a theory—linguistic revision is sometimes warranted. Artists select compositionally or improvisedly. In this case the artist is fundamentally doing the same thing, viz., selecting, but there are two ways in which it may achieved. This is similar to the analysis of many other action-types (verbs), such as running and running quickly. I reject this view because the linear model is wrong, and because there is a disanalogy with other verbs. Even though I could begin composing and then improvise, and vice versa, in performances this cannot be the case. One has already composed and now it is being played, instantiated, performed. In addition, there are enough differences that obtain in most cases between composing and improvising to preclude an adverbial theory.

2.2 Properties

When a jazz master improvises, perhaps the most impressive aspect of the performance is its appearance of impromptu perfection. Although improvised, the performance has no mistake, false step, or deficiency. It looks inevitable, as if it could have been done in no other way, as if every stage were known to the performer from the beginning.

86 “Composedly” already exists as an adverb with a very different meaning. “Compositionally” exists, too, but sounds closer to the intended meaning here.
Paradoxically, we know that if the same jazz master performed the improvisation again, it would be entirely different, but it would still appear as if it could have been done in no other way, as if it were inevitable.87

— Francis-Noël Thomas and Mark Turner, *Clear and Simple as the Truth: Writing Classic Prose*

There are both metaphysical and evaluative issues with respect to the following properties: improvised/having been improvised, improvisatory (character)/as if it was improvised/sounds or looks improvised. "Improvised" can pick out a certain action-type or it can be used as an aesthetic property—but saying something is improvised or improvisatory as an aesthetic property does not necessarily entail anything about value. Sounding or looking or otherwise seeming improvised is often called “improvisatory” or “as if improvised.” I would like to discuss this property from a metaphysical point of view and bracket the evaluative issues. Since “improvised” and “composed” are genetic properties, not much discussion is required here because it has been addressed in the action theory section above. Medium specificity becomes process/generative specificity: certain kinds of content and/or attributes are better suited to one generative process rather than another. I am studying two generative processes, composition and improvisation. Performance is not a generative process because any performance will be either of a composition or an improvisation.

It is clear that there is a property of performances, and perhaps of other objects and events, that one may call “improvised.” This is meant in the sense that these performances meet the following criterion: if the performance was in fact improvised by the performer, then the performance has the property of having been improvised. Hence, this is a genetic property: the property is about the origin, or generative/productive process, of the object to which it is being ascribed. A performance may be an instantiation of this property, a bearer of this property, or

---

possess this property. In addition to performances in music, dance, and theatre, literary works and paintings could also be described as improvisatory. If an artist can improvise in a particular art form, then there is the potential for an object in that art form to be described as improvised. I will bracket the question of what kinds of thing can be bearers of such properties and just refer to performances and improvisations themselves, since it is clear that they are probably the best examples of such bearers.

It would seem that if this is the case with improvisation, then so it is with composition. If a sound sequence (or sound occurrence) has been composed (action-type), then it has the genetic property of having been composed.

Can we make a distinction between the properties is/was improvised and sounds improvised? Sounding improvised is not a necessary property of performances that are in fact improvised, because a performance may be improvised and not sound improvised (whatever that means for the moment). On the other hand, a performance could be of a composition but still sound improvised. One may want to say: if a performance sounds improvised to the listeners, then it has the property of sounding improvised. Consequently, sounding improvised is a perceptual property to some extent. In other words, the perception of listeners and their recognition completely determines the truth-conditions of the property ascription. This does not, however, entail that no background knowledge is required for ascription. One could not properly ascribe a performance as sounding improvised if one has not listened to it, and if one has not engaged with improvised (genetic sense) and composed works in the past. The problem for such an account of this property is whether consensus, or even something less than consensus, could ever be achieved with respect to various performances. Perhaps this is an empirical question. Since the truth-conditions, on this account, not only include direct perception but recognition
under a description, the perceiver would also require certain background knowledge for ascription. This would mean that *sounding improvised* would also be an artistic property. There are at least two kinds of properties that are relevant to aesthetic understanding: aesthetic properties and artistic properties. Aesthetic properties are more or less perceptual, and require little or no background knowledge about art history and the like for successful ascription. Artistic properties require background knowledge, sometimes a lot of it, for ascription.  

Where do the conditions, contexts, and instances from which we think we can say things like *sounds improvised*, whether or not we know in fact that it was improvised, derive? There must be experiences from which we derive our judgments about *sounding or seeming improvised*? Could it simply be the set of performances to which we were exposed in our personal histories?

Consequently, there is an epistemic requirement for the successful ascription of *improvisatory* and *as if improvised*. It might be too much to require that one have experiences of both composed and improvised works in a particular art form. Probably, it is sufficient that one have experiences of improvised works in *some* art forms. If one did not have some experience with improvisations, then it seems unlikely that one would be able to recognize the properties on which *improvisatory* supervenes. This supposes that there are properties of improvisations that can be detected by audiences. So what are these features? What does it mean to sound improvised or spontaneous? Is sounding improvised and spontaneous the same thing? My hunch is that what listeners (or viewers) are tracking are various attributes that are related through a family resemblance structure. So, there will be attributes of improvisations that are

---

88 The distinction between aesthetic and artistic properties is discussed in detail below in 2.3.
sometimes attributes of compositions, and there are no necessary attributes, those that are always present when a work *sounds improvised*.

A WOA may seem improvisational, even if it is scripted, if it has a feel of spontaneity to it. According to Gena Rowlands (in a broadcast interview with Charlie Rose), John Cassavetes’ films were mostly scripted except for his first (*Shadows*), which was improvised. So what most people are seeing in his films is the property of *looking improvised* not *being improvised*. Having been improvised is a factual property that picks out a genetic feature of a work. This property, therefore, is contingent upon the definition of the action-type “improvising.” Whereas sounding or looking improvised is a perceptual property that picks out features of a work, whether or not it was in fact improvised.

John Rockwell in the New York *Times*, for example, used the term as an aesthetic property but not a genetic one in a recent review of Yushiko Chuma’s *Sundown*, a music and dance piece. Rockwell writes, “A lot of the performance, especially outdoors, looked a little inconclusive and scattershot, with an improvisatory feeling, however carefully planned.”89 In this context, it seems Rockwell is using it in a somewhat negative sense because “improvisatory” occurs in the sentence with “inconclusive” and “scattershot.” But I can also see that “inconclusive” and “scattershot” may be positive attributes of WOAs, and thereby contribute to the WOA’s aesthetic value. On the other hand, one may interpret this sentence to mean that the improvisatory feel accounts for or explains the inconclusiveness and scattershot quality, in which case “improvisatory” could be value-neutral. Nonetheless, this is good example, demonstrating that such a property is used, and of how such a property is used, in practice, in criticism.

---

Usually, an audience member will know whether the performance she is going to experience is a performance of a composition or an improvisation, and sometimes there is a mixture of these, and perhaps even in the mixture a person would not be able to tell which part was improvised and which not improvised. This often happens in the case of watching television, theatre, or films. Did the actor *ad lib* that? Or was that written in the script? Answers to these questions may not be forthcoming from just direct experience of the performance. Answers would require information typically outside the normal conditions an audience member finds herself. Consequently, the determination of whether a particular sequence was composed/scripted or improvised is a matter of one’s epistemic position. Members of the cast and crew, presumably, would know the status of sequences. Even in cases where an audience member possesses the score or script, it might be impossible to determine improvisation or not. A change from the script (or a version of the script) could have been made during rehearsals, or at least prior to performances. In that case, the change would not be improvised during the performance.

What could it mean to say that some set of actions or sound-occurrences sound *as if it were improvised*? This sounds like a recognitional capacity. As with many other recognitional capacities, they are knowledge-based and perceptual. The knowledge may be technical and inductive. Here one’s previous experiences of listening to improvised (genetic sense) music, composed music, and knowledge of genres, art and music history would be relevant. One has memories of what it sounded like et cetera. One makes inferences about what can be done and what cannot be done, limits to human capacities and abilities. But there are problems. A recognizes P as sounding improvised, B does not. But this is just like any other aesthetic concept or property.
There is no property of music that *ipso facto* would distinguish between sounding improvised or composed. However, certain properties, such that if a musical performance or work possessed them to some high degree, might be able to distinguish these alleged properties. For example, large-scale structural features that some analyses ascribe to works may be highly improbable for an improviser to do simply because of human limitations. These limitations are cognitive (short-term and long-term memory limitations, certain “perspectival” requirements for locating and planning such large-scale features) and physical (movements, perceptual). But one must be very careful here not to underestimate human abilities. It is well-known especially in music that many prodigies and extraordinary players have abilities that go well beyond ordinary capacities: in motor skills, memory, retention, recall, perception, et cetera. These abilities do increase the probability of performing some of these large-scale features, to realize them in some extended improvisation over a single time, or recording session or over a career.

The property often associated with improvisation is spontaneity, which could be imagined more or less immediately, a certain ephemeral quality. Probably though the most important feature is the knowledge *that* this is an improvised performance. This also explains the positive evaluations of improviser and improvisation when the improvisation sounds like things that the audience knows were not (are not) improvised. The frame of reference, or background information, for evaluating these performances is non-improvisations. In this way, improvisation draws attention to the ways in which the conditions of making or creating can be important in critical and casual evaluation. For example, in a discussion of the Parry-Lord theory, D. Gary Miller says, “The appropriate question then becomes: Does improvisation-composition before a live audience foster devices that differ from those normally found in non-
improvised poetry, such that the two types may exhibit different formal properties?" He then goes on to see whether they in fact have different properties. In other words, Miller does literary criticism with this distinction in mind.

Another useful distinction can be made. Lee B. Brown suggests that in especially non-musical improvisation, in say painting or literature, perhaps a better term is non-performing artistic improvisation, there is temporal indifference between the audience of the artwork and its creation. That is, a painting (say) can be improvised in terms of the distinctive activity in which it was created, its modality, manner in which it was made, created, constructed but the audience does not and need not witness this. Consequently, there can be two identical objects in terms of perceptual properties and even modalities, but one main difference in modality: one was created improvisationally before exhibited, and the other was performed, improvised in the presence of an audience. It is a form of performance art. Do they both have the same property of improvised or improvisatory? Are there any aesthetic differences? Are we expected to imagine the performance conditions in the case of the temporally indifferent one? This distinction between improvising in painting (say) and music dissolves once one introduces recordings of musical improvisations. Is this not the same as the painting case? Does one really have to witness the improvisation live or in the studio? I do not think we want to claim that if a performance occurs in a studio setting, this feature itself excludes the performance being an improvisation. That sounds absurd to me. The studio improvisation still has the genetic property of being improvised whether any one witnesses it or not. This is not true if one requires that improvisations are performances and performances must have an audience. Why not say that the studio engineers

---

90 D. Gary Miller, 15.
and others in the studio count as an audience. In some sense they are an audience of what is being played.

Stanley Cavell seems to be talking about the *as if* property of improvised: a performance sounds as if it were or could have been improvised. It is not clear what the antonym property should be to “not sounding spontaneous.” If X is not spontaneous then what is it? Contrived (but this usually not a neutral term; it is negative)? Not fresh or planned? How can something *sound* planned, worked out? The answer might involve attributions of simplicity and complexity grounded in basic human capacities and abilities. For example, X might follow certain rules that only studied reflection could provide; or X is so complex and possesses such large-scale features that a human could only achieve this with editing, revising, and long-term activity and reflection.

It is not clear that sound-occurrences which are in fact improvised have the perceptual property that Cavell is attempting to explain. One thing is certain, however: given Cavell’s account, a composition does not necessarily have the property “*as if were* (or sounds) composed,” because compositions may have the property of being “improvisatory.” Although Cavell’s main purpose is not to defend the existence of such a property, for his overall argument to be persuasive he only needs this account to be plausible to function as an analogy for his arguments about fraudulence in contemporary music and art. When talking about “improvisatory,” Cavell is not talking about aleatoric methods or randomness, because those are the subjects (or targets) of his broader aim.

Within some two to three pages, Stanley Cavell in 1966 was able to broach many of the issues that are of philosophical and theoretical interest with regard to improvisation. In what is now considered by aestheticians as a classic, Cavell’s “Music Discomposed” is a mother lode of
ideas, musings, and commentary, and rich in philosophical, probing discourse. The pages that concern me here are roughly 200-202, where Cavell discusses improvisation.

Cavell introduces the concept of improvisation in order to make a broader point about fraudulence in modern (or contemporary) art, especially music. Here I want to address his comments about improvisation for their own sake, without regard to Cavell’s larger purpose (even though, if his account of improvisation is wrongheaded, then it may affect his larger project as well).

Cavell’s broad understanding of improvisation as “certain qualities of music generally” is about how a listener might perceive some music. I interpret this to be similar to the Wittgensteinian idea of, instead of “seeing as,” “hearing as ...” Hearing as reveals that listening is infected with attitudes, expectations, and even fabrications. In this case it would be (inter alia) hearing the music as if it were improvised (or as if it were the product of improvisation). But what are these purported features of music? If this type of listening is possible, then the person must have some prior concept of improvisation before she will be able to “hear the music as improvised...” Otherwise, how would one know that one was listening as if the music were improvised as opposed to hearing the music some other way? I take it that these general features of music to which Cavell is referring are in opposition to features music has when it is composed and does not sound as if it could have been improvised. There are limits to what one can see or hear as improvised. That seems to be Cavell’s point.

But the music Cavell is referring to is, by historical fact, more or less composed. It was composed in the sense that there was opportunity for revision, even though parts may have had their source in improvisation. So, one could at least in principle, according to Cavell, listen to music as if it were being improvised instead of having been composed prior to its performance,
namely the performance one happens to be listening to at the time. This seems to depend upon a
strict distinction between composing and improvising. On the other hand, it might not
presuppose this strict distinction because Cavell admittedly uses the concept of improvisation
with unusual, perhaps even idiosyncratic, broadness. That is legitimate as long as one can make
sense of this concept in that way. As I argued above, I do not think that this distinction is strict,
and it is sometimes untenable in that it hinders and obfuscates generative/production conditions
instead of illuminate them. The way in which Cavell is asking one to listen does not consider the
implications of the actual conditions of composition: the composer improvising either in her
“mind’s ear,” or on an instrument to herself, and writing it down, and then possibly revising. So
what Cavell must mean when he says that around the time of Beethoven this type of listening
ceases to be imaginable, this feigned property of improvisation, is that the music no longer seems
to be imaginable as the product of a process of performed, spontaneous composition without
revision. There were large and long-term plans and goals of the compositions that could have
been completed only with large stretches of time for reflection and revision, looking back on
what had already been composed, comparisons and juxtapositions of sections and pieces—all
tasks that need much time and editorial sensibility. (These are the kind of properties with which
Schenkerian analysis is concerned.) These large-scale properties are not normally associated
with improvisation.

It is worth reproducing the whole of this brilliant passage, even though it is long:

The concept of improvisation, unlike the concept of chance, is one which has established
and familiar uses in the practice of music theorists and historians. An ethnomusicologist
will have a recourse to the concept as a way of accounting for the creation-cum-
performance of the music of cultures, or classes, which have no functionaries we would
think of as composers, and no objects we would think of as embodying the intention to
art; and within the realm of composed (written) music, improvisation is, until recent
times, recognized as explicitly called for at certain sharply marked incidents of a performance—in the awarding of cadenzas, in the opportunities of ornamentation, in the realization of figured bass. In such uses, the concept has little explanatory power, but seems merely to name events which one knows, as matters of historical fact (that is, as facts independent of anything a critic would have to discover by an analysis or interpretation of the musical material as an aesthetic phenomenon), not to have been composed.

My use of the concept is far more general. I mean it to refer to certain qualities of music generally. Perhaps what I am getting at can be brought out this way. In listening to a great deal of music, particularly to the time of Beethoven, it would, I want to suggest, be possible to imagine that it was being improvised. Its mere complexity, or a certain kind of complexity, would be no obstacle. (Bach, we are told, was capable of improvising double fugues on any given subjects.) I do not suggest that a chorus or a symphony orchestra can be imagined to be improvising music; on the contrary, a group improvisation itself has a particular sound. On the other hand I do not wish to restrict the sense of improvisation to the performance of one player either. It may help to say: One can hear, in the music in question, how the composition is related to, or could grow in familiar ways, from a process of improvisation; as though the parts meted out by the composer were re-enactments, or dramatizations, of successes his improvisations had discovered—given the finish and permanence the occasion deserves and the public demands, but containing essentially only such discoveries. If this could be granted, a further suggestion becomes possible. Somewhere in the development of Beethoven, this ceases to be imaginable. (I do not include all music after Beethoven. Chopin and Liszt clearly seem improvisatory, in the sense intended; so do Brahms Intermezzi, but not Brahms Symphonies; early Stravinsky, perhaps, but not recent Stravinsky.)

Why might such a phenomenon occur? It is, obviously enough, within contexts fully defined by shared formulas that the possibilities of full, explicit improvisation traditionally exists—whether one thinks of the great epics of literature (whose “oral-formulaic” character is established), or of ancient Chinese painting, or of Eastern music, or of the theatre of the Commedia dell’Arte, or jazz. If it seems a paradox that the reliance on formula should follow the fullest release of spontaneity, that must have less to do with the relation of these phenomena than with recent revolutions in our aesthetic requirements. The suggestion, however, is this. The context in which we can hear music as improvisatory is one in which the language it employs, its conventions, are familiar or obvious enough (whether because simple or because they permit of a total mastery or perspicuity) that no point are we or the performer in doubt about our location or goal; there are solutions to every problem, permitting the exercise of familiar forms of resourcefulness; a mistake is clearly recognizable as such, and may even present a chance to be seized; and just as the general range of chances is circumscribed, so there is a preparation for every chance, and if not an inspired one, then a formula for one. But in the late experience of Beethoven, it is as if our freedom to act no longer depends on the possibility of spontaneity; improvising to fit a given lack or need is no longer enough. The entire enterprise of action and of communication has become problematic. The problem is no longer how to do what you want, but to know what would satisfy you. We could also say: Convention as a whole now looked upon not as a firm inheritance from the past, but as a continuing improvisation in the face of problems we no longer
understand. Nothing we now have to say, no personal utterance, has its meaning conveyed in the convention and formulas we now share. In a time of slogans, sponsored messages, ideologies, psychological warfare, mass projects, where words have lost touch with their sources and objects, and in a phonographic culture where music is for dreaming, or for kissing, or for taking a shower, or for having your teeth drilled, our choices seem to be those of silence, or nihilism (the denial of the value of shared meaning altogether), or statements so personal as to form the possibility of communication without the support of convention—perhaps to become the source of new convention. An, then, of course, they are most likely to fail even to seem to communicate. Such, at any rate, are the choices which the modern works of art I know seem to me to have made. I should say that the attempt to re-invent convention is the alternative I take Schoenberg and Stravinsky and Bartok to have taken; whereas in their total organization, Krenek and Stockhausen have chosen nihilism.91

Cavell is correct in saying that there are limits to his exercise of imagination. For example, when one is listening to an orchestral or choral piece, it is difficult to imagine how such a piece could be collectively improvised by all of the musicians. Such a feat is imaginatively resistant. At minimum, it would be highly improbable for this to happen, even though such a thing is logically possible. Collective improvisations, he says interestingly, have a particular sound. I take this to be some perceptual property, something irreducible, as in “I cannot say to which physical properties it reduces but I know when I hear it”—it is veridical and recognitional.

But I do take issue with some of what Cavell is suggesting. I begin with this early (1833) account of Mozart’s talent for improvisation.

In the art of free improvisation Mozart had no equal. His improvisations were as well-ordered as if he had them lying written out before him. This led several to think that, when he performed an improvisation in public, he must have thought everything out, and practiced it, beforehand. Albrechtsberger thought so too. But one evening they met at a musical soiree; Mozart was in a good mood and demanded a theme of Albrechtsberger. The latter played him an old German popular song. Mozart sat down and improvised in this theme for an hour in such a way as to excite general admiration and show by means

---

of variations and fugues (in which he never departed from the theme) that he was master of every aspect of the musician’s art.  

Albrechtsberger, if not present and recording technology were available, would not have ascribed sounds improvised to this Mozart performance. One cannot underestimate the abilities of such geniuses.

Cavell suggests that there is this break in the history of music, and perhaps it can be broadened to other art forms, such that roughly before Beethoven (or early Beethoven as Cavell would have it) Western art music sounds as if it could have been improvised or derived from improvisations. In fact, a large part of early music was improvised and derived from personal and public improvisations, especially in J. S. Bach's case. From roughly late Beethoven and after Western art music sounds as if it cannot be improvised or derived from improvisations. Why? Even though Cavell does not say explicitly what the source of this transition is, one can surmise that it is this later period's musical complexity, its large-scale structural features, its "juxtaposition." One obvious criticism of this view is to say that Cavell underestimates what in fact can be improvised by expert, talented, skillful musicians. One cannot be cheap about this: both Cavell cannot be cheap and criticisms of him cannot be cheap. What I mean is that obviously a group of orchestral musicians are not going to get together for a "jam session" on Saturday night and by chance improvise Beethoven's Sixth Symphony. So the point cannot just be about instrumentation and the complexity that is derived from it (which Cavell addresses), and the concomitant coordination problems that would involve. This thought experiment is not impossible but improbable, just like the monkeys accidentally typing out Hamlet. (the

---

92 Abbe Stadler, 1833 autobiography quoted in Taruskin, 287.
symphony case is more probable than the monkeys, I should think.) Cavell's point is about the sonic properties themselves, or as he says it, "certain qualities of music generally."\(^\text{93}\)

So a more genuine criticism of Cavell is that he presupposes an oversimplification of what improvisation means and has meant, and that the goals of the agents of Western art music (composers, performers) have changed dramatically with respect to improvisation through the historical periods of music and art. One might say that there are three more or less distinct narratives of the meaning and goals of improvisation in Western art and music. One is the Classical view, which would include the Baroque and early Classical periods of music history. Here the goal of improvisation was *not* to sound improvised, to conceal the generative practice that has given rise to the product of the improvisation, and to keep in line with non-improvised evaluative criteria. This is what Gerald Bruns has called "rhetorical" improvisation.\(^\text{94}\) This period is about embellishment, working within fixed forms, et cetera. And the history provided in Part I justifies this view: figured bass, ricercar, cadenza, faburden, et cetera. There is no attempt to loosen up the non-improvised structures. Yet this is just what Cavell calls sounds *as if* improvised.

The Romantic view of improvisation is to have less concealment. There is a loosening up of structures and allowing more freedom, this is what makes the Romantic period different from the Classical. But still keeps within the evaluative criteria of non-improvised evaluative criteria. This period also allows sounding improvised a bit more, certainly more than classical. Examples are the development of the impromptu, fantasia, the construction of many of the famous cadenzas to the Classical composers, etc.

\(^\text{93}\) Cavell, 200.

While the modernist/contemporary view is to not conceal at all, want to sound spontaneous, not concerned with keeping up with the evaluative criteria of non-improvised, in fact eschewing and sometimes purposefully subverting those criteria.

I think that I have license to characterize a whole history here in this way to counter Cavell's general characterization as well; in fact Cavell's is even more ambitious than mine: it is more general and far-reaching. Furthermore, this is no different than Danto's interpretation of art history. Of course, some people think Danto's theory is false, or does not resonate well with the actual, detailed study of the history of art. Nonetheless, those criticisms are internal to the process. In other words, these criticisms are aimed at Danto's conception of how art history has progressed and the organizing principles by which one can retrospectively make sense of such. External criticisms would be say that the whole enterprise of attempting to characterize history with grand themes. To argue against this view would take me too far from the subject at hand. So I shall hand wave here and simply say I do think history, besides studying the minutiae, which is important, would be less interesting and useful from the point of view of using history to learn about who we are, our past, what is possible, and where we are going. Without such grand narratives, those goals and uses of history would have to be withdrawn. Yet this is a major reason why we study history and take keen interest in it.

Now let us apply this way of viewing the historical narrative of improvisation to Cavell's view. He assumes a unitary narrative of improvisation, otherwise his view would not even make sense. Now I am not saying that Cavell's view is incoherent. It is internally consistent in the sense that all he needs to make his claim is for people to be able to distinguish between two general kinds of sounding music, before and after his breakpoint. But its basis is faulty. One is

---

not going to be able to suppose a static sounding *as if improvised* because the goals etc. of improvisation changed. But does Cavell's view then make sense for just Baroque and early Classical going into the late Classical and Romantic period? Is that all he needs to make his point. I think not because his point is not just a historical one, but a general theoretical one (cite evidence of this).

These improvisation conventions and values were formed according to not only aesthetic concerns and interests but social ones too. These were not formed in an aesthetic vacuum—to think so would be naïve.

The paradox that Cavell is exposing and taking advantage of is that the conditions that make improvisation possible as an option, a possible act, are exactly those of composition as well. For composition to have been foregone, we need not look to improvisation, nay, it is contemporary music of chance and total direction that is the alternative (or enemy as some would have it).

Questions for Cavell’s use of improvisatory are as follows. Is it plausible to say that people could reliably and consistently distinguish between sound occurrences that sound improvised or sound composed? What assumptions must be in place for a property like *improvisatory* to be useful at all?

I think that Cavell’s account is confused because it assumes certain beliefs about compositions and improvisations that are false or questionable. Cavell, like many others, underestimates what may be and what has been achieved in improvisations, and neglects a more accurate account of composing as involving improvising. Furthermore, improvisations do not have any particular “sound.” Anything improvised could have been composed, and anything composed *could have* been improvised (in a logically possible sense) though it is improbable that
would be the case. The fact that it in many cases it is highly improbable, although not impossible (logically possible), that a set of orchestra musicians together improvised a sound-occurrence corresponding to Brahms’s Fourth Symphony score is not relevant here. Why? Is it really a misunderstanding of probability, or is it that it underestimates human capacities? It just takes more time and reflection to create a symphony with complex relations like Brahms’s Fourth than is possible for a human spontaneously creating, or creating while performing. Perhaps the better answer is that that is not what a set of musicians do when they get together to improvise. They are not trying to create a classical symphony, that is not their goal. Furthermore, many famous, justly lauded improvisations have complexity on par with classical music features (one should think of Clifford Brown, Sonny Rollins, John Coltrane). Now in some sense, but a very narrow and useless sense, one may speak of “improvisatory.” For example, when some music sounds like jazz, people tend to say something like “sounds improvised” et cetera. However, the problems here are 1) the music may in fact not be improvised; and 2) this presupposes the equation of jazz with improvisation, which is false.

2.3 Works of Art

Pop (or jazz) culture, in the starkest contrast to classical, has a concept of work-identity so fluid as to be practically indefinable. (It is a famous unresolved problem of musicology, in fact.)


I must warn at the outset that I will not provide a comprehensive theory of art works, nor even musical works, because I do not have one. Nor do I need one to accomplish the goals of

---

96 Taruskin, 281.
this section. (Compare this to the fact that I did not have a comprehensive account of artistic creation in the above section.) However, I do provide some insights about works of art and musical works, and defend the thesis that improvisations are works. Moreover, I will not be providing a comprehensive overview of the literature on musical works, in part because Stephen Davies has already done this in his masterful book *Musical Works and Performances: A Philosophical Exploration*.97

In addition, my theory of improvisations as works—that they are WOAs and their particular nature—may proceed without making an explicit connection between the action theory and ontology of work-products. As I said earlier, the correct model of the action-types of composition and improvisation is the continuum model even though that model is troublesome for a stable ontology of work-products. Therefore, what I say henceforth may be interpreted as the results of a generative process that clearly falls on the extreme improvisation side of the continuum line. Alternatively, but more controversially, the continuum model may suggest that the ontology of the results of composing and improvising ought to be the same. This is the case because since composing and improvising fundamentally share the same logical and cognitive process of selection, and most composing and improvising are mixed enterprises (the reason for the continuum), an account of the WOA can be uniform. One consequence of this would be that an account of a MW from an (SCC) case would be admitting improvisation to some degree, and whatever account of a MW from (SCI) would be admitting composition and all that entails to some degree.

---

There will be two sets of arguments for the conclusion that improvisations are works: direct and indirect. The first set of indirect arguments will be considering the major challenges that have been put forward to classifying improvisations as WOAs. I shall undermine each of these challenges. Undermining those challenges is not sufficient for demonstrating that improvisations are WOAs (there could be other reasons); however, it does clear the way for more positive, direct arguments. The second set of indirect arguments will be burden-shifting. The presumption among aestheticians today is that improvisations are not WOAs (of course, there is an important minority). I will remove this presumption in order to demonstrate that it is plausible to think that improvisations are WOAs. I will accomplish this by showing that improvisations are covered by the most sophisticated, widely accepted theory of the musical work, which is Jerrold Levinson’s indicated structure theory. Consequently, the burden of proof will be on the naysayers to show us why improvisations are not WOAs; however, it could still be the case that improvisations are not WOAs. Another problem here is that although musical improvisations can be covered by Levinson’s theory of musical works, this theory does not capture all of the salient features of improvisations, which may be important or essential to the identity of an improvised work. Some of these shortcomings are similar to why Levinson’s theory seems to have limited application in general (which he recognizes). Moreover, non-musical improvisations are not covered by Levinson’s theory. The third indirect argument will be generated by the question: if improvisations are not works, then what are they? I will look at some of the answers given to this question, and consider other logical possibilities. I will show that none of these other possibilities is a plausible account of what improvisations are. Hence, an improvisation as a WOA is the best choice among alternatives. The set of alternatives, however, may not be exhaustive, thus making this argument indirect.
The direct argument involves providing a positive theory of improvisational works. Presenting a positive theory goes beyond mere burden-shifting, process of elimination (best among alternatives), and undermining counterarguments. In some sense, providing a positive theory constitutes an “existence proof,” i.e., if one can do it, and there is no other plausible alternative, then it must be the case. First, I will draw upon the indirect argument that improvisations do meet the conditions of some of the current theories of the work, and so are works under those theories (like Levinson’s). The features of these theories that improvisations meet, and the salient features of improvisations that are not captured, will inspire the positive account I shall give. I will show that improvisations need a more finely tuned theory of the work than Levinson’s. In addition, whilst doing this, questions of individuation will be addressed. My account coheres well with, and preserves, intuitions both musicians and non-musicians have about improvising and improvisations, and it explains improvisational practices in the various art forms.

2.3.1 A General Critique of “Musical Work” and a Defense

The conviction persists, though history shows it to be a hallucination, that all the questions that the human mind has asked are questions that can be answered in terms of the alternatives that the questions themselves present. But in fact, intellectual progress usually occurs through sheer abandonment of questions together with both of the alternatives they assume, an abandonment that results from their decreasing vitalism and a change of urgent interest. We do not solve them, we get over them.98

—John Dewey

Before I begin my positive account and criticisms of other views and theories, I will address some meta-ontological issues. When one is constructing an ontology, there are overt and covert assumptions or presuppositions lying behind the theory. Recently, aestheticians have begun to discuss and investigate these explicitly as meta-ontological issues; however, there are moments in the history of analytic philosophy that address these issues, and certainly Kant could be viewed as doing this systematically in his *Critiques*. One may call these meta-ontological issues and considerations. Amie Thomasson suggests that “… meta-ontology, as applied to issues in the ontology of art, [are] designed to examine what it is we are doing when we formulate theories about the ontology of art, how we can adjudicate among the competing theories, and what the limits of knowledge are in this area.” In my view, broadly considered, meta-ontological issues involve the investigation of assumptions and presuppositions about other ontological theories (usually broader theories, such as theories of abstract objects or of material objects); the purpose and function of ontology and metaphysics more generally; facts about the world; and scientific theories that may or may not be relevant to the ontological theory at hand.

It is now commonplace that there are such things as musical works (MW) or musical works of art. This was not always the case. As Lydia Goehr has shown, *our* (read: Western, in analytic philosophy I am thinking of P. F. Strawson. Wittgenstein is another example. On meta-ontology explicitly recognized in aesthetics, see, for example, Amie L. Thomasson, “The Ontology of Art and Knowledge in Aesthetics,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 68, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 221-229; “Ontological Innovation in Art,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 68, no. 2 (2010): 119-130; and *Ordinary Objects* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

100 Amie L. Thomasson, “The Ontology of Art and Knowledge in Aesthetics,” 222.

101 For example, roughly a third (33%) of Julian Dodd’s book *Works of Music: An Essay in Ontology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) is dedicated to the theory of type/token from a more or less purely metaphysical point of view. This seems reasonable given that his theory of musical works sits within standard type/token theory.
European, classical, art music) concept of musical work-hood does not become static and iron-clad until roughly 1800.\textsuperscript{102} There were, certainly, related concepts working in non-Western music and in antiquity. Where and how do MWs fit into our musical practices? How are MWs, if they exist, related to sounds, musical sounds, pitch, tone, melody, rhythm, meter, timbre, scores, notation(s), performances, arrangements, transcriptions, orchestrations, various kinds of recordings, recording media, digital computer technology, and improvisations? Is it useful or explanatory to have MWs in an ontological theory? Are musical performances representations or instantiations (in sound) of scores, or are scores representations or instantiations of something like sound-structures or sound-occurrences in performances? What is the MW in jazz and other popular music genres? Is there a work-concept in popular genres that resembles Western classical art music? Notice that these ontological questions are in addition to questions of the basic, fundamental constituents of musical sound and sound.

In my view, the debates in the metaphysics of music have ignored some \textit{purely} metaphysical points. First, all types are eternal by definition—they are non-spatio-temporal, abstract objects. Second, any pattern or sequence of movements, sounds, orthography, et cetera is an instantiation of a type. These are very basic points, but their relevance and significance in WOA theories is often confused or ignored. Whether I doodle on the piano, practice a Beethoven sonata, improvise a solo over the “All the Things You Are,” I am bringing into existence a token of a type whose existence preceded my token. Now pure types, things like words, possible chess games, sets of numbers, cannot—it is often said—be identified with works, or works cannot be identified with pure types because pure types lack properties that we think works should or do possess. Consequently, a main issue for theories of WOAs is about

what those properties are and how they can be incorporated into a clear, coherent, metaphysically sound theory. Should aesthetic and artistic properties be included in the identity conditions of a WOA? Should authorship be included? So, for example, pure types may be ruled out as being WOAs because pure types are not created by humans, they exist before humans instantiate them. But types may be “juiced up” to include many kinds of properties, including aesthetic and artistic properties. If they are, then the issue that remains is whether one wants to include authorship (and all of the properties that come with it) in the identity of a WOA.

In philosophical aesthetics, aesthetic properties\textsuperscript{103} are a thorny issue: their nature, ascription or attribution conditions, appropriate bearers, epistemology, and taxonomy are all controversial, and have a vast literature. Those issues, however, are beyond the scope of this project. I use aesthetic properties in the way understood by Sibley \textit{et alii}.\textsuperscript{104}

There are many ways of categorizing all of the properties relevant to criticism, evaluation and appreciation of works of art and other objects and events that receive our aesthetic attention. But in general there seem to be at least these: aesthetic (including second-order perceptual, taste, formal, and Gestalt properties), artistic, expressive (including emotive and reactive properties), representational (including exemplification, appropriation, et cetera), and semantic/meaning properties. The important distinction of concern to me here is that between aesthetic and artistic properties. Arthur Danto, Peter Kivy, Jerrold Levinson and others have made the distinction

\textsuperscript{103} I use the term “property” as more or less synonymous with attribute, quality, characteristic, feature, and trait. Levinson points out that there is a difference between a property and a quality: being graceful versus gracefulness. See Jerrold Levinson, “WOAs and the Future,” in \textit{Music, Art, and Metaphysics: Essays in Philosophical Aesthetics} (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 179-214.

between aesthetic and artistic properties. Perhaps calling the latter “artistic” properties may be unfortunate, a bit misleading, and sometimes even inaccurate, but that is what we are stuck with for now, and I shall use that term. Aesthetic properties are mainly perceptual; they are sensual and structural. Examples include: beauty, ugliness, garishness, unity, flamboyance, coherence, gracefulness, vivid, restrained, second-order perceptual properties, behavior properties, Gestalt properties, taste properties. Jerrold Levinson has defined artistic properties thus: “Artistic properties differ from aesthetic properties in that they do not merely depend on the WOA’s relation to other WOAs and the surrounding artistic background—they are not merely the perceivable upshot of that contextual placement—but are inherently a matter of that relationality.” He also says that artistic properties are “appreciatively relevant ones that are...

---

105 Jerrold Levinson, “WOAs and the Future,” in Music, Art, and Metaphysics: Essays in Philosophical Aesthetics (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 179-214. Levinson distinguishes other kinds of properties as well, such as representational and meaning properties—all of these make up the total aesthetic content of a work of art. He includes expressive properties in the category of aesthetic properties; I would create a different category for these. Also see Peter Kivy, The Corded Shell: Reflections on Musical Expression (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 115-116.


Examples of aesthetic properties are: what might be called pure value properties (being beautiful, sublime, ugly, dreary); emotion properties (being sad, joyful, sombre, angry); formal qualities (balanced, tightly knit, loosely woven, graceful); behavioral properties (being bouncy, [dreary], daring, [bold], sluggish,); evocative qualities (being powerful, boring, amusing, [humorous], stirring, [intense, interesting, exciting]); representational qualities ([verisimilitude], being true-to-life, distorted, realistic); what might be called second-order perceptual properties (vivid or pure (said of colors or tones), [intense], dull, muted, [articulated, slurred]). From Alan H. Goldman, “Properties, Aesthetic,” in A Companion to Aesthetics, Blackwell Companions to Philosophy Series, ed. David Cooper (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1992), 342. These may said to supervene on non-aesthetic properties of objects and events such as shape, color, identification of subject matter in representation, et cetera. From a list of aesthetic properties by
not directly perceivable but are inherently relations to other WOAs.” Artistic properties require perception but always require more cognitive mediation than aesthetic properties. One must have background knowledge (e.g., of history) and interpretative skills based upon that knowledge in order to ascribe artistic properties. Examples of artistic properties are originality, derivativeness, skillfulness, revolutionariness, typicality, influentiality, syntheticness, distinctiveness of vision. These properties have traditionally been ascribed to works of art and natural phenomena. In the case of natural phenomena, only aesthetic properties apply.

An example from David Best helps to make the distinction between aesthetic and artistic properties clear:

Some years ago I was privileged to attend a performance by Ram Gopal, the great Indian classical dancer, and I was quite captivated by the exhilarating and exquisite quality of his movements. Yet I was unable to appreciate his dance artistically since I could not understand it. For instance, there is a great and varied range of subtle hand gestures in Indian classical dance, each with a quite precise meaning, of which I knew none. It is clear that my appreciation was aesthetic, not artistic.


Other examples of artistic properties: historically related properties (original, novel, innovative, new, interesting, conservative, derivative, trite, monotonic, poignant); relational properties related to art theories, art histories, traditions, schools, genres; technical properties (virtuosic, dexterous, facility, ease, efficient, accurate, sloppy, sacrificial).


Kendall Walton writes: “One of the most fundamental questions of musical aesthetics is this: Which is of primary musical importance, musical works (symphonies, songs, sonatas, etc.) or performances of musical works? Are works or performances the basic object of musical attention, musical appreciation, and musical judgment?” The motivation for recognizing or adding MWs to our ontology is to allow us to refer to something in our musical practices. These musical practices include composing, improvising, performing, playing, practicing, interpreting, listening, appreciating, criticizing, evaluating, transcribing, orchestrating, arranging, et cetera. Our musical practices are variegated and complex. For Walton, the assumption seems to be that value fundamentally motivates musical metaphysics. Uses of terms like “importance,” “significance,” “focus of appreciation,” et cetera clearly imply value. But this does not settle the issue because further questions arise about the nature of the value, valuing, and evaluation to which one is committed. In other words: Which meta-ontological considerations should one use or presuppose in constructing a metaphysical theory? Or is it enough to call attention to the ones that we seem as a culture to be committed to in our musical and cultural practices?

Traditionally, the criteria of metaphysical theory acceptance are explanatory power and preservation of, or coherence with, pre-theoretical intuitions, or where relevant, consistency with scientific facts. Very often, scientific facts do not play a significant role in aesthetic discussions. I would add a further consideration, then, especially relevant to metaphysical theories in aesthetics: sociological and anthropological facts about human artistic practices, including artistic production and reception, and critical and evaluative practices.

Artistic, critical, and musical practices should play a role as meta-ontological considerations in constructing a musical metaphysics. Stephen Davies says “If ontology is to be more than a philosopher’s game, it must reflect the ‘what’s’ and ‘why’s’ informing the esteem that draws us to art works. Musical ontology should be responsive to the ways we engage with and discuss music and its works.” However, the metaphysical theory must make metaphysical sense, too. By metaphysical sense, I mean that the theory should adhere to general theory construction desiderata, and be consistent with the best general metaphysical theories available. I do not mean to imply that metaphysical theories are completely settled issues; nonetheless, there is consensus, or at least presumption and burden of proof ascriptions, on many matters.

Philosophers’ imaginations are either buttressed or diminished by past and current technologies, among others things such as ingenuity and imaginative resistance problems. This not only holds for philosophers’ thought experiments, which I take to be obvious, but other tools that we use, too. My view is that in doing ontology in aesthetics philosophers have radically underestimated the effects of our development (or lack thereof) of technology, scientific knowledge. There exceptions to this underestimation. Aestheticians and others generally recognize the importance of the development of writing, both as an idea and the technology of it, on literature. One can discern it in the comparison to the primarily oral cultures that continue to exist. In the metaphysics of material objects, there are now serious alternatives to traditional


11 There is now a lot of good work on the nature of thought experiments both in philosophy and science. See, especially, the work of Tamar Szabo Gendler. Moreover, the locus classicus on the issue of imaginative resistance is Tamar Gendler, “The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance,” The Journal of Philosophy 97, no. 2 (February 2000): 55-81. This article has created a small but growing cottage industry, including such notable philosophers as Brian Weatherson, Richard Moran, Dustin Stokes, and others.
views that have been influenced by the explosion of knowledge in particle physics and theoretical physics. Four dimensionalism attempts to construct an ontological theory that is partly influenced by quantum mechanics, or string theory.\textsuperscript{112} Below I will try to show how this is the case in the metaphysics of music. Two important areas in which there have been unaanalyzed assumptions informing theories are notation and the creation/discovery dichotomy.

**Notation, Works, and Bias**

In general, philosophers of music have neglected to realize the extent to which the western notational system for music has influenced their theorizing and thinking about the metaphysics of music. The notational system, just like the western tempered system of pitches themselves, is more or less arbitrary and historically contingent. One response is that since philosophers have more or less paid attention only to western music, and the western tradition has a long, entrenched history, then it should be no surprise that notation has played strong in theorizing about the metaphysics of music. But that misses the point. I am pointing out how the western tempered system and its corresponding notation are contingent. In addition, even given the western tempered system, there could have been many different notation systems developed. The contingency I am concerned with is both the “could have been otherwise” type, and the fact that the properties, sonic or otherwise, that western notation has captured and sought to capture is contingent as well. It is difficult to determine why some properties were notated and others not. Clearly, in some cases it had to do with the technology available.

\textsuperscript{112} Probably, the best advocate of this view is Theodore Sider, *Four Dimensionalism: An Ontology of Persistence and Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).
Here is an example. Sound structures as types or kinds play a central role in the metaphysics of music. They are based more on notation than the physics of sound. Philosophers have equated the sound structure to the features a score notates and can notate. The sound structure’s ontological thinness is largely a by-product of the assumption that structures are exhausted by the representations we make of them. Even though there can be a few ways of representing a sound structure, the tendency is to represent them as more or less scores, which indicate pitch in the tempered system, rhythm, meter, tempi, vague stylistic instructions (e.g., *ad libitum*, “freely” in a score), et cetera. Another way of representing a sound structure is to indicate pitches by actual time (milliseconds) and Hertz cycles per second. This would be unreadable for humans, but the purpose of a representation of a sound structure is not to put forward a set of instructions for performers.

Computing theory, digital computers, and related technology provide an alternative example. Since digitally recorded sounds (or analog recordings transformed into digital recordings) capture perceptual properties (and sub-perceptual properties) by encoding them into binary code, one could use the binary encoding sequence along with specification of eight- or sixteen-bit, sampling rate, et cetera as a representation of a sound structure. Certainly, a series of digits is an abstract object. The encoding itself must be realized on an appropriate playback mechanism that is programmed to transform the binary encoding into sounds and sonic properties. This is not different from the fact that notations rely on humans to understand and obey their conventions. Without people capable of understanding and playing notation, a sound structure based on a standard score would be as dead as a compact disk\(^\text{113}\) encoded with microscopic spaces and laser etchings without compact disk player technology.

\(^{113}\) By “compact disc,” I mean to include any storage device capable of encoding digital computer machine code.
What counts as the appropriate object for the musical work of art presents some difficulty to the theorist. In human musical practices, there are scores, sketches, lead sheets, performances, rehearsals, productions, arrangements, transcriptions, interpretations, variations, parodies, and improvisations. Currently, there are several metaphysical theories of the musical work. Most of them are indexed to a particular time, culture, or genre. This fact is evidence that different practices and traditions require different theories. I believe the promise of having the theory of the musical work is slim to none. Musical works as kinds (categories, or types, or other abstracta) are going to be plural, and different genres have different degrees of ontological complexity. The motivations for theorizing about musical works are that it has intrinsic metaphysical interests, which are shared by other philosophical problems and issues, and it is important because thinking about this issue raises important questions about what is central to music, musical evaluation, and criticism, and even ordinary appreciation. First, I shall comment on why this should be an issue at all for the aesthetics of improvisation.

What really hinges on the work of art status? Does it really matter if improvisations are works? What would make it matter? We need a focus of appreciation. Some philosophers have treated the concern for a correct theory of the musical work in classical, Western art music as a mere puzzle to be solved without significant consequences artistic practices. It is motivated by a desire to account for the relationships between scores, performances, transcriptions, arrangements, parodies, variations, and the like. In the world of improvisation, which exists within Western art music too, most of these relationships do not obtain. There are no scores for improvisations, at least before they are performed. There is no composition/performance

---

relation. However, there is an instantiation of a sound structure. The instantiation is not occurring in the typical composition way; however, the improviser can certainly be viewed as indicating a sound structure through performance, playing. Indeed, as Kendall Walton has noted, another interest is in figuring out what the primary object of appreciation and evaluation is. I am not sure if this is correct, but it cannot be doubted as a conscious motive on the part of philosophers. I question this because intuitively, it seems to me, the ordinary listener or appreciator or critic makes a distinction between a performance token of (say) Beethoven’s Third Symphony and the set of instructions upon which the performance token was based. We call those sets of instructions scores. Furthermore, people can primarily appreciate a particular instrumentalist, or orchestra, or conductor, no matter what the piece of music is. Particular interpretations, even though they may be unorthodox, may be the primary object of appreciation. There are all sorts of things that can be appreciated and evaluated. Now, Walton’s point is to single out the most important or central object. But merely having a correct or adequate theory of the musical work does not entail that the “work” is the primary object. In other words, one can pursue the theory of the work even if it is not the primary object; the account would still be useful, of philosophical interest, and help us to understand at least one of the things we appreciate, evaluate, and analyze. David Davies goes against this. He argues that the worth of the work concept at all is to be the focus of appreciation.

In addition, there now seems to be a practice among aestheticians to call the thing we pay attention to in an art form or genre “works.” This makes some sense. So what is the object we pay attention to in improvised art genres?

115 Kendall Walton, “The Presentation and Portrayal of Sound Patterns.”
Aaron Ridley is skeptical about musical metaphysics. Ridley has challenged the need for musical ontology. Why place such a premium on arguing that improvisations are works? It may seem forced, especially when one considers that works really seem to be connected to prescription, which means repeatability, and following instructions. One might think that if it is evaluation with which we are concerned, then even if improvisations are not works, they can still be evaluated. Not being a work does not preclude improvisations from being evaluated.

Whether one likes it or not, there exists a tradition and history that recognizes and establishes a large framework of social practices called the “work.” Lydia Goehr has analyzed that history. She historicizes the conception of musical works. Works have become more or less entrenched in our critical and appreciative practices. This fact gives warrant to the idea that works are of primary significance in evaluation, whatever they may be. To conceive of improvisations as non-works would already be to reduce improvisation (and thereby improvising) to a lesser status than more traditional conceptions of works, viz., of Western, classical, art music. Moreover, there seems to be no a priori reason to say that works cannot have the properties that improvisations bear. The reasons given, as we shall see, for improvisations not being works are appeals to evaluative issues and evidence from supposed social practices. When one says that works need to be prescriptive, it is not clear what kind of a claim this is. Surely, using past practice as evidence that things in the past which have been called works have been for the most part prescriptive, sounds like question-begging. Why use that history and tradition? Why confine the concept in that way? "Work-hood," I submit, should be defined in such a way that it allows improvisations to be works. Why? Is this arbitrary? Am

---


I question-begging? I do not think so. I want a theory of the work to do the work (no pun intended) and be the object of critical inquiry; I do not want to engage in “humptydumptying” over the definition of “work-hood.”

On the other hand, one may claim work-hood is merely a stranglehold—perhaps, monopoly—of the past that is oppressive to other, often newer, genres. One way of emphasizing the significant differences, aesthetic and otherwise, between Western art music and other genres, including many “world” musical genres, is to eliminate the work-concept. My solution is this. If the general work-concept is interpreted as “focus of appreciation,” an object of aesthetic judgments, then the concept will be sufficiently malleable to allow us to use it for other genres. This solution, then, both addresses the potential negative effect of dismissing the work-concept in improvisatory and other genres, and liberates these genres from the oft-viewed oppressive past tradition. It does the former by preserving the work-concept; it does the latter by recognizing ontological plurality while still using the work-concept. I will argue in favor of such an ontological plurality below.

Another reason to use and focus on the concept of “work” with respect to improvisations is that we do want improvisations to be on par with the western classical notion of musical work as composition. Even the enemies of the idea that improvisations are works think this; for example Stephen Davies says, “… improvisers and performers can deserve no less praise for their creativity than composers receive.” This is also the reason why other terms for classifying improvisations would be insufficient. For example, Paul Thom has suggested that

---

118 I learned this term from Nigel Warburton, *Thinking from A to Z* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 73. (This book is in its third edition now.)

improvisations may be “aesthetic objects” but not WOAs. And not all aesthetic objects are WOAs. He grants, while falling short of asserting it, that performances and works performed can be aesthetic objects, but they are not WOAs. Putting these together into argument form yields an invalid argument. I accept the premise that not all aesthetic objects are WOAs (alternatively, some aesthetic objects are not WOAs). But that being true does not show which aesthetic objects are not WOAs; it merely says at least one is not, we do not know which one (or set). In this argument, to suppose that improvisations are included in the set of aesthetic objects that are not WOAs is petitio principii. Nothing in this argument entails that improvisations cannot be aesthetic objects, performances, and WOAs.

Whether or not the work in a particular genre or tradition is in fact the primary object of appreciation, there is no doubt that work-hood has a central role in much of music appreciation, criticism, and musical practices. An example of the prejudice for a singular conception of the musical work is given by Martha Nussbaum, although the spirit of what she says is correct: “The concept of the musical artwork that organizes our practices of concert going is in fact of relatively recent origin, even in the West; and yet this fact is far from widely recognized. A listener who brings that concept to a performance by Ravi Shankar is likely to miss many aspects of his creative contribution, which is that of improvisation within the limits of a classical form with long traditions of performance.” My response is that it is not the concept of MW that is the problem here, but the conception of the MW. By interpreting work-hood to be the focus of appreciation (or one of the main foci of appreciation), we are not committed to the notion that there is only one kind of thing that satisfies and functions as the focus of appreciation in all

---

artistic contexts. This simply means that the particular kind of thing a work is in the classical tradition will be different for other genres. In other genres we want something to regard in high esteem, but we need a different ontological conception of work-hood. In other words, there is no one size fits all theory of work-hood. So, there will be some features of work-hood that classical art music possesses that will be retained in other genres and others not. Consequently, work-hood in different genres of music are going to be a different kinds of object—but all will be the focus (or foci) of appreciation. But that also explains why it is important to retain the term “work” and our interest in it. We need to show that there is something on par with classical art music work-hood in other traditions and genres, if they are to be valued and evaluated on equal grounds. Therefore, I shall proceed by using the work-hood concept.

2.3.2 General Challenges to Improvisations as Works

Many philosophers and musicologists challenge the claim that improvisations are WOAs and/or MWs. From a review of the literature and an informal, unscientific poll, the presumption seems to be that improvisations are not WOAs. Aestheticians such as Stephen Davies, Andrew Kania, Paul Thom, and Andy Hamilton argue for this thesis;122 whereas, the notable exceptions are Peter Kivy (to some extent) and Philip Alperson, who think that improvisations are

WOAs. In a nutshell, here are the main arguments against the claim that improvisations are MWs.

Challenge 1 (CH 1) Improvisations are performances (i.e., necessarily), and performances are not, and cannot be, artworks. This is the view of Paul Thom among others.124

(CH 2) Improvisations are not strictly compositions (in other words there are differences between the two action-types), and only compositions are (or give rise to) MWs. Only the action-type of composing gives rise to MWs. There are other tough cases for this argument: are orchestrations, arrangements, and transcriptions separate MWs?

(CH 3) Recorded improvisations are documentations, and documentations are not WOAs or MWs. On some metaphysical views, all WOAs are documentations of the actions or action-types that created them.125 I will bracket that minority view here.

I shall examine each of these views, and in so doing some aspects of my positive theory that improvisations are WOAs will be adumbrated.

Certainly, improvisations are performances, as established in 2.1. I think (CH 1) is false. Consider

Premise 1. No WOAs are events (event-tokens).

124 Paul Thom, For An Audience.
Premise 2. All performances are events (event-tokens).

3. / No performances are WOAs.

This argument is valid. Is it sound? Premise (1) is an odd claim to make. The problem here is the assumption that WOAs in general must be the kind of entities with which one may engage more than once. In other words, WOAs must be capable of being multiply instanced. Consequently, WOAs cannot be ephemeral, fleeting, non-static events. But one can engage with fleeting things more than once depending on what one talking about. We can engage with the action-type of improvising itself more than once, or (say) Sonny Rollins’ improvising over rhythm changes more than once. But these observations equivocate on the object of engagement that concerns us in the above argument. The sound sequence that Rollins played, which was an event, over rhythm changes on July 4, 1958 at the Village Vanguard no longer exists, it has been swept away into the dustbin of jazz history. How could that event be a WOA or MW?

Although Premise 1 and its assumption (multiple engagement or instantiation) are plausible, they are based on confusion and a lack of charity. The lack of charity derives from their ungenerous view that only works for performance exist; they ignore, at least conceptually, the possibility of works not for performance. They can be accused of this lack of charity because there is no a priori reason for there not being works for performance and works not for performance. But a stronger objection to Premise 1 and the multiplicity assumption is that it conflates metaphysics and epistemology. The paradigm examples of WOAs that Thom and others use are Shakespeare’s King Lear, Joyce’s Ulysses, and Beethoven’s Sixth Symphony. I

can attend many performances of the play *King Lear* and read *Ulysses* many times; I can read *King Lear* and *Ulysses* and recommend them to others to read; I can attend many performances of the Sixth Symphony. However, the reason one can do those things is because the text of *King Lear* still exists, and there are many copies of the text, and there are probably people who have much of it memorized such that a group could perhaps put together the text from memory. But if these were not famous works to which many people for a long time have been acquainted, the memory extraction would not be the case. If all of the copies of *King Lear*, *Ulysses* and the Sixth Symphony were destroyed, and no one remembered them, they would not be multiple. People could not engage with them. Now I do not want to say that under those conditions *King Lear* or *Ulysses* or the Sixth Symphony does not exist. They do exist and they would continue to exist as abstract objects, perhaps as types. But there would be no tokens. There would be no possibility of multiplicity—multiple engagements or instantiations. There is conflation of acquaintance of what there is and what there is.

Another problem with Premise 1 and Premise 2 involves confusion over *doing* and *making*. Performers *do* something, and performances involve *doing* not *making*. Performers act, play, move, dance, et cetera. Is acting, playing, and moving a *doing* or *making* or both? WOAs, it is claimed, are made, created, and are not *just doing*. But even in the case where performers are doing and not making (if that distinction makes sense), this is not the case for improvisers because they *are making while doing*. Even if one does not view the product as a WOA, it is clear that improvisers make/create a sound-sequence, which instantiates an abstract sound structure. Something has been made (or discovered). The process of *making something* does not entail that the product of the making continues to exist beyond the making. Imagine that someone manipulates some medium and the product of manipulation passes away immediately.
after. The way Thom interprets making is as though making art entails that the product of the making must be available only after the making. What an (artistic) agent makes may exist only whilst she makes it. There is no logical error in that. Richard Shusterman makes a similar point eloquently: “This separation of the WOA from the artist’s personality has deeply marked our aesthetic heritage. … But there is also a tradition in aesthetics that affirms a greater unity of art and life, of making and doing.”127 If not by traditional classical music performers, then the existence and historical persistence of improvisers and improvisation have demanded, and give justification for, that other tradition.

A similar argument used in favor of (CH 1) is that performers are not creative, or ought not to be creative. Their role is one of fealty. Performances are judged on their fidelity to WOAs, directions, production types. But this is a limited understanding of what it is to be creative. Creation and making admit of degrees. There are different levels of creativity, which do give rise to different kinds of fidelity—as in fidelity to one’s self and one’s artistic integrity or personal style.

It is much easier to claim that a certain set of musical performers are creative because of the specific nature of their practices. A pianist or harpsichordist who performs Bach’s keyboard works is attempting to perform a work and make it available to listeners. But that is not all they are doing. The performer is trying to interpret the work in a specific way, often to reveal some properties which the performer thinks ought to be emphasized or highlighted, or more generally, and perhaps more importantly, to reveal a personal understanding or “vision” of the work. This is much easier to make sense of when the player (the musician) of the work is simultaneously the director or interpreter or producer. This also explains why the conductor of orchestras is

considered creative in the sense that he or she is revealing a personal understanding of an orchestral work through directing the musicians of the orchestra. But this also shows why we have intuitions that all of those musicians are not being creative but more robotic in following the explicit, precise instructions of the score, the conductor, and perhaps even their principal (first chair of each instrument section). Typically, we do not think of orchestra musicians as creative performers, but we do attribute competence and excellence in execution and expression. We reserve ultimate praise for the virtuosos who perform solo and out in front of the orchestra or ensemble for concertos and sonatas and the like. The difference is that the orchestra musicians have little, if any, opportunity for conveying a personal understanding of the work, and in fact it may not be their proper role. If an orchestra musician did attempt more than this, it would probably be viewed negatively; whereas, the soloist does convey personal understanding of a work, or in Peter Kivy’s terminology “personal authenticity.”

But in performing arts where there is more separation between these activities, the distinctions seem to get more pronounced and problematic. Consider theatre and dance. Sometimes the situation seems to be similar to the orchestra case, sometimes not. When certain actors perform in plays, people go to see the actor. But here they might be interested for two divergent reasons. Audiences might just want to see the actor perform whether or not the actor is responsible for the interpretation of the work. Here the qualities admired might be brilliant execution, personal charisma and style. Or some actors are admired because of their personal understandings of characters, roles, plays interpretations etc. For example, Olivier: he is admired sometimes for the interpretation of a Shakespeare play, sometimes because of the brilliant personal understanding or vision of a character in Shakespeare. Examples of charisma

---

128 Peter Kivy, *Authenticities.*
and style might be some film actors, such as Jack Nicholson, Robert Mitchum, and some character actors. Occasionally, these two spheres collide: the personal understanding and personal style, the execution and the interpretation. In theatre we value certain directors (in film this is even more obvious because of the increased role over artistic decisions that the film director has over what is ultimately presented to the audience) because of their skill in emphasizing certain features of theatre works or their strong personal understandings of works (think of Elia Kazan and Mike Nichols).

So, if multiplicity through continued physical existence is the central reason for Premise 1, and I have shown that the assumption that makes Premise 1 plausible is false, then Premise 1 loses its presumption. Hence, the argument is unsound.

Moreover, (CH 1) supposes an oversimplified art ontology. Performances are event-tokens, but they can be tokens of a performance type, usually a production type. Performance tokens are not just tokens of the WOA as score or script. Each object/event has different levels of ontological thickness and thinness. I proffer opera as an example. I attended two performance tokens of Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte* at the Santa Fe Opera in July 1998—two consecutive nights. Jonathan Miller was the director and blocked the acting, designed the sets and costumes and lighting. Miller decided to set the story, plot and characters in post World War I 1920s Vienna, in an expensive, fancy hotel. The following things seem to exist: the WOA *Die Zauberflöte* by Mozart, which includes his score, Emanuel Schikaneder’s libretto, and some surviving stage instructions; the production type, which is Miller’s interpretation of *Die Zauberflöte*; individual performance tokens. Evaluative concerns motivate such an ontology. Mozart’s work is brilliant and wonderful—high aesthetic and artistic value. In my view, the production type—the Miller interpretation—was a failure; it did not work (no more “magic” in
The Magic Flute). Yet on the second night the performance token was excellently executed. I do not fault the performers for a lousy direction and production type. Given the production type, they performed well. On the first night, the performance token failed because the power failed at the opera house and this threw the entire performance off. Evaluations can be different for each performance token. To make matters simple: score and libretto receive positive evaluation, production type negative, first performance token negative, the second performance token positive. What makes the different evaluations possible is the ontological complexity. Opera is an ontologically complex art form. What is a production type? This is a set instructions that can be multiply instanced, yet it is derivative on a different type of work. The performance tokens here are instances of two “types:” Die Zauberflöte and the Miller production type. It may be the case that if no one recorded these performances and Miller’s and his collaborators’ instructions, then there will never be another token of this production type. The type is fleeting in one sense, but continues to exist as some sort of type, an abstract object, though no one will ever have access to it. I want to say that the score/libretto, production type, and each performance token is a WOA.

Moreover, performance tokens, either recorded or not, are important because they constitute an oeuvre. We value oeuvre. Performers who exclusively perform (not compose et cetera) give us performance tokens to evaluate. Kevin Bazzana makes an analogical argument with the auteur theory in philosophy of film and cinema studies. Speaking of Glenn Gould, Bazzana says,

I would suggest, in fact, that his [Glenn Gould’s] oeuvre merits consideration by standards very like those of the so-called auteur theory of cinema, as propounded by French (and later American) film critics in the 1950s and 1960s. According to the auteur theory, the personality of the director was a criterion of value, particularly where there was a manifest tension between that personality and the material of the work. Moreover,
with a canonical director who had a particularly distinctive personal vision, the *auteur* critic was interested not only (or even especially) in evaluating the individual films but in appreciating the *oeuvre* as a whole, and so in situating the individual films within the overall conception of the director. Put bluntly, the *auteur* critic was as interested in a director’s artistic failures as in his successes, where that director’s work as a whole was deemed important; failure illuminates the *oeuvre* no less than does success. The *auteur* theory was not intended to sanitize the canonical directors, to find reasons to excuse or forgive their weak and unconvincing productions, but rather to acknowledge that those productions existed within an *oeuvre* that had a value greater than the sum of its constituent works. Indeed, *auteur* critics were often more interested in the bad works of great directors than the exceptional successes of mediocre ones.  

Certainly, improvisers fit into this category, making their individual performances and recordings primary objects of appreciation.

Next, let us consider (CH 3). Noël Carroll gives an account of broadcast improvisations. Non-recorded broadcast improvisations raise difficulties because they are events. Carroll characterizes and putatively solves the problem thus:

... I think that our anxieties rest on the intuition that improvisations are one-of-a-kind events.

I believe that there are two ways to handle this problem. The first is to concede that improvisations are singular artworks and to argue that, as in the case of single instance photographs, reception instances of improvisations are documentations rather than tokens of the works in question. However, the second solution to this problem, and the one I prefer, is to deny that improvisations are, in principle, single instance artworks. For improvisations can be memorized and played again by the original artists or by someone else; they can be notated, as they are in the classical tradition, and played again; and in the age of mass art they can be taped and/or memorized by listeners who, in turn can notate them and/or reproduce them. An improvisation continues to exist as long as token performances of it may be executed. A painting ceases to exist when the “original is destroyed; but in this sense, there are not, strictly speaking, originals in the case of improvised musical or dramatic productions. It is conceptually possible to replicate an improvisation, but it is not possible to replicate paintings under the standard concept of painting.

Improvisations are not, in principle, singular artworks. Thus, the pattern developed to characterize film artworks can be applied to broadcast improvisations. That

---

is, we see and/or hear token reception instances of the improvisation type through the mediation of a token transmission signal template.\footnote{Noël Carroll, “The Ontology of Mass Art,” \textit{Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism} 55, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 194-195.}

Carroll is correct in saying that there are reception tokens of improvisation types. However, one can still recognize improvisations, a certain class of them, as singular WOAs, as I shall argue below.

Several points need to be made about documentations. What is a documentation? It seems to be a metaphysical category that is distinct from WOAs, representations, instances, exemplifications, and reproductions. There are theories of MWs that involve recordings as a primary mode of being. Consequently, if these theories are sound (which I think they are), then in principle there is nothing wrong with recordings functioning as entities in an ontological theory. In addition, recordings are stable, more or less static entities. They are like scores, and if my point about notational bias and technology from above are correct, then recordings themselves may be used or may be viewed as notational devices, too. Second, musical performances are works are documentations of MWs.

In addition, if documentations exist as a separate ontological category, then they must be recordings. The method and media of recording is not important here. If the documentation is sufficiently transparent, then one would see through or hear through the recording medium and engage the object or event that was recorded. Hence, that a recording is a documentation does not entail that there is no WOA. It is a documentation of a WOA. Merely calling something a documentation does not entail that there is no WOA involved.

Now I consider (CH 2). The differences and similarities between composing and improvising have already been discussed in the action theory section above. Here one must find
a characteristic that is not only contrastive between composing and improvising but also makes a difference to the WOA/MW issue. Prescription is a good candidate: composing prescribes (usually through notation), and improvising does not prescribe. Even though I do not think prescription is a necessary condition for composing, one may think that prescription is essential for work status. Hence, one may say that the distinction between the two action-types does not necessarily entail anything about work status, unless

(CW) The only action-type that generates, gives rise to, to WOAs or MWs is composing is true. Given that there is a distinction between the two action-types of composing and improvising (though not mutually exclusive on the continuum), then

(IW) The action-type of improvising does not generate WOAs or MWs would be true, too. Are there any reasons to accept (CW)? We shall see quickly how meta-ontological considerations enter into this investigation. Because I am trying to argue that improvisations are WOAs, I must show that (CW) is false or at least questionable. I see no reason to accept this categorical claim (CW). The only way for (CW) to be true is if one could show that (CW) is true a priori, by fiat, if you will. This means that (CW) would be an analytic proposition—that is the only way (CW) can be a priori true. There are two possible meanings here: (1) generating works is part of the meaning of composing; or (2) part of the meaning of “work of art” or “musical work” is that it was the result of a compositional process, the action-

---

131 Here I am using “work” to refer to any work of art in any art form.
type composing. Consider (1) first. Is it really part of the *meaning* of composition or composing that it generates WOAs or MWs? Now composing must result in something, something produced or generated by whatever process of composition is being eventuated, but that is far from saying what the exact nature of the product is. However, even if it were true that the generation of works is part of the meaning of composing, it would not entail that composing is the *only* generative process that gives rise to WOAs or MWs. Instead, one might say that the product of the action-type composing is a *composition*. That seems true but tautologous. That would be analytic, and it would be illuminating for our purposes only if

(CW’) All compositions (the results of composing) are WOAs or MWs

were true. Even people who believe (CW) is true would not accept (CW’). Not all artists’ doodles, sketches, notes, et cetera are WOAs even though in some sense they were composed, generated in the act of composition. I am excluding the cases of day-dream-like doodling. Doodles of this type seem like improvisations.

How do we want to consider the status of compositions? Is it merely a synonym for WOA or MW? How would one argue for such conclusions? It is not clear to me what kinds of arguments can be proffered here except appeals to semantic intuitions. I must admit that my intuitions are neutral here. WOAs and MWs are products of activities or accomplished in the course of those activities.

Now consider meaning (2). Part of the meaning of “work of art” or “musical work” is that it was the result of composing. This is not more plausible than (CW’). Perhaps, the only way to settle this is by semantic intuitions and use. It is more plausible to think that
The action-type composing generates, or gives rise to, WOAs or MWs.

(CW"") says that when an agent legitimately composes, the result is a WOA or MW. This claim is quantifying over the actions that are properly “composings” not over WOAs or MWs. Therefore, (CW"") does not exclude other means of generation of WOAs or MWs—in other words (IW) can be false. Thus, even though “composing” may always generate WOAs/MWs, it can be the case that other action-types generate WOAs/MW, such as improvising.

Is there any reason to think (IW) is true regardless of the status of CW or CW‘ or CW”’? (IW) can be dismissed for the same reasons that (CW) failed. (IW) would have to be a priori true, and thus an analytic proposition. In other words, part of the meaning of “improvise” and its cognates would include the idea that the result of such action-types is not a WOA; and similarly, part of the meaning of “work of art” or “musical work” is that the object or event to which it refers was not improvised. It is absurd to think that people have such semantic intuitions without already having an account of WOA or MW in their background knowledge. Perhaps, one way to investigate this is experimental philosophy. This would require finding out and testing people’s semantic intuitions about “work of art,” “musical work,” “composing,” “improvising.” A bit of armchair and anecdotal social and cognitive psychology is required in the absence of such experimental evidence, although I am not sure that the kinds of experiments that could be developed to test our semantic intuitions would be adequately robust to establish an hypothesis either way. It is not clear that people have semantic intuitions about “work of art” or “musical work,” because although these terms are used by lay people, critics, and artists, their use of these terms does not seem stable and comprehensive; they are terms of art and convenience. In
general people do not have fully worked out views of what they mean by “work of art” or “musical work.” Furthermore, it could turn out that these terms function with stability within certain highly rarefied groups, such as classical musicians, jazz musicians, popular music critics, et cetera. If this is the case, then it simply shows the need to do conceptual analysis, to do philosophy.

This really leaves us in our initial position here: try to find an attribute that WOAs or MWs possess, but improvisations do not. So, let us go back to the initial suggestion: prescription. To prescribe here means to give instructions for doing something (e.g., playing, moving). Talk of prescription usually comes along with other claims. For example, if X is prescriptive, then one is primarily interested in the execution of X, or the product of the execution of X. In the Standard Case of Composition (SCC) from the beginning of Part II, the notated score is a set of instructions for musicians to execute. Since it is obviously wrong to identify the MW with the score, the score is used as an exemplar for the properties that ought to be included in the account or the theory of the MW. If improvisations are not prescriptive, then improvisations would be excluded if

(WP) WOAs must be prescriptive

is true. If (WP) is true, and if composing is essentially prescriptive and improvisation is not, then we would have sufficient evidence to conclude that improvisations are not WOAs, and in general improvising (action-type) does not generate WOAs. But (WP) is false. Counterexamples are
paintings, sculptures, and literary works. None of these works of art are prescriptive and they certainly are works.\textsuperscript{132} Perhaps (WP) needs to be modified to

\[(PWP) \text{Performing arts works must be prescriptive.}\]

Or, more modestly,

\[(MWP) \text{Musical works must be prescriptive.}\]

Since, (MWP) would be included within the scope of (PWP), let us consider the more modest claim. (MWP) says, in other words, being prescriptive is a necessary condition for being a musical work (X is a MW only if X is prescriptive); prescription is essential to be a MW. Why is there (or should there be) a difference between works of art in general and musical works? Obviously, some level of specificity has to be given in an account of WOAs for each art form, but there should be some general features of works of art that remain constant through all of the art forms. Is that true? Consider

\textsuperscript{132} There are some counterexamples to this claim, but they are rare. For example, there can be a painting that is a set of instructions of some kind, and literary works can certainly be of set of instructions to do something or make something. But these cases are few and far between and do not represent the central components of these art forms. Furthermore, in this kind of case the actual execution of the prescription is not important—\textit{that it is a prescription} is what is aesthetically interestingly. However, in the standard case of MWs, the \textit{execution} of the prescription (i.e., a performance) is the focus of appreciation, and functions (for the most part) as \textit{the} epistemic access to the work.
(Plurality WOA) Different art forms, to be determined in some suitable way, must have different accounts or theories of what counts as a work of art (the identity of WOAs) in that particular art form; and

(Unity WOA) Despite there being different art forms, genres, and other categories, there is only one kind of WOA.

(Plurality WOA) leaves open the question that there are universal features to all WOAs in all art forms. Hence, there are distinctive features to WOAs in each art form, and there may be some universal features that these WOAs share. Similarly, if (Plurality WOA) sounds reasonable, then an ontological pluralism with respect to genres should also sound reasonable. Different genres may require different theories of WOAs and MWs. Investigating and theorizing about individual art forms and genres has been a recent change in analytic aesthetics. Consider what Noël Carroll says:

Recently, philosophers of art have wanted to alleviate the overly constricted configuration of the field by looking at the special theoretical problems of individual arts, by returning to older questions of the aesthetics of nature, and by re-situating traditional questions about art within broader questions about the function of symbol systems in general. The present attempt at a philosophy of horror is part of this effort to widen the purview of philosophical aesthetics. Not only should the special problems of artforms [sic] be reconsidered; but the special problems of genres that cross artforms should be re-evaluated as well.\textsuperscript{133}

In addition, Peter Kivy, in what may be called a manifesto (very unusual for Kivy, it should be noted), has suggested that aestheticians focus on problems and questions that may be distinctive

\textsuperscript{133} Noël Carroll, \textit{The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart} (New York: Routledge, 1990), 9.
in particular art forms and genres. In fact, the title of his book reveals the project: *Philosophies of Arts: An Essay in Differences*. The first two chapters of this book, “How We Got Here, and Why” and “Where We Are,” are derived from his Presidential Address to the American Society for Aesthetics Annual Meeting in 1992. Kivy says,

> I have been arguing that the history of aesthetic theory, from its modern beginnings in the eighteenth century to its present, flourishing state, has been almost a single-purpose quest for the “common property,” with absolute music as the perennial *experimentum crucis* … And as things presently stand, that quest remains the major activity of philosophers of art, with no settled-on solution in hand.

> This not to say that differences in the arts have not, historically, been recognized as an object of philosophical concern. … However that may be, the overriding concern was, and continues to be, the search for sameness; and that search has blinded the philosophical community to a bevy of questions of more than trivial importance, involving the arts not in their sameness but in their particularity. … what I am urging, by both precept and example, is that the project of philosophically scrutinizing the individual arts—both “high” and “low”—and their distinctive differences be taken off the back burner and put up front. There is no reason we cannot keep two kettles boiling at once.134

Thus, Kivy is urging an emphasis on looking for the differences between art forms and genres, but not at the expense of the traditional “cross-form” questions and problems. We would do well to do both. (Also notice his inclusion of so-called high and low art, which would include popular art forms and genres.) This opens the door to thinking that different art forms and genres may require very different treatment in terms of approach and theories. Specifically, here this would mean that one cannot speak of *a* or *the* “theory of the musical work;” instead, there will be *theories* of musical works. Different genres have different salient features, different things to which listeners pay attention, different concerns, and these inform understanding and evaluation within genres. It makes sense to have different conceptions of MWs (or, more generally, WOAs)

---

that reflect these differences, if we are to understand the concept of work of music as the primary object of appreciation.

As indicated above, even if (Plurality WOA) is true, it would not preclude the fact that there are some properties of works of art that are universal, viz., hold for works of art in all art forms. To deny this would be to accept

\((\textit{Sui Generis} \text{ WOA})\) Different art forms, to be determined in some suitable way, must have completely different accounts or theories of what counts as a work of art in that particular art form, i.e., each art form is \textit{sui generis} with respect to work-hood.

Various reasons can be given for accepting this \textit{sui generis} claim.\textsuperscript{135} But if this were true it would call into question some traditional, standard problems and questions in aesthetics, such as the definition of art, the nature of aesthetic experience, et cetera, those that Kivy mentions above—the quest of a common property. These projects are supposed to range over all of the arts forms and sometimes are even meant to be broader, as in the aesthetics of nature and artificial environments (as Carroll mentions above). No one would deny that one has different kinds of experiences in reading a novel, listening to music, looking at pictures; however, intuitions substantiate that these kinds of experiences are different from all other kinds of experiences. How are they different? They are, at least in part, aesthetic. So, aestheticians have

\textsuperscript{135} For example, medium specificity theories could be committed to such a claim and to a certain degree support it. But just because particular art forms (and possibly genres) are better than others in communicating or conveying certain contents does not mean that \textit{nothing} is shared among art forms. And if properties are shared among works of art in different art forms, the \textit{sui generis} claim is false.
tried to figure out what that difference is, whilst still recognizing some higher-level, so to speak, variation with respect to engagement with the different art forms.

Now one may object to the above criticism of the *sui generis* principle by pointing out that (1) so much the worse for traditional aesthetic problems; and (2) my examples given above may require general theorizing, but work-hood issues are a different matter. But it is difficult to imagine that general things can be said about the definition of art but nothing general can be said about work-hood status in all art forms. Even if there are, roughly, things that can be said about what counts as art in general and what counts as an aesthetic experience, some of these similarities must enter into theories of work-hood. Therefore, because of the long tradition of aestheticians having something to say about properties ranging over all of the art forms, and that work-hood theories will to some extent be parasitic on these other aesthetic issues, (*Sui Generis* WOA) is false.

I implied above that the disjunction between (Plurality WOA) and (Sui Generis WOA) is mutually exhaustive, though not mutually exclusive. If these alternatives were not exhaustive, then I would be guilty of the false dilemma fallacy. However, both could be true and both could be false. The plan was that if one thinks that (Plurality WOA) is false, then one is committed to either (Sui Generis WOA) or (Unity WOA). But I have shown that there are good reasons to think that (Sui Generis WOA) and (Unity WOA) are false. Therefore, (Plurality WOA) is presumptively true. (Plurality WOA) is borne out in our artistic and appreciative practices. Given (Plurality WOA) then, in some art forms or genres WOAs are prescriptive, and in other art forms or genres they are not prescriptive.
But I also want to argue that improvisations can be prescriptive, and there is a sense in which all improvisations are prescriptive. I will argue for this below. Let us then focus on a single art form.

Within music, ontological plurality may be true. Thus,

(Plurality MWP) There are different kinds of musical works.

This view is a kind of Ontological Pluralism because it states that there is more than one kind of MW. The use of the term “musical work” already implies that there are different kinds of WOAs because there are different art forms, but it is still possible to have one account or theory of the WOA. Thus, on this view, it might even be nonsensical to speak of “musical works;” there is no singular, unique thing to which one may refer. Different theories of MWs might correlate to musical genres, and this supposes that one could give a suitable account of genre and genre differences. Or different theories of MWs might correlate to different action-types or musical practices. Differences between practices and genres do not necessarily mean that some have work status while others do not have work status. One might have to decide about work status on case-by-case basis. First, let us address the claim itself. How can one defend (Plurality MWP)?

(Plurality MWP) can be defended on appreciative and evaluative grounds. One considers what aesthetic understanding consists of in a particular genre or musical practice. Some degree of musical understanding is necessary for the proper appreciation and evaluation of the products of these genres and practices. In fact, these are inter-defined and dependent: proper appreciation is determined by understanding, and understanding is motivated by wanting to properly
appreciate, and thereby evaluate, the products of genres and practices. Understanding resides in part in explaining (or having explanations of) features of the artistic products (foci of appreciation). Sometimes the explanations will be obvious, and other times one will have to rely on the constructed intentions of the artists. One begins to obtain answers to why-questions by determining the distinguishing characteristics of each genre and practice. Salient features of genres and practices will be determined. Proper appreciation should include these salient features, and the evaluation of the products will be based, perhaps in large part, on these salient features. Evaluation without consideration of these salient features is a form of missing the point. If a particular theory of WOAs or MWs does not capture these salient features, then the theory will not be about the object or focus of appreciation. As indicated in 2.3.1, a fundamental intuition that we have about the existence of WOAs in general is that they account for, and are the embodiment of, the object of appreciation—what it is we think we are evaluating. Thus, if the salient features of different genres and practices are not shared, then this will require different theories of the MW in each case. In other words, the theory of the MW in each genre should capture the salient features of the main object or objects of appreciation in that respective genre.

Consider what Stephen Toulmin says here. He makes the point well:

Not so long ago, in the days before it became intellectually respectable, jazz used to be contrasted with ‘good music.’ Of course (the critics granted) it was not all equally debased: there could be better jazz and worse jazz. For that matter, not all ‘good music’ was equally good—nor even ‘good’: Grieg, for instance, was a splendid composer of his kind, and yet remained suspect, as not being wholly ‘good.’ Still, in judging music (it was presumed) one had to consider both whether a piece or composer was a good example of a particular type, and whether that type was a ‘good’ type. Different genres of music were thus placed in a hierarchy, some being subordinated to others.

Looking back, we may doubt whether these cross-type comparisons were fair, or even legitimate. Yet the fact is that they were made. ... Just as the question ‘Is this music good of its kind?’ is distinct from the question ‘Is it “good” music?,’ so we find scientists asking both ‘Is this event a natural and self-explanatory one of its kind?’ and also ‘Is this
an example of the most natural and self-explanatory sort?’ Explanatory ideals and paradigms thus have two parts to play. Within a given science, such as dynamics, one kind of motion (say) will be accepted as the standard of intelligibility. ... But, when we compare happenings of different kinds, we find different sciences being subordinated to one another, and so setting standards for one another, in the same way as genres of music. Phenomena may, as a result, be explained either by comparing them with other, more self-explanatory happenings of the same kind or by relating them to happenings of some other sort, which are thought to be intrinsically more natural, acceptable, and self-explanatory.136

Recognizing different art forms and genres do not entail their relations are hierarchical. Of course, there is a grand history in aesthetics of philosophers attempting to create such hierarchies. Among the most infamous are Plato, Kant, Hegel, and Schopenhauer. All attempts were failures, often because of the implausibility of the more general metaphysical theories on which they grounded.

The justification just provided for (MWP) involves meta-ontological issues. The ontology of human artifacts,137 and perhaps other social phenomena, should be treated differently than the ontology of the natural world and perhaps some abstract objects such as numbers and geometric objects. In the latter case, realism would require that truth conditions will be tied to a set of considerations that are independent of human interests, though perhaps not human intervention.138 In the case of human artifacts our interests are relevant and may be used to settle metaphysical issues. To be specific in the case that concerns us here: there would be no other reasons to contrive a theory of the MW if it were not for our interests in appreciation and evaluation. We are still interested in the truth, of course, but the truth conditions are more

---


137 For an excellent account of the concept of “artifact,” see Randall Dipert, *Artifacts, Artworks, and Agency*.

138 See, for example, Ian Hacking, *Representing and Intervening: Introductory Topics in the Philosophy of Natural Science* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
directly influenced by, even generated by, human-centered concerns.\textsuperscript{139} There will be the question of exactly what constitutes a social phenomenon from a non-social one, and it is easy to think of the hard cases; however, when it comes to art, justifiably there is not much debate. Art, though perhaps not aesthetics broadly construed, is artifactual.\textsuperscript{140}

If prescription does not prohibit improvisations from being classified as WOAs or MWs, then multiple realization or instantiation may be the barrier to prevent improvisations from being WOAs or MWs.

Consider

(MI) Musical works must be capable of being multiply instanced.

What does “multiply instanced” mean? Multiply instanced is sometimes called repeatability. The way in which musical works are multiply instanced is mainly through performances and/or reception tokens. The latter covers the sound reproduction of a musical recording. If (MI) is true of works for performance (not performed works), then (MWP) must be true, for otherwise how would one instance a $W_i$ without a set of instructions? But there is no reason to think (MWP) is true. If one includes reception tokens as instances of a work, then (MWP) does not have to be true for (MI) to be true. However, even a recording can be prescriptive. Instead of a

\textsuperscript{139} For a brilliant analysis of these meta-ontological issues, see Amie Thomasson’s articles cited above.

\textsuperscript{140} I think this is the case even if the “art” was created by primates. Primates have intentional psychologies, and it is possible that primates could be working under an art concept. There have been some studies on bird song. A few aestheticians have been addressing this issue (e.g., Sheila Lintott, Aaron Meskin). In addition, the artifactuality condition has been a standard necessary condition in definitions of art. George Dickie’s institutional definition is one example. Dickie (and also Noël Carroll) also has responses to the putative driftwood and natural event counterexamples. They count as artifacts when they are “framed” or exemplified by humans.
score, one might use a recording to give others instructions on how to instantiate or realize a work. Consider avant-garde works in which pictures, drawings, and the like serve as scores. Hence, if one’s ontology is going to include certain kinds of recordings as works, then (MI) is acceptable because either recording can be prescriptive, or reception tokens count as instances. The problem still holds for non-recorded improvisations. Are non-recorded improvisations capable of being multiply instanced? Ideally, non-recorded improvisations can be repeated because improvisations do instantiate sound structures. If someone memorized a non-recorded improvisation’s sound structure, then it could be multiply instanced. Is (MI) true unconditionally? In order for (MI) to be true, it would depend upon the following stronger, modal claim:

(MMI) Essentially, necessarily, music is a multiply instanced art form.

Improvisation is an entrenched, traditional musical practice, even in the Western classical art music tradition. Now suppose that it is true that improvisations are not necessarily multiply instanced—improvisations cannot be multiply instanced (although, as I argue below, there are ways in which they can be and are multiply instanced). Hence, (MMI) is false and (MI) is false. In other words, because a major musical practice with a long history is not multiply instanced, it cannot be the case that music is necessarily multiply instanced. (MMI) does not capture a proper description of musical practices. But some may not be satisfied with this quick move. The referent of the term “music” in the proposition of (MMI) must be fixed to a factual description of the art form, which can be suitably determined through history, social sciences, and simple
reflection. That improvisation is an entrenched musical (and artistic) practice is a fact.\textsuperscript{141} Thus, (MMI) does not cohere with the facts. However, the modal operator in (MMI) may be doing the work. What is the strength of the modal operator? Does it mean on any conception of music in any possible world? Or does it mean given a particular definition of music captured by our current practices music is necessarily (in all possible worlds) multiply instanced? I do not think the first suggestion makes sense. How would one begin to construct other conceptions of music different from the one we have? Would it make sense to say that an alternative conception of music is that it is (exclusively) a tactile art form and not sonic? Obviously, that is a silly semantic game. To determine whether X exists in some or all possible worlds, X must mean and/or refer to something. Consequently, the definition of music must be fixed, and the best way to make it rigid is to address our historical and current musical practices.\textsuperscript{142}

Even though I believe the above argument is strong, there is another argument to be made with respect to (MMI). Improvisations can be multiply instanced. There are two cases to consider: fleeting, ephemeral performance tokens that are improvised, and recorded or documented improvisations. No one doubts that improvisations (in music) are at least in part sound structures. What else could they be? Sound structures are abstract objects and they exist independently of human action or thought. When one happens to play the sound sequence that matches a particular sound structure, one is instantiating, and thus the sound-structure itself may be multiply instanced through and in both temporal and spatial coordinates. Without claiming that sound-structures exhaust the identity conditions of improvisations (whether WOAs or not), there is here at least one aspect of improvisations that are multiply instanced. That seems to be enough to satisfy MMI, or even MI. The problem in the background here is prescription once

\textsuperscript{141} Part I may be interpreted as providing a plethora of evidence for this claim.

\textsuperscript{142} The argument here would also hold of the more general concept of “art.”
again. Although recorded improvisations have documentations, namely, the recording, on whatever medium is used, and its properties. The reproduction, or playback instance, of a documentation would be a reception token, and if reception tokens are included as instantiations, then documented improvisations would be multiply instanced. Furthermore, if I am correct that recorded improvisations are a special kind of MW (to be argued for below), then the work would have instantiations through playbacks (reception tokens). What of playbacks through use of sound reproduction equipment when there are no listeners, so putatively there is no reception? One can invoke ideal reception, that is, counterfactually there could be someone present to hear the playback. Hence, it should count as a reception token. But MMI is just one of the general criticisms of improvisations as WOAs, viz., that performances or performance tokens cannot be WOAs. This has already been refuted above, so (MMI) is either trivially true, or (MMI) is non-trivially false.

Compare (MMI) to film or photography. It seems that nothing about photography hinges on the fact that there may be many prints of a single image taken by a camera. Consider the following example. Ansel Adams generates a negative and prints it in his dark room. The negative is destroyed. Consequently, there is only one print of the image in existence. Now, of course, counterfactually there could have been more prints. But the fact that there is actually only one print, and add to the thought experiment that negatives are destroyed after printing them once, then if photography were necessarily multiply instanced, then in a world in which the capturing of still images worked this way there would be no such thing as photography. This seems very implausible. My intuitions are that photography would still exist, would flourish, and would be a distinctive art form. It would be a slightly different art form than it is presently,
nonetheless it would still be an art form whose defining feature is the use of mechanical reproduction for the production, generation, and capturing of images.\textsuperscript{143}

So, the question becomes, is being multiply instanced ever necessary to be a particular art form? Wood cuts, print making? The fact that we do distinguish between art forms in this way does not entail that this feature reveals something essential to a particular art form. Instead, what it does is give us a property by which we can distinguish between and categorize art forms as they presently exist. A property $P$ upon which we sort things does not entail that $P$ is essential to any of the sorting categories.

Furthermore, (Plurality MWP) says that there is nothing intrinsic to the concept of music itself that as an art form its WOAs must be multiply instanced. Some genres of music have MWs that are multiply instanced, other do not.\textsuperscript{144}

I conclude that (CH 2) is false or questionable. This is the case because its assumptions and presuppositions conflict with any reasonable conception of music history and practices, and there are sound semantic intuitions that preclude improvising give rise to WOAs and MWs.

### 2.3.3 Burden-Shifting: Levinson’s Theory and Improvisations

The purpose of this section is to take a standard account of musical works, in fact the \textit{locus classicus} on musical works, and determine whether improvisations would be covered by


\textsuperscript{144} I will just note that on theories that take action-types instead of their products to be the primary objects of appreciation, all art forms are multiply instanced, including painting. Currie claims that all art forms are multiply instanced. This view is compatible with my theory, although I am not committed to such a claim.
this standard account. Jerrold Levinson’s theory of the musical work is justifiably the *locus classicus*, because it is comprehensive with respect to a genre, explicit, economical, and the most influential account of musical works. Even though Levinson explicitly recognizes the limits of what his theory is meant to apply to, one can still test the theory to see if it applies to other cases.

For example, Levinson was not addressing popular music, nor many contemporary avant-garde pieces. The data for his theory is the very limited case of Western, art, classical music from roughly Bach to Brahms (approximately 1700 to 1900, with exceptions before, during, and after this period). I will show that improvisations would be covered by Levinson’s theory of the musical work. In doing this, I am not arguing that Levinson’s theory is the correct theory of the metaphysical status of improvisations; instead, this demonstrates that there is some presumption in favor of improvisations being works of art (WOA) and/or musical works (MW). In addition, this section will serve as good base for understanding the some of the issues and problems in the ontology of music.

Levinson first specifies three desiderata that a theory of the musical work should satisfy. The “creatability” desideratum is “(Cre) Musical works must be such that they do not exist prior to the composer’s compositional activity, but are brought into existence by that activity.”145 Fine individuation is “(Ind) Musical works must be such that composers composing in different musico-historical contexts who determine identical sound structures invariably compose distinct musical works.”146 Performance means: “(Per) Musical works must be such that specific means of performance or sound production are integral to them.”147 Levinson claims his theory

---

146 Ibid., 73.
147 Ibid., 78.
satisfies all three desiderata. A musical work (MW) is an abstract entity he calls an initiated type. The particular initiated type that constitutes the musical work is the conjunction of the sound structure and performing-means structure, as indicated by some particular person (composer) at a specific time. The compositional act consequently introduces to the world a new object:

$$MW = S/PM \text{ structure-as-indicated-by-X-at-t.}$$

I should note that since 1980, when Levinson’s article was first published, he has made one major change to the theory. In response to criticisms by Gregory Currie, Levinson amended the account of MW:

$$MW^+ = S/PM \text{ structure-as-indicated-by-X-at-t-in-musico-historical-context-C}$$

As Levinson states, this new account makes creative context, composer, date of composition, and musical structure necessary conditions for the identity of a musical work (in most of Western, art, classical music). It may be the case that the indexing of time $t$ is redundant with the inclusion of musico-historical contexts, but it seems to be needed to thwart off certain bizarre thought experiment cases, which Currie concocts. For example, Currie queries whether Beethoven’s *Hammerklavier* Sonata would be the same work if the preceding music history

---


149 Ludwig van Beethoven, *Piano Sonata* No. 29 in B-flat Major, Opus 106, “Grosser Sonate für das Hammerklavier.”
were different. Suppose that Beethoven’s Sonata was the first piece music written in Europe since the time of Purcell—it seems that the *Hammerklavier* would not be the work we identify as Beethoven’s *Hammerklavier* Sonata. This counterfactual history would eliminate and add various artistic properties to the work, even though it was still composed by Ludwig van Beethoven in 1817-1818 and dedicated to Archduke Rudolf. Since Levinson thinks that the musico-historical context is a function of the time of composition and the person/agent doing the composing and the preceding and following musical/artistic history, as long as the composers are different persons, then the works created are different even when the S/PM structures are identical. This is the case because Levinson thinks that relevant properties of the work are determined at least in part by what a composer has done prior to the particular composition in question. For example, these artistic properties include, or would be derived from, the various psychological properties of composers, such as being influenced by this or that theory or person, what the composer studied and when, with whom they studied and when, and the composer’s prior artistic achievements and failures. Many philosophers and musicians believe that artistic properties are part of the identity of MWs. Pure sound structures do not possess artistic properties, although they possess many, if not most, of the aesthetic properties we deem as significant for the identity of a WOA.

Since Levinson recognizes and accepts that abstract objects cannot be “created” by humans—they exist eternally or a-temporally—but (he claims) (Cre) is a strong intuition we have, a new entity that encapsulates both is required. Levinson thus “invents” (discovers?) initiated types.

---

150 Currie, *Ontology of Art*, 58-60; and Levinson, “Art as Action,” 145-146.

151 The problem of what term to use here is exactly the same as the problem Levinson tries to solve by introducing this new type of entity—initiated types. Did Levinson construct, invent, or
Levinson describes the following ontological classification. There are indicated structures and pure structures. Both kinds of structures are types. One may infer that both are abstract objects, since types are abstract. Moreover, Levinson says, there are two kinds of types: implicit types and initiated types. Implicit types are the standard, abstract, non-temporal kind, which include things like “geometrical figures, family relationships, strings of words, series of moves in chess, ways of placing five balls in three bins.”\textsuperscript{152} Initiated types come into being; they are not eternal. They are brought into existence through a process of intentional human action (e.g., composition). Levinson claims that the Ford Thunderbird, the Lincoln penny, and the hedgehog are examples of initiated types. These are historically contingent structures. Thus, a coin of the same design as the Lincoln penny during the ancient Roman Empire would share the structure of the Lincoln penny but would not be the Lincoln penny. The Lincoln penny can exist as the Lincoln penny only after the historical person Lincoln existed. Consequently, Levinson solves the problem he set out for himself: capture the abstract nature of musical works but allow them to be created and individuated in a way that preserves (or conserves) their artistic properties.

Levinson distinguishes between (1) instances of $W \{I(W)\}$, (2) instances of the sound structure of $W \{I(W_{ss})\}$, (3) instances of the S/PM structure of $W \{I(W_{s/pm})\}$, and (4) performances of $W \{P(W)\}$. An instance of a work $W$ is a sound event (an actualized sound sequence) that conforms completely to the S/PM structure of $W$. A performance of a work $W$ is a sound event that is intended to instantiate $W$: it represents an attempt to exemplify $W$’s S/PM in accordance with the composer’s indication of it and “\textit{succeeds to a reasonable degree}.”

\textsuperscript{152} Levinson, “What a Musical Work Is,” 80.
Therefore, a correct P(W) is an I(W), and an incorrect P(W) is not an I(W). Incorrect performances are still performances of something. These distinctions allow Levinson to avoid Nelson Goodman’s counterintuitive conclusion that a performance of a work with one, even minor, error is not a performance of the work. Furthermore, transcriptions of musical works count as new, different musical works, even though a transcription would be an I(W_s) though not an I(W_s/pm). Now we can derive the following “theorems”\textsuperscript{153}.

T1: All I(W) = I(W_s)

T2: All I(W) = I(W_s/pm)

T3: Some I(W_s/pm) are not I(W)

T4: Some I(W_s) are not I(W)

T5: All P(W) = I(W)

T6: Some I(W) are not P(W)

T7: A particular P(W) is a member of the set of all performances of W \{P(W)_1, ..., P(W)_n\}

T8: \{I(W)\} is a subset of \{P(W)\}

The fact that Levinson’s theory gives rise to these distinctions and entities has advantages, many of which provide plausible metaphysical grounds for understanding musical practices. For example, I would not want to classify Wendy Carlos’s synthesizer renditions of Bach and Beethoven keyboard compositions as \textit{performances of} their works, nor would I classify them as proper transcriptions. But they are instances of the sound-structure of their works. I limit my example to keyboard compositions because the synthesizer is a keyboard instrument (in fact, a

\textsuperscript{153} These are my derivations based on Levinson’s definitions and comments presented in his article.
synthesizer can produce any keyboard timbre, e.g. pianoforte, organ, clavichord, and harpsichord). In other words, the pure sound structure of a keyboard is realizable on a keyboard instrument. An orchestral composition’s sound structure could be realized by dubbing and multi-tracking in recording sessions. In other words, each orchestral part would be played on the synthesizer and recorded as tracks. In addition, a performance of a work ought to be susceptible to errors. There may be vagueness with respect to the quantity and quality of errors that would qualify a sound sequence as not being a performance of a work; however, most performances of works do contain minor errors and still seem to qualify as performances of the work. If not, then one would be stipulating that performances of works are impossible, which I think is an undesirable view. Therefore, one could construct a continuum representing the quantity and quality of errors. Those sound sequences with a few insubstantial (itself a vague term) errors would be closer to the ideal performance of a MW, and those with many significant errors would be closer to not being a performance of the MW.

This ontological classification is helpful with respect to many thorny issues in performance practice, but it would not eliminate completely the controversies that exist about particular cases (e.g., some of Glenn Gould’s live performances and recordings of Bach and Brahms, and Keith Jarrett’s recordings of Mozart and Haydn, and the authentic instrument movement of performance practice). However, this classification opens up new possibilities. For example, if a performer ignores certain features of a score, then the executed sound sequence (whether live or recorded or both) may qualify as an instance of the sound structure but not an instance of the work.

Now let us determine whether improvisations can be MW⁺ = S/PM structure-as-indicated-by-X-at-t-in-musico-historical-context-C. First, improvisations are certainly sound
Improvisations (in music) are sound sequences or occurrences, and these sound sequences instantiate or realize a pure sound structure \textit{simpliciter}. This point will be important for my positive account given below. Analogously, an improvised literary text instantiates an abstract structure, which includes letters, spaces and punctuation.

Now it might be said that by improvising, an improviser does not select, fix, determine a PM structure. I have two responses to this putative objection. First, one may construe the actual means used in improvising as the performance means. This interpretation is more plausible in light of the (MusPen) and (NotDev) cases. Second, the performance means structure is not a necessary condition for being a MW+. Levinson includes performance means structures in order to address the typical works of the classical canon, which often specify instrumentation in some way. However, many classical works do not specify instrumentation, but still are works (e.g., many of J.S. Bach’s compositions, such as \textit{Art of the Fugue}). So, for Levinson, if a work has performance-means specified, then it must be included in the identity of the work; whereas, if there is no performance-means specified, then it cannot be specified and there will not be \(I(W_{s/pm})\), just \(I(W_{ss})\) and \(I(W)\).

The same ambiguities that arise with some scores also arise with improvisation. In that sense, improvisations would be no different than a score which did not include certain features such as instrumentation, dynamics, tempi, et cetera, or contain such instructions to a limited degree. Levinson uses several phrases that are vague, perhaps deliberately vague: “compositional act,” “indicated.” There is one attempt by Levinson to make indicate more precise when he includes, parenthetically, the terms “(fixes, determines, selects).” The full quotation is needed: “For the paradigmatic pieces we are concerned with, the composer typically
indicates (fixes, determines, selects) an S/PM structure by creating a score.”\textsuperscript{154} In addition, a concept such as “compositional act” will refer to different activities if only because of technological changes that allow for different ways to notate and produce, select, and determine sounds, or otherwise give artistic and production instructions. There is no reason to deny improvising as a compositional act in the way that Levinson describes it here—an activity by which a person (as improviser, as composer) selects, determines, fixes an S/PM structure or sound structure \textit{simpliciter}. This is, however, an empirical matter; it ought not to be decided by \textit{a priori} argument. How people compose is a matter of how they actually do it. Later in the article Levinson describes it more specifically: “The other class of types, initiated types, are so called because they begin to exist only when they are initiated by an intentional human act of some kind. All those of interest can, I think, be construed as arising from an operation, like indication, performed upon a pure structure. Typically, this indication is effected by producing an exemplar of the structure involved, or a blueprint of it. In so indicating (or determining) the structure, the exemplar or blueprint inaugurates the type that is the indicated structure, the structure-as-indicated-by-x-at-t. All indicated structures are, perforce, initiated types.”\textsuperscript{155} First, improvising is certainly an intentional human act. Improvising may be viewed as an operation performed upon a pure structure (we have already shown that improvisations are in part sound structures \textit{simpliciter}, just like any sequence of sounds or sound-occurrence is). Second, the next sentence contains an important word: “typically.” Levinson is correct in saying that in the classical canon “typically” a composer composed by producing, creating, making a score. The score served as an exemplar or blueprint, and indicated the pure sound structure (s-s \textit{simpliciter}).

\textsuperscript{154} Levinson, “What a Musical Work Is,” 79.
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., 81.
But this does not entail that compositions must be produced through exemplars or blueprints.

In improvisations a (say) player indicates while performing the piece simultaneously. The indication is achieved during the performance. There is no a priori reason for thinking that indicating cannot be achieved while playing, or that playing/performing is a way or form of indicating. Of course, a score could be produced simultaneously as in the (MusPen) or (NotDev) cases discussed above. Incidentally, this is how a musically illiterate person could produce a notated score or chart. Or the improvised sound sequence could be notated afterwards. These seem like accidental features of improvisations.

In addition, indicating does not necessarily entail anything about replication or re-identification, although improvisations (I shall argue) are subject to both. Furthermore, if my previous arguments are correct about improvising and composing—that they are fundamentally based on the same process of selection—then it would surely follow that improvisations would satisfy the indication of a S/PM structure criterion. Indicating is selecting, or a way of selecting. There is nothing in Levinson’s theory to preclude improvisations as musical works. Levinson says: “The other class of types, initiated types, are [sic] so called because they begin to exist

---

156 In fact, James C. Anderson (“Musical Kinds,” The British Journal of Aesthetics 25, no. 1 (Winter 1983): 44) confirms the vagueness that I find in Levinson’s theory on indication: “For what is it for a kind to be ‘indicated-by-P-at-t’? While we all understand, with Levinson, that typically this is done by creating a score, no general account of ‘kind-indication’ is to be found in Levinson’s paper, nor in my amended version of his theory.”

157 These are difficult words to get right—if there is correctness already established about them. Samuel R. Levin (Shades of Meaning: Reflections on the Use, Misuse, and Abuse of English (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1998), 77-78) distinguishes between duplication and replication: “a distinction may be drawn between these two words on the basis that replicate is derived from replica, whose meaning properly connotes ‘a copy—of a concrete object or of an objective representation,’ whereas duplicate conveys a more general sense of ‘to produce again’ or ‘to reproduce;’ in other words, duplication may be regarded as an activity because one duplicates something, but replication is a process in which something is replicated.” I find this to be unhelpful because I still want to know what it is to duplicate X and replicate X. Here is a stab at analysis: To replicate could mean to generate a copy in some way or an objective presentation of X, whereas to duplicate X is to create another exact copy.
only when they are initiated by an intentional human act of some kind.” Improvising is an intentional human act that brings into existence a particular sound structure. Simply, improvisations are indications of musical works while the composer/improviser simultaneously performs them. A recording or notational device could serve as the documentation of the musical work; however, nothing in Levinson’s theory requires documentation or a notated score to be produced. Therefore, I conclude that improvisations meet all of the conditions of Levinson’s definition of a musical work, MW+. Hence, improvisations are musical works on this account.

There are five groups of challenges, objections, and criticisms of Levinson’s theory of musical works.

(1) Limited application. As Levinson himself notes his theory is to account only for Western Classical art music roughly from 1700 to 1900. Should one seek a more comprehensive theory, and try to incorporate other kinds of music, genres, and historical periods? Since I argued for (Plurality WOA and MWP), I believe the limited application is acceptable. However, a problem arises with respect to the boundaries of applicability. Classical music from roughly 1700 to 1900 is very vague. But this is not a devastating criticism.

(2) Structures. There is a significant question as to whether structures can be indexed in the way Levinson requires. S/PM structures are indexed according to person, place, time, and context. Should we accept Levinson’s distinction between pure/implicit types and initiated types?

---

(3) Abstract objects. Obviously, Levinson’s theory relies upon the existence of abstract objects, and in fact introduces a new abstract object, MW or MW+. Consequently, the theory is subject to all of the general criticisms of abstract objects, and especially criticisms of WOAs as abstract objects. I will not pursue this objection further.

(4) Desiderata. The intuitions that give rise to his three desiderata may be questioned or denied.

(5) Notational exemplars. First, there is a parsimony problem, which is not devastating for Levinson’s theory and is easily corrected. Levinson assumes the score is the notational exemplar for the abstract type of the S/PM structure. But if the score contains timbre notations, either indirectly or directly, then the PM structure is not needed. For example, most scores of this period of western classical music do not just indicate a c’ pitch/tone but a clarinet playing c’. In other words, instrumentation is included, as Levinson recognizes. So, my point here is that pure sound structures can incorporate timbre properties, and since instrumentation, or PM structure as Levinson call it, is wholly reducible to timbre, then pure sound structures simpliciter are sufficient. PM structures are redundant.

I shall discuss (5) first. Can a non-specified, non-intended instrument or devices produce the same timbres as real, traditional instruments? If yes, then PM structures are not redundant. But not all individual instruments of an instrument category have exactly the same harmonic content, attack-delay envelope and vibrato, although they must be sufficiently similar to be a successful member of the kind. Many of the differences are barely measurable, thus imperceptible. It may be the same for synthesized sounds. Differences may occur if the

\[159\] I have never confirmed whether Levinson would be willing to accept such a correction.
fingering and embouchure (when relevant) of the instrument produces expressive or timbral
differences. If that is the case, then specific instrument playing is *sui generis*. Suppose there is a
solo clarinet composition that is performed twice. One is performed by a musician on a standard
clarinet. The other is performed by a person playing a special synthesizer keyboard. They both
produce exactly the same sound sequence. Does the synthesized case not count as performance
of the PM structure because it was not played on a clarinet? The score specified a clarinet. Do
composers intend the actual instrument or just the timbre of the instrument they specify? One
cannot answer this question by historical inquiry because before such technology was available
or conceivable, there was no reason to say “clarinet timbre or clarinet-like timbre.” Clarinets
were the only things capable of producing such timbres or clarinet sounds. Considerations of
counterfactual histories also probably will not yield an answer to these questions. It does not
take thought experiments to generate such problems. Consider the authenticity movement of
performance practice for Renaissance and Baroque music. Should Vivaldi and Bach only be
properly performed on instruments of the period? Suppose a contemporary instrument maker
could duplicate a violin or viola designed and constructed in the 1740s. Would that be an
authentic instrument or a period instrument? Here one might simply appeal to the perceptible
properties produced by such instruments. If the duplicates had the same “feel” and sonic
properties indicative of actual period instruments, then it might make sense to say that they
should count as authentic. Of course, I have thus far omitted an important element: the agents
playing either the original period instrument or the duplicates. Not only the instrument itself, but
the way it is played, should be included in so called authentic music practice. The way people
played these instruments in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is hopelessly lost to us.
This has not stopped music historians, critics, and experts from making inferences about such
playing. Nonetheless, that element cannot be reproduced accurately because there are no artifacts available to provide evidence of the way musicians played several hundred years ago.

It is interesting to imagine a case in which all hitherto specifiable timbres could be produced on a special keyboard instrument like a synthesizer. People could then learn any instrument on this keyboard instrument. There could be an orchestra of keyboards and keyboard players. What would this mean for musical practices? All learning of playing an instrument would be reducible to learning how to play keyboard. I do not say piano because such an instrument would require additional skills to produce the timbres, such as synthesizers do today. In the future, we may have to work such questions.

Second, there are questions about using scores as notational exemplars as I demonstrated above. The contingencies of notation in any culture, and the limits that are constitutive of a notation system cause unwarranted bias in doing sound metaphysics. If there were different technologies available to Bach and Beethoven, it is possible that the properties they would choose to specify in their instructions would be ontologically thicker or thinner than standard scores. Furthermore, the properties may be very different from what we think of scorable properties given our history.

Challenge (1) is not problematic given that (Plurality MW) is correct. We need ontological plurality because of the meta-ontological concerns, and the defense of (Plurality MW), discussed above. Consequently, the objections to Levinson’s theory of MWs that remain most prescient are the soundness of our intuitions with respect to the three desiderata, using notation as the standard to construct abstract objects, and the problem of whether initiated types and indicated structures exist.
Challenge (4). Does Levinson give us any reasons for accepting his quite hefty assumptions? In one way, perhaps yes. Levinson presupposes that there are entities in the world called musical works, and his concern is to figure out what those things are. Levinson’s argument is not going to get very far at all if one just denies that such entities exist. So, it seems that Levinson really needs to convince us of two things: not only what these entities are (the criteria for being one of those objects he identified as MWs), but that there are such things in the first place. Levinson does a good job of developing the criteria given the desiderata he formulates, but it is questionable whether he motivates the project itself—namely, that there are or should be such things as musical works. Being charitable, one might want to interpret some of the things Levinson says as being entrenched intuitions or beliefs that we have given our culture and history, etc. as taking it as quite obvious that there needs to be such things as musical works.

As Lydia Goehr has pointed out, Levinson’s account of musical works depend upon the appeal to a set of allegedly non-negotiable intuitions (Levinson does not say as much, but it is implicit in how he argues) and theoretical arguments. By non-negotiable, I think Goehr means that Levinson presents his case as if these are the intuitions “we” have, where the “we” is assumed to be most or all educated, sophisticated listeners of music. It is unclear whether these intuitions are intended to be the ones “we” ought to have or the ones we do in fact have. This kind of problem in analytic philosophical methodology is almost never made explicit or clear. Now, the theoretical arguments Levinson uses are Gedankenexperiment or Gedankenexperiment-like arguments. So, since ultimately these thought experiment conclusions rely upon an appeal to some set of more fundamental intuitions, Levinson’s argument fundamentally rests on

---

intuitions (we do have or ought to have given a certain set of interests, practices, goals, values, et
cetera). It might be clear that the best line of attack against Levinson’s theory of musical works
is to challenge these intuitions. How does one do that? There are at least two ways. First, one
can just deny that these are “our” intuitions. This can be, and traditionally has been, attempted
by the counterexample approach, which demonstrates that the intuitions are not as clear as first
presented, or not comprehensive enough for the purposes at hand. Another way is to show that
an individual may have conflicting intuitions over a particular relevant case, or that significant
groups of individuals would have conflicting intuitions over a case. If no further appeal can be
made to something outside of these intuitions, then there seems to be no way to adjudicate
between these intuitions. We are left in a morass. Second, one can try to show that the intuitions
are irrelevant to what counts, or what is significant in theorizing about the subject matter. This
latter approach does not try to deny that we have these intuitions, in fact one might concede that
we do have these intuitions, but rather gives something like a “so what” response to them.

Therefore, a comprehensive attack on Levinson’s theory would undermine or refute both
his alleged non-negotiable intuitions and his theoretical arguments by challenging the intuitions.
Of course, one still has the entire usual arsenal of refutation by attacking the inferences, and the
argument structure (validity, soundness). Attacking Levinson’s theory is a tricky task for several
reasons. First, whenever one is dealing with intuitions and intuition-pumping, it is risky and
difficult. Second, because Levinson is arguing for the existence of a new kind of entity or
ontological category, one cannot easily undermine his account by showing that the entity really
does not meet the standard requirements without question begging.

What are the kinds of intuitions that Levinson appeals to make his arguments for his
theory of musical works? Some of the intuitions are metaphysical, and mainly those of us with a
philosophical bent. But most are supposed to be aesthetic, hence evaluative. These are about what we find important in music. In short, why we value music, what we find valuable in our experience of music.

Challenge (2). Traditional metaphysical accounts of structures define them as sets of relations. They are different from sets because in sets the order of the members (or elements) does not individuate the set, whereas structures are individuated by the order of their members (as in a set of ordered $n$-tuples). This puts obvious restrictions on the kinds of thing that may be a structure. Levinson says that the pure sound structure *simpliciter* includes all “standardly” specified audible features. This is questionable. But what is a standardly specified audible feature (property)? What do scores represent? In order to include these features, the structure would have to be based upon the notational exemplar, and would be, therefore, more like a linguistic type than a pure sound structure. In fact, this is similar to Anderson’s view. Anderson thinks of the musical work as a descriptive-kind defined by the score. The linguistic type of “cat” is the sequence \{c, a, t\} or \{c, a, t\}. Levinson says he does not mean for the structure to be reductive in any sense. Do initiated types admit of the type-token distinction? What would count as a token of the initiated type? A performance? A particular printing of the score? The initiated type is still an abstract entity in the sense that it is not identical to the score or a performance, even if that performance is a perfect (lacks any errors) compliance-class of the score.

In one sense there really are not different kinds of structures. A structure is a structure; it does not matter what it is a structure of, namely the content of the ordered sequence. The content

---

of abstract objects like sets and structures are always representations. Think of the set of natural numbers, an infinite set. The content of the set are numbers, which are already abstract objects; however, when I physically inscribe a representation of the set of natural numbers \{1, 2, 3, \ldots\} I use numerals, which are representations in notational form of the numbers. So what is the content of a sound structure? There are many ways of representing sounds and the properties of sounds. There are many ways of representing numbers too, but we have adopted the convention of Arabic numerals. I could have written the set of natural numbers as \{I, II, III, \ldots\}. So, one might use Western musical notation as a way of representing sounds and their properties. If I do, then whatever limitations this notation has, my structure has as well. But if I do not use notational exemplar as my representational system, then I may not be subject to these limitations or different ones. If there is a representational system which could capture (or represent) all sounds and sonic properties, then the structure itself would be complete. Perhaps recordings should be considered a representational system, even a new notational system creating notational exemplars. Recordings capture sounds, certainly all audible sounds, and sonic properties. Whether or not recordings capture all audible sounds and sonic properties is the problem of transparency of recordings, but that need not concern us here.

My defense of the separation between metaphysics and epistemology should be expected. Consider Levinson’s theory of initiated types or indicated structures. A consequence of his theory is that even if there are neither recordings nor remaining scores of a musical work, it would still continue to exist because MW+ is not dependent upon physical objects or events for its continued existence. MW+’s coming to be is dependent (according to Levinson) upon physical events obtaining, but once brought into existence it is eternal like other abstracta. Therefore, even if there is no way of re-identifying the improvisation because there is no
physical record or document of it, and even if no one remembers it, it was brought into existence and continues to exist as a musical work. This would mean that a person could putatively bring into existence a musical work by playing or writing, and for all we know it is novel, but not be the agent’s work because it had already been brought into existence by someone else. The same problem exists for Levinson’s theory.

What salient features of improvisations are not captured by Levinson’s theory of the MW? Levinson’s theory of the MW is not sufficiently ontologically thick. Our interest in improvisations is in how they sound. How sounds sound is a vague enterprise when trying to describe this phenomenon. This holds for all of sensory modalities. Probably, we do not possess a rich enough vocabulary, and we do not have the reflective capacity of our own experiences in an introspectively sufficient manner, to articulate what we hear. But we know we do hear these rich sonic properties, and we know when we have these experiences: our experiences of performance token events and recordings. Levinson’s theory of MW+ captures the fact that sonic improvisations instantiate a sound structure, have timbre properties, and have artistic properties that are based on the performer and historical context of the improvisation. Levinson’s theory does not capture. Many improvisations are not solo performances. Consider Keith Jarrett’s Köln Concert. It is a recording. How much ontologically thicker is the recording than Levinson’s MW+? Digital recordings quantify the sonic information into a computational code that is realized for playback on music reproduction machines (amplifiers, pre-amplifiers, compact disc players, et cetera). For example, the binary encoding by lasers on a disc is an abstract object. But now we have the bias generated by the technology—the particular way in which humans have devised to encode and capture information (light, sound). Now of course in some sense even traditional sound structures are based on a bias—a scientific one—because of
the tempered system of the west, and the way we have devised of measuring and representing. Is a sound a set of cycles? Sounds are vibrating airwaves. But we choose a system to measure and represent the vibrations. (Perhaps even the concept of vibration is contingent?) We radically underestimate the way in which our technological practices and inventions influence our metaphysical musings. These practices become entrenched: we take them for granted and forget their contingent origins. The information and practices could have been a different way. We could measure and represent sonic properties differently.

Here I have shown that improvisations are MWs according to Levinson’s theory of the MW, although Levinson did not explicitly address improvisations in his theory. Improvisations meet the criteria Levinson puts forward for something to be classified as a MW. This, however, does not mean that Levinson’s account is the best theory for improvisations. There are salient features of improvisations and improvisational practice that are not captured by Levinson’s theory. Furthermore, Levinson’s theory of MWs has shortcomings. Consequently, the accomplishment here is limited: there is presumption for improvisations being WOAs (at least in the case of music). But now a better fitting theory needs to be constructed for the work-hood of improvisations: a theory that does not have such shortcomings and captures all of the salient properties of improvisations.

2.3.4 The Proper Theory for Improvisations as WOAs

Our preserved theories and the world fit together so snugly less because we have found out how the world is than because we have tailored each to the other.\textsuperscript{162}

—Ian Hacking, \textit{Representing and Intervening}

\textsuperscript{162} Ian Hacking, \textit{Representing and Intervening}, 31.
The work-concept as employed in many popular musics and jazz is different from that of Western, classical, art music. One kind of difference resides in variegated goals. The classical musician seeks notational accuracy and sometimes interpretive accuracy; whereas, in jazz (say), often there is no notational script or score against which one could be accurate and the goal is to be creative at the time of performance, create a new version or interpretation of the work which does not include notational accuracy even if there is a scored manuscript. The work-concept here is problematic because of the fact that there are often no scores, and more importantly the absence of rules, tacit or not, of how melodies and even harmonies are to be played. In fact, often a goal is to obscure it as much as possible while giving an audience enough structure to recognize it. Since a major goal of improvising and jazz practice is to be original, creative, and spontaneous, the role the work plays is that of evaluative background in the sense that the performance of the work is to be judged as a performance of the work in order to evaluate the performance’s creativity. This needs some form of recognition. In addition, improvisational practices often produce singular (non-recorded) events. This also needs to be recognized in a theory.

First let us be clear about the practices and products that are of first order concern for the metaphysics of improvisation. I shall the history, including contemporary history, of jazz as the paradigm.

(1) There are individual events consisting of ensemble or solo “live” performance tokens without recording or documentation.
(2) There are individual events consisting of ensemble or solo “live” performance tokens with recording or documentation. Following Theodore (Ted) Gracyk, these are called veridical recordings.

(3) There are recordings, which typically occur in recording studios. Some recordings are similar to recordings of live performances that usually occur in performance venues (as in (2) above). Some recordings are “constructed” in the sense that the recording does not consist simply of a documentation of a wholly separable event, viz., the performance in the studio. Constructed recordings involve such technologies as dubbing, recording separate tracks, a single musician playing several tracks, editing different recorded sound sequences together, multiple signal processing editing. In other words, the recording is “sculpted,” or constructed onto the medium of recording (e.g., tape, disks, digital media, analog media). Many non-veridical jazz recordings are a combination of “live” studio performances, which mimic a performance to an audience in a venue, and constructed practices. Of course, it is possible to use many constructed recording practices on veridical recordings. Consequently, the distinction between veridical and constructed recordings is vague. We have access to, i.e., hear, recordings through playback on suitable reproduction means. Each playback is a reception token.

(4) There are songs, tunes, lead sheets and charts, arrangements, transcriptions.

Because of the complexity of the practices and objects that exist in jazz and other improvisational genres and art forms, we need an ontological theory that takes account of this complexity and plurality and has some explanatory power. Consequently, the ontology I offer


164 The term “constructed recording” also comes from Gracyk.
will be plural. I do not think that there is one kind of work involved in improvisational, artistic practices. The two basic claims are that we need to recognize recordings and sound structures.

My first point is that recordings, which are ontologically thick and robust, should be a significant entity in an ontological theory of improvisation and performing art forms that include improvisational practices in their histories. The advent of sound recording technology and reproduction permitted music to be recorded and listened to repeatedly. In the case of dance and theatre, moving picture recording played a similar role, though historically less significantly than in music. No longer ephemeral, improvisations could now be studied in depth: over long periods of time, with as many pauses and repeats as the listener desired. Manipulation of playback makes possible transcription by musicians and theorists. In addition, the improvisations were now available to anyone with access to sound reproduction equipment; one need not be in attendance. This, to a significant degree, introduces the idea of an improvised work in yet another sense. When improvisations are recorded, either live or in a studio, the action-type of improvising generates two objects: a sound structure MW, and a recording MW.

There are many reasons in favor of this ontological claim. First, the history of jazz is largely documented through recordings and is primarily conveyed to people through recordings. Obviously, recordings do not play an exclusive role here, but recordings are primary. This is the case in part because of the historically contingent fact that jazz as a genre developed roughly simultaneously with the invention and development of various kinds of recording technologies. In jazz history and appreciation courses, recordings are emphasized because they provide examples, are a primary object of study for the subject, and give access to musicians and styles that no longer exist and would be difficult if not impossible to duplicate. Even though there are

---

165 I mean to include video/audio, and audio tout court recordings.
lead sheets and charts that can be and are studied (at least for those with musical knowledge),
they are insufficient for the study of jazz. Much of jazz was not and is not notated. Admittedly,
most performances that have occurred are also not available for study. They were neither
notated nor recorded. Nonetheless, there are a significant number of recordings available. Some
of the strengths of the history of these recordings are that most of these recordings are publicly
available in some format, and the recordings are diverse with respect to time periods (obviously
contingent on the availability of the technology), styles, artists, locations, and are both veridical
and constructed.

A similar claim has been made with respect to rock music and other popular music genres
by Gracyk and John Fisher.¹⁶⁶ I will argue that jazz, for example, is akin to rock music with
respect to the proper, primary objects of appreciation. I will use and apply what I call the
Gracyk-Fisher theory of the ontology of rock and other popular music to improvisation. The fact
that rock music includes a lot of improvisation supports this analogy and application to jazz and
other improvisational genres (assuming the Gracyk-Fisher is correct).

Although one listens to recordings in the study of western classical music, this is an
adjunct to the primary study of theory and scores. Some theorists say that coming to know a
classical work can only be achieved by listening to it, either a live performance or a recording.
Some would even say several performances or recordings from different artists (musicians,
conductors, orchestras, et cetera). The historical contingency of recording technology, as I have
pointed out, could have changed the nature of our appreciative, academic, and musical practices
of classical music. And perhaps that is occurring now. Appreciators and educators are focusing

¹⁶⁶ Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise*; John Andrew Fisher, “Rock ’n’ Recording: The Ontological
more on recordings of classical works, and different recordings makes the study of varying interpretations convenient. Live performances were the only option before this. But this counterfactual proposition and possible future change is not a problem for my account. I accept the ontological plurality and complexity of classical music as well. When I say that performance tokens, whether recorded or not, are WOAs and/or MWs, I include classical music. I find no reason for rejecting the idea that when Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli performs and/or records a Scarlatti sonata, there are two MWs involved: one is generated by the performance, the other pre-exists the performance. Therefore, if one, for example, accepts Levinson’s theory of the MW for classical music, there is the MW+ entity and the recorded or unrecorded performance. Are all performances WOAs/MWs? Yes, they are works. The profligacy objection to including all performances is not cogent. This objection makes accusations of a “bloated” ontology with the assumption that an ontology should be subject to Occam’s razor. But parsimony governs in cases of unnecessary entities. I believe that sometimes the parsimony principle is abused. Applying parsimony does not mean specifying a particular number of entities, or establishing absolute boundaries for the number of entities. In the philosophy of science, its main purpose is as a criterion in deciding among empirically equivalent theories and explanations. Imagine the scenario J. S. Mill feared in the quotation I used above. Given certain parameters most or all of the possible combinations of pitches and their ordered durations have been exhausted by human invention and industriousness. For the moment, let us use Levinson’s theory of the work. Consequently, there would be an extremely large number of MW+s. Would that constitute a bloated ontology? I think not; frankly, it sounds silly. To put it “tautologously:” an ontology ought to have as many entities as there are. Performances in the descriptive sense count as WOAs and MWs.
I might be accused of equivocation with respect to the proper level of entities to which parsimony ought to be applied. To describe this objection I shall use an analogous case to the idea that all performances are WOAs or MWs. A similar objection can be made against the view that all improvisations, however insignificant or amateur, are musical works. This view would have the untoward consequence of significantly bloating our musical/artistic ontology. The concern about profligate ontological theories, it might be said, is about the theory part of an ontology, i.e., the quantity of the kinds of entities, not the quantity of members in the set of any particular kind entity. If this were not the case, then this criticism could be used against any of the accounts of musical works because their members (individual compositions) are continually expanding. In other words, parsimony applies to (say) kinds of thing, not the individual things that constitute the kind or members of the set the kind term describes. But the other counterargument against parsimony objections is that it seems irrelevant, especially with respect to certain kinds of abstract objects. Could there be too many possible chess games? Are there too many numbers? Since sound structures play a role in my account and in many other theories of the musical work (especially if they are type-token theories), then there are either an indefinite number of possible musical works, or an enormous number of possible musical works. Granted I am now talking about posibilities, it could be the case that an enormous number of sound structures are instantiated through human action. The quantity of sound structures is already specified given a set of defined parameters (e.g., length of time, a cap on possible pitches) because sound structures are abstract and exist non-spatio-temporally—all of them exist eternally. If one does not define parameters, then there are an infinite number of sound structures and as a result there are an infinite number of possible musical works that might be instantiated by either action-type. And if sound structures are finite because of parameters we set
(obviously could still be a very large number), then the number of potential musical works is fixed and finite, even though a thousand generations of humans would never be able to instantiate that number. The infinite, indefinite, or large number of sound structures seems irrelevant to the merit of a theory that uses such entities.

Second, jazz musicians primarily study jazz and improvisation via recordings. They transcribe improvised solos, often learn tunes and improvisation by ear from recordings, they become familiar with the language of the history of jazz by listening to recordings. Jazz transcriptions require transcribing (notating) improvised solos and improvised interpretations of tunes from recordings. Again, there are other modes of study, such as attending live jazz performances, participating in jam sessions, ensemble practicing, exercise and “how-to” textbooks and manuals, and private or group lessons. I am not diminishing the value of these modes of engagement by emphasizing recordings. However, the primary way someone learns to play like Bird (Charlie Parker) is not by listening to a live person play like Bird, or by studying transcriptions of his solos. In addition, transcriptions, like classical scores, only capture limited features of the sound sequence. They cannot, at least not yet, capture subtleties of rhythm, and most importantly, the non-reductive, elusive property of a musician’s “sound” on his or her instrument. One must have direct epistemic access to the sound. Recordings, even when they are of poor quality, provide that access and mediated direct engagement.

My second point is that an entity like a sound structure must be included in the ontology of improvisation. In the case of other art forms, there needs to be an appropriate structure, akin to a pure sound structure. The fact that musicians can and do use other musicians’ unrecorded improvisations directly, as in quotation, or indirectly, entails that there is at least a mental or conceptual object used as a basis for (say) the musical quotation. Usually, quotations require
transposition. For example, Parker played an E-flat alto saxophone and if I am playing a piano (C instrument) or tenor saxophone (B-flat) I need to transpose that actual pitches Parker recorded or played to transposed pitches in the relevant key of my instrument. In addition, transcriptions and arrangements can only be accounted for by abstract sound structures. Consider the example of big band arrangements of tunes constructed from Charlie Parker’s improvised solos. These tunes are constructed from Charlie Parker’s solos. Others have also composed tunes from Parker’s improvised solos. Notice that this practice is not different from what Bach and Beethoven did from their own improvisations. These examples are also illustrative of another feature of improvisations that support their status as works. There are many improvised solos preserved on recordings that possess a level of fame and adoration accorded to typical, western classical works (where the work-hood is not in question). Most of Charlie Parker’s recorded solos, John Coltrane’s solo on “Giant Steps,” Coleman Hawkins’ solo on “Body and Soul,” many of Miles Davis’s solos from the late 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s have this status. Not just connoisseurs but ordinary enthusiasts can whistle or hum these sound structures. When one sings or whistles a Bird solo, one does not reproduce the exact sound of what Bird played. Obviously, there are differences in timbre, key, and other properties of the sounds. This is possible because one uses the sound structure of what Bird played, not the actual sound sequence Bird performed, as on a recording. We listen to the recordings of these solos as we would listen to a late Beethoven string quartet. We often repeat playback of the solo itself, just as we repeat playback of a particular movement of a symphony. Our listening and appreciative practices treat these solos as ontologically thick (the recording itself) and thin (sound structure simpliciter) objects. Our generative and appreciative practices with respect to improvisation are constitutive of the work-hood of improvisations, in particular the ontological complexity and plurality I am
suggesting. By this I mean that these practices logically support my ontological account of improvisation, and that my ontological account makes possible these appreciative practices.  

The substance of my theory is the following. A person’s improvising simultaneously brings into existence, or instantiates, two entities: (1) an abstract structure of some kind, and (2) either a recorded performance event token or an unrecorded performance event token. (1) requires that there be sound structures, movement structures, movement and word structures, et cetera. (2) means that in the case of constructive recordings [the distinction between constructed and veridical recordings is not important in jazz but may have significance in other genres, although even in jazz it can be important as in some fusion, electronic jazz music], the artwork is the sound recording, in a way defended (amended Fisher theory), and in the case of live performances, the performance event itself is the artwork (along with the structure it realizes as indicated by S at t). What needs to be done: a precise definition of these ontological entities, such as the structures, an argument that performances can be WOAs, a theory of how sound recordings and perhaps other recording/documentations can be WOAs and the primary WOAs of a genre. The structure is what is replicable, reproducible. The recording/documentation although multiply instanced has definitive versions. Show that improvised genres are more like rock and film than classical music (although even some classical music recently is like rock—for example Glenn Gould or anyone for that matter recordings which many are constructive, but even if not then recording documents a performance which is a particular interpretation of a musical work, and if performances can be works, then the recording is a work itself along with the WOA). The fact that performances, many of them in the past, and many of the present and future will never be experienced again is not a reason to discount performances as WOAs.

Charitably, one might say that this is a “transcendental argument.”
My theory recognizes both the ontologically thin and thick elements of improvisations and improvisational and artistic practices in various art forms. The recordings and performances are ontologically thick; the sound structure is ontologically thin.

When there is no constructive recording, the performance event will be the WOA and/or MW. There are several reasons why recordings should be considered the MW for many improvisations. The history of one of the most significant genres of music to arise with improvisational practices is for the most part a history of recordings. Jazz musicians learn their trade through the study of recordings. They learn by ear the solos and styles of past masters. They transcribe solo improvisations as well as renderings of melodies and standards including the harmonic elements by the rhythm section (piano, guitar, even drum parts). In some cases solo improvisations are “quoted” in new recordings or live performances. These practices reveal the strong role of recordings have played in the history and development of jazz and rock music.

Recordings and performance token events are the most robust entities. They contain all of the sonic perceptual and sub-perceptual properties. I include sub-perceptual properties because there may be aesthetic properties, which are perceivable, that supervene on them. In addition, these entities possess all of the relevant artistic properties that ought to be part of the identity of a WOA and MW for improvisations. Recordings and performance tokens are indexed to the time and location of their eventuating, which entails that all properties dependent upon music-historical/art-historical context are part of their identity. Recordings and performance tokens, or their constituent parts and properties, can be original, derivative, Bill Evans-influenced, novel, traditional, free jazz-influenced, modal jazz-influenced, et cetera. Pure sound structures cannot possess these properties because they are non-spatio-temporal, abstract objects. Recordings and performance tokens instantiate pure sound structures. Furthermore, for those
whose intuitions cohere with Levinson’s (Cre) desideratum, and accept the creation/discover distinction, recordings and performance tokens meet that criterion.

Perhaps one of the most important advantages of recordings and performance tokens (and their veridical recordings) is that they capture all the improvising that occurs in many artistic contexts, most notably jazz. In the (SCI) case above, I pointed out that the naïve view of improvisation is that there is one person improvising at a time, or that only solos are improvised or should count as improvisation. Recordings and performance tokens include all of the ensemble’s playing, including all of the improvisation that occurs from the interaction between musicians, and the improvising of the rhythm section. To think that these are not of aesthetic interest or value is to misunderstand jazz and jazz practices. I am not sure how one could argue for this claim without question-begging. But as George Dickie notes in his defense of the institutional theory of art, there is circular reasoning (a form of question-begging) and there is viciously circular reasoning. The institutional theory may be circular but it is not viciously so. I will adopt that argument here.

Recordings, especially, permit one to investigate the many complex features that exist in typical jazz ensemble performance. One can listen to a recording of a tune or performance many times and concentrate one’s attention on various aspects. For example, when I listen to the 1960s quintet of Miles Davis, I like many others often concentrate on Miles Davis’ playing, soloing, and how he interprets and re-interprets standards, and his own quintet’s tunes (such as Wayne Shorter’s brilliant, innovative tunes). Other times I concentrate on Tony Williams’ drumming or Herbie Hancock’s accompaniment, much of which is improvised. Listening to a series of live, veridical recordings, such as the quintet’s The Complete Live at the Plugged Nickel 1965, one can compare and contrast the performances of the same tune and discern the very
varied way in which the rhythm section plays the same tune in different sets and on different
days.

Performance event tokens are physical, space-time events whose spatial and temporal
boundaries are determined by the phenomenological experience of the audience and the actions
and intentions of the performers. Audience members’ experiences of the event in addition to the
conventions of performance will provide the grounds for the beginning and cessation of a
performance event. These events are brought about by the relevant artistic agents’ bodily
movements, manipulation of sound producing devices (including vocalizations), and the sounds
these devices produce. An ontology of sound is well beyond the scope of this project;\textsuperscript{168}
however, here I will assume a reductive, physicalist ontology of sounds as vibrations of air.

Causes and effects must be the same for two events to be identical. By the “same,” I mean that
the space-time properties are identical. Hence, on this account, it is impossible to re-perform an
action exactly (perhaps time travel would defeat this claim). Requiring events to be individuated
by their spatial-temporal properties makes possible performance types and tokens. For example,
John’s playing a middle C on a particular piano for three seconds on Tuesday at location $L$ is a
different event token from his playing a middle C for three seconds on the same piano on
Wednesday at $L$. However, both performance events are of the same performance type, viz.,
John’s playing a middle C for three seconds on this particular piano at $L$. In an ontological
theory of performing arts, it is desirable to distinguish performance token events from
performance types because of spatial and temporal context dependent properties that often make
a difference to critical assessments.

\textsuperscript{168} For the ontology of sound, a fairly recent area of metaphysics, see Casey O’Callaghan,
What is a recording? The idea that recordings can be the primary objects of appreciation in particular genres, and thus be fundamental ontological entities, comes from Theodore Gracyk’s aesthetics of rock music.\textsuperscript{169} Although, as Gracyk notes, he was just giving philosophical justification for something critics, connoisseurs, and enthusiasts knew tacitly and un-philosophically. Gracyk’s theory was revised by John Fisher. Here are some quotations from Gracyk’s book \textit{Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock} that give a good foundation for understanding the theory and its motivation:\textsuperscript{170}

1. “recordings are the primary link between the rock artist and the audience” (18).
2. Recordings are “the primary object of critical attention” (18).
3. “Records, not simply songs or performances, are the relevant object of critical attention” (13).
4. Alternatively, recordings are the “primary texts” of rock music (21).
5. “listeners immersed in the rock tradition regard the sound of rock recordings as highly relevant to their impact and meaning” (17-18).
6. “the musical works do not exist apart from the recording process itself” (13).
7. “Rock music is both composed and received in light of musical qualities that are subject to mechanical reproduction but not notational specification” (1).
8. “In rock the musical work is less typically a song than an arrangement of recorded sounds” (1).

Gracyk also points out the collaborative nature of the recording, which is the value of the production of the recording (by a separate producer(s) or the musicians themselves). How recordings are produced, and the effect of that process, can only be accessed through the


reproduction of the recording. Production consists of microphone placement, tracking, choice of recording equipment, mixing tracks, dubbing, signal processing (e.g., echo, reverberation, frequency equalization, noise reduction, octave effects, distortion, flangellation). As music aficionados know, some producers became famous, as famous as musicians and artists. This ontology is what also explains the introduction of the term “recording artist,” which was first and aptly attributed to the Beatles.

The recording work (MW\(_R\)) is the master “tape”\(^{171}\) recorded and produced at a particular time and place. The master tape should be considered complete when the artists and other collaborators deem it is ready for reproduction and distribution to the public. A constructed recording is not a performance of work; it is the work. There are reproductions of the master tape on different media: compact discs, tapes, vinyl records, et cetera. All copies of the master tape in whatever medium (digital files such as MP3, cassette tapes, vinyl records, compact disks) must be causally related to the master tape in the right way in order to be authentic and give listeners proper epistemic access to the MW\(_R\). We hear and have access to MW\(_R\)s through playback. Playback conditions are normative. One must use a suitable reproduction machine in suitable listening conditions in order to experience the MW\(_R\). Consequently, not all playback events give access to the MW\(_R\). Here there will be tough aesthetic issues to consider: what listening conditions are suitable? Are there general rules that can be adopted? Or are rules specific to individual cases or genres? Some argue that some artists construct their recordings for “Ipod” like listening, viz., headphones, and environment in which the listening occurs is unimportant. Gracyk and Fisher make the case that many (most?) rock recordings have standard, normative conditions for appropriate playback and listening. Fisher says that most rock

\(^{171}\) Before digital recording and playback technology, the masters were reel-to-reel tapes. Nowadays, typically the master is a digital file encoded and stored on an appropriate medium.
recordings of roughly the 1960s and 1970s should be listened to in conditions that mimic professional studio playback, because those are the conditions under which the recording was made and “sculpted.”

Fisher argues that veridical recordings have less support as MWs in rock music. Although I disagree with Fisher, I will not contest his claim here. I think it is different for jazz and perhaps other musical genres wherein improvisation is central. Problem is that veridical recordings seem to be documentations of the performance token event, and if one thinks that performance tokens are WOAs, then this makes the case for veridical recordings being works themselves even more difficult. I do not want to deny that veridical recordings are documentations. Since there are important features of improvisations occurring in real time (unlike what often happens in constructed recordings), as I said above, often there is not much difference between a constructed and veridical recording. A studio performance is like a “live” performance without an audience. One might think that in constructed recordings, musicians are performing for a recording, whereas in veridical recordings performers are performing for an audience. But ultimately this distinction dissolves because musicians know that there is an “audience” who will be listening to their recordings at a later time. In addition, however the audience’s presence changes musicians’ performances, there are other ways in which it causes more opacity to what is of utmost aesthetic importance. For example, the justly famous and valuable Bill Evans’ *Sunday at the Village Vanguard* sessions recording has a lot of ambient noise. Sometimes I think that the clinking of glasses, the light, whispering conversation, and the sounds of the movement of the club’s staff add a sentimental touch to these recordings. But most


of the time I am annoyed because it creates an albeit not totally cumbersome barrier to hearing
and concentrating on Evans’ piano, Paul Motian’s drums, and Scott La Faro’s bass. Many jazz
musicians treat the studio as if it were a live performance (minus the distractions of the
audience\textsuperscript{174}), and they believe that artistic integrity requires improvisers especially to record in
this way. These musicians would never dub, splice, or paste sound sequences, although almost
everyone executes several “takes” of a performance in a studio setting. The selection of which
performance to publish is also available in the veridical case. Usually, producers will record
many more live performances than what is intended to be released, and the musicians and other
collaborators choose which to include on the master tape. These performances may be culled
from several different venues and appearances. Historically, this has not occurred in jazz as
much as in rock and popular music. And this fact is revealing. There is a strong documentation
sensibility in jazz and improvisational practices. Many “takes” are often released, veridical
recordings are unified (one time and place), critics and enthusiasts demand release of all sessions
and material recorded\textsuperscript{175}. There are two kinds of immediacy involved in improvisation. First,
the fact that ideas, movements, sounds, et cetera are being invented at the time of recording, or
playing, or performing—invention is occurring immediately (more or less as I have established
already). Revision and editing are impossible, and there are significant temporal constraints.
Second, there is the twofold immediacy of improvisation in live performance: real time
invention (the first) and phenomenological immediacy, or uniqueness of initial experience. I am
not suggesting that the initial experience one has in listening is not valuable. I am suggesting

\textsuperscript{174} Some jazz musicians love the audience; they feed off of them and it fuels their creative
inspiration. Other jazz musicians loathe audiences, even when they are well behaved (the Glenn
Gould view).

\textsuperscript{175} This phenomenon exists in rock music appreciation, too. One recent example is the enormous
amount of material being released by Jimi Hendrix’s executors.
that it may not be the most valuable because it does permit understanding and appreciation of properties of improvisations that require study and contemplation—the kind of study and contemplation one affords to a late Beethoven string quartet, or Mahler symphony, or a work of Schönberg. In addition, experiences of sound recordings involve mostly hearing. Experiences of live performance involve more than one sensory modality. Recent studies have shown that the visual component of the live experience (the same is true of video recordings of live, musical performances) affects our understanding and appreciation, if not evaluation, of a performance.176 People that experience simultaneous visual and auditory inputs detect expressive qualities more accurately than when confronted with auditory inputs alone. This immediacy has caused confusion about evaluation, however. Some philosophers have thought that a kind of acousmatic concatenationism is the correct model of understanding and appreciation of improvisation because of these kinds of immediacy. In other words, improvisation’s most salient features are detectable in (or even require attendance at live performances177) immediate experience because they are immediate phenomena. This view is erroneous. There are qualities to detect and appreciate that come from non-immediate repeated experience, reflection, and introspection, the first kind of immediacy is present in repeated experiences of live performances or recordings. But this is erroneous. Documentation and recording technology have permitted deep concentration. Here is Keith Jarrett commenting on his own, recent solo recording:


Months before I went to Japan, I had the idea that, since my career had had a lot to do with transforming energy into something new each time, this time I wanted the transformation to include the actual format itself. Most listeners of my past solo concerts will be momentarily (at least) shocked at the initial absence of melodic—or even motivic—content, the material seemingly un-motivated by any concept at all. This is not an accident (or it was a planned one). I didn’t want any premature resolutions. How we arrive at profound thoughts has a lot to do with what we aren’t thinking beforehand, and I had in mind letting some of the music happen to me without sitting there deep in thought. I wanted my hands (especially the left hand) to tell me things. This is part of the process I wished to experiment with. Transformative moments are very rare, or they seem so due to our inattention. It takes so many processes to coincide just so for us to arrive at a transformative moment (if we’re watching). But maybe this is wrong, and they happen constantly, though we are absent. The listener has to bear with me here. The whole thing is risky, but I’ve taken you places before and I’m not aiming to disappoint.

… I was slightly shocked to notice that the concert had arranged itself into a musical structure despite my every effort to be oblivious to the overall outcome. I should not have felt this way, however, for the subconscious musical choices of sequence were made out of the personal need for the next thing. This is what one should keep in mind while listening. We are all players and we are all being played.

… Everything on these discs is completely improvised.178

In the second paragraph, one learns that even performers, improvisers, need to listen and engage again to discover all of the valuable properties present in an improvised performance. The fact these features were not intended by the improviser is not relevant. One finds valuable, unintended properties in non-improvised works of music, literature, painting, et cetera.

In addition, veridical recordings give us better access to improvisational artistic failures. A primary object of evaluation, as pointed above, is the oeuvre of an improviser. Critics and enthusiasts want to hear many takes, alternatives, determine artistic growth or decline. Acquaintance with artistic failures is important, and veridical recordings provide more evidence of these failures. Of course, constructed recordings can be failures as well. One needs evidence

from both constructed and veridical recordings to make comprehensive judgments about improvisers.

Because there is a continuum of the degree differences between constructed and veridical recordings, and in the history of improvised jazz music this distinction is less stark than in rock music, and the role documentation plays in almost all improvisational genres, veridical recordings should count as MWRs.

Jazz “composers” compose tunes that are for the most part exactly like classical compositions. The works of Duke Ellington, Antonio Carlos Jobim, Thelonious Monk, and Wayne Shorter are examples of brilliant jazz composers. The action-type in these cases is (SCC). They are notated in scores, charts, and lead sheets. The specificity of the instructions provided through the notation will underdetermine the exact nature of the performance, and this specificity differs in the same it does in classical music. For example, much of Duke Ellington’s oeuvre has a high level of specificity (much like late nineteenth century scores), although there are other compositions that are more like lead sheets wherein the instructions are deliberately vague. In the latter cases, under-determination is the goal. Basic melodic and harmonic structures are indicated leaving room for interpretation. They become vehicles for improvisation. Vehicles for improvising—particular tempos, rhythms, harmonic structures, melodies, vamps, et cetera—are aesthetically appreciated for their fecundity. For aesthetic evaluation, the “aesthetic strength” of a jazz tune, say a Jobim or Ellington tune, is actually demonstrated by the number of recorded and unrecorded performances, the diversity of those performances and interpretations, and it malleability and flexibility for interpretation. Where the work comes in to play in evaluating is to help us determine the strength of certain critical/aesthetic predicates that are important for jazz appreciation, criticism, and evaluation.
The recording or set of recordings of the composition form the base upon which one determines both the aesthetic strength of the pure sound structure that the composition instantiates, and the interpretation performance token itself, which on my account is a MW, too. Ontological plurality accounts for our appreciative practices, and explains the generative practices of the artists.

Duke Ellington himself recorded some of his more robust compositions as lead sheets (e.g., *Duke Ellington and John Coltrane* album, *Money Jungle* album with Ellington in a trio setting with Charles Mingus and Max Roach\(^{179}\)) demonstrating the flexibility that exists in jazz and in genres where improvisation, innovation, and novelty are premiums. If Levinson’s theory could be salvaged from its problems, then it would be a satisfactory theory of the “thicker” scores. These more robustly scored works possess artistic properties not captured by pure sound structures. There is no doubt that these artistic properties are important in the understanding and appreciation of these works. However, since most of the compositions contained improvised sections, and the composers often recorded their own compositions with their own bands and ensembles, my ontology of recordings and pure sound structures are sufficient. We have access to recordings that these composers made of their tunes. To account for the various interpretations in recorded and unrecorded performances by other artists, there are pure sound structures. In cases like “Take the A Train,” there is a score, which is robust in specific instructions like a classical score, and lead sheet notations. The lead sheet notations are minimal with respect to melodic and harmonic notation and give rise to the significant improvisational practice of interpreting tunes (basic melodic and harmonic structures). This is the process that was used in most of jazz history. Standards are lead sheets extracted from ontologically thicker

Tin Pan Alley scores, and musical show “books,” that are constitutive of the practice of generating versions, interpretations of these compositions. Original instrumentation is almost always changed, and the point of performing them is to render an interesting interpretation. Not only melodic and harmonic elements are ornamented and changed, and tempi changed, but sometimes the entire style or sub-genre of a tune is changed from its original score and/or performances. For example, suppose a samba is changed to a march, a ballad becomes an up-tempo tune, a major, expressively happy tune is changed to minor. Some versions have become appreciated and entrenched. For example, Charlie Parker’s famous introduction to “All the Things You Are,” which was partly improvised and partly planned, is now often considered part of the tune. When performed in jam sessions, this introduction is often included. Many younger musicians, who do not study the original Tin Pan Alley and musical show history, believe that it was part of the original tune!

What of other genres of music in which improvisation is essential, such as gamelan? Recordings have not played an important role in the history and development of gamelan. Historically, gamelan music is much older than jazz. Second, recording technology and practices were late in introduction and never took hold because the live performance tradition, especially the “cutting sessions,” is central to gamelan practices. Gamelan orchestras generate collective, collaborative improvisations based on constraints. Since gamelan performances are the central objects of appreciation, and the sound structures instantiated during performances have no

---

180 One example of this introduction is on the recording Charlie Parker, *Live at Massey Hall, May, 1953*, Savoy Records. Scott DeVeaux reports that this famous introduction can be traced back to a tune titled “Good Jelly Blues, recorded by Billy Eckstine and the DeLuxe All-Stars on April 13, 1944, and probably notated by Dizzy Gillespie. In addition, DeVeaux claims that this introduction is a “hip caricature” of the opening to Rachmaninoff’s Prelude in C-Sharp Minor. Scott DeVeaux, *The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 342-343.
effective ossifying mechanism, we must accept the performance tokens and the sound structures they instantiate. Having neither a notational record, nor sound recording, and given the immense harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic complexity of gamelan performances, it is improbable that these sound structures will have much practical value. People will not be able to remember in sufficient detail the sound structure features of the performance. Nonetheless, those sound structures do exist and are instantiated during those performances. In the cases where the performances are recorded, the recording will be the primary MW.

How would one decide what ontology to use? Genre determinations and the like must proceed on a case-by-case basis and ought to be argued about and decided by critics, connoisseurs, and the public. Over time, certain views become entrenched. These attributions must be empirically decided (by the experts) by the conditions present at the time of production. Because it is empirical, there can be epistemic problems. For example, a case in which an improvisation occurs as a performance token event and initially it is believed that there was no recording of the event will be deficient until the recording is discovered. At some later time, one discovers a live, veridical recording of the performance token. Perhaps, it was clandestinely recorded by an audience member. This kind of case has existed. There are Charlie Parker recordings of live performances that were unknown until a few decades after the performances. In addition, because of the limits of our empirical knowledge one must be open to changes in our ontological attribution of particular cases. Most cases, however, will be clear: there is a recording, which is constructed or veridical, a performance token event occurs, the performance was recorded or not.
ENVOI

to float the orb or suggest the orb is floating: and, with the
mind thereto attached, to float free: the orb floats, a bluegreen
wonder: so to touch the structures as to free them into rafts

that reveal the tide: many rafts to ride and the tides make a
place to go: let’s go and regard the structures, the six-starred
easter lily, the beans feeling up the stakes: we’re gliding: we

are gliding: ask the astronomer, if you don’t believe it: but
motion as a summary of time and space is gliding us: for a while,
we may ride such forces: then, we must get off: but now this

beats any amusement park by the shore: our Ferris wheel, what a
wheel: our roller coaster, what mathematics of stoop and climb: sew
my name on my cap: we’re clear: we’re ourselves: we’re sailing.

—A. R. Ammons, section 155 (conclusion) of *Sphere: The Form of a Motion*
Bibliography

A. Improvisation and Jazz


Gilmour, John C. “Improvisation in Cézanne’s Late Landscapes.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 58, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 191-204.


Iseminger, Gary. “Sonicism and Jazz Improvisation.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 68, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 297-299.


Martin, Peter J. “Improvisation in Jazz: Towards a Sociological Model.” Manchester Sociology Occasional Papers Series, no. 45, Department of Sociology, University of Manchester, January 1996.


Merod, Jim, ed. *boundary 2: Special Issue: Jazz as Cultural Archive* 22, no. 2 (Summer 1995).


———. *Is Jazz Dead? (Or Has It Moved to a New Address)*. New York: Routledge, 2005.


Oliphant, Dave, ed. *The Bebop Revolution in Words and Music*. Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.


———. “Psychological Constraints on Improvisational Expertise and Communication.” In In the Course of Performance: Studies in the World of Musical Improvisation, Chicago


Segal, Greg. “Some Thoughts on Improvisation.” *The Improvisor: The International Journal of Free Improvisation* [online journal only].


Smith, LaDonna. “Improvisation as a Form of Cultural Recreation.” *The Improvisor: The International Journal of Free Improvisation* [online journal only].


———. “The Moment as Teacher.” *The Improvisor: The International Journal of Free Improvisation* [online journal only].
“What To Do at the Fork in the Road? Improvisation as a Model of Social Behavior and Cultural Navigational Technique.” The Improvisor: The International Journal of Free Improvisation [online journal only].


**B. Philosophy and Psychology of Music, Musicology**


Botstein, Leon. “Notes from the Editor: Returning to a Different Philosophical Tradition.” *Musical Quarterly* 82, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 225-231.


———. “So, You Want to Sing with the Beatles? Too Late!” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 130-137.


C. General Aesthetics, Philosophy of Culture, Criticism


———, ed. *South Atlantic Quarterly (Rock & Roll and Culture)* 90, no. 4 (Fall 1991).


——. “Expression as Expression.” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 67, no. 3 (July 1986): 196-224.


### D. General Philosophy and Psychology


**E. Action Theory**


**F. Creativity**


**G. Reference Works**


AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Tobyn C. DeMarco was born in New Jersey. He studied music at the Hartt School of Music, University of Hartford, Hartford, Connecticut; earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Philosophy from Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick, New Jersey; earned a Master of Arts degree in Philosophy from New York University, New York, New York; and earned his PhD in Philosophy from The Graduate School and University Center, The City University of New York, New York, New York.