Unplanned Coordination: Ensemble Improvisation as Collective Action

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Abstract: The characteristic features of ensemble dance improvisation (“EDI”) make it an interesting case for theories of intentional collective action. These features include the high degree of freedom enjoyed by each individual, and the lack of fixed or hierarchical roles, rigid decision procedures, or detailed plans. In this article, we present a “reductive” approach to collective action, apply it to EDI, and show how the theory enriches our perspective on this practice. We show, with the help of our theory of collective action, that when it reaches or approaches its ideals, EDI constitutes a significant collective achievement, one that manifests an impressive, spontaneous, jointly cooperative and individually highly autonomous activity that meets demanding aesthetic standards. A good case of EDI thus emerges as an ideal form of collective action, not merely in the sense of being a clear case of collective action, but in being a good or valuable case of collective action. Its being socially good in this way is not a mere extrinsic feature of the artwork, but part of its aesthetic value. We end by discussing how this value is easily missed by traditional aesthetic frameworks, but is revealed by more contemporary frameworks like social aesthetics.
UNPLANNED COORDINATION:
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Consider the following case of doing things together:

Nine women in a long narrow boat are members of a crew team. In unison, eight women pull on the oars at the direction of the coxswain, with the shared intent of being the first boat to cross the finish line.

This is a clear, indeed, paradigm case of a collective intentional action—“collective action” for short. Consider another case of doing things together. Suppose you observe the following:

A group of improvising dancers are “warming-up” with their eyes closed. Each dancer seems immersed in a private experience. Ripples of subtle movement permeate the room. Eventually, eyes begin to open and without external prompting, individuals coalesce into small groups; without verbal communication or overt teaching, they sometimes perform the same movements, as if permeable to each another, absorbing motions like a drop of dye in a glass of water. The groups combine and dissolve by a logic that seems internal to the process. As if by design, some dancers decumulate to the periphery and stop. Others create a comedy of gestures, unpredictably signaling left and right, both leading and following these signals until they crowd into the corner. The entire room shares a long, quiet stillness that seems to confirm an agreement—this is the end.

What have we just witnessed? Certainly, there is coordination here, and it is not all happening by coincidence. But neither is it scripted. Suppose that the group began with a plan to “warm-up, work together and end in about 30 minutes.” There is some sort of group communication, negotiation, and organization happening here, but does it count as a case of collective (intentional) action?

The intuitive answer is: yes. What plausible account of collective action can accommodate this, one that explains why both examples above, and others besides, count as genuine cases of collective action despite their significant differences? What account can make sense of group actions that follow a step-by-step plan, as well as the spontaneous actions of the improvising dancers, both as genuine cases of collective action, without allowing just any aggregate or collection of individual actions to count?

Setting aside the case of ensemble improvisation for a moment, why should we care to understand the nature of collective action or attempt to provide an account of it? First, collective action has practical significance: many important things simply cannot be accomplished without it. Understanding what makes collective action possible, and what could get in the way, could have practical import. Second, on at least some theories, the normative status of an act can be affected by collective participation or its lack. Consider the act of making a law. A law

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1 We might perform actions that, taken together, have some consequences X that no one could cause on their own, and in this broad sense it would be true that “we collectively brought about X.” But we might not have intended to do so.
2 For example, many modern theories of political legitimacy from the 17th Century onwards take some form of consent to be a source of political legitimacy. For discussion, see Fabienne (2017).
established by dictator’s edict holds an ethical status and authority different than that established through a collective process. Even if the dictator’s rule is the very same as that established by a more collective process, it might fail to have the legitimacy of the latter. In other cases, the collective nature of the act can make it more treacherous, as when officers conspire to plant evidence against an innocent victim of police shooting. Third, understanding the nature of collective action is vital for tackling difficult questions about when and how to distribute responsibility amongst participants in a collective act. For these and other reasons, it is valuable to clearly understand collective action and to properly distinguish it from activities that involve multiple individuals but that are not collective actions.

In this article, we consider ensemble dance improvisation (“EDI”), which may also be called “compositional improvisation” or “performance improvisation,” as a kind of collective action. In the arts, the idea of spontaneous co-creation by a group is hardly new or unique to dance. A more common example is that of jazz music. Like jazz, the practices and performances of dance improvisation might require members of the group to negotiate spontaneous action in relation to what is “scored” or composed in advance. Toward one end of the spectrum, there may be pre-determined movements, tasks, qualities, or themes; dancers work together to manipulate, inflect, or “riff” on a pre-packaged palette of ingredients, or they may alternate between spontaneous choices and prescribed sequences. At the other end of the spectrum, only the approximate duration of the performance is pre-determined; dancers collaborate in a spontaneous structuring process to build a coherent work that is broadly “choreographic”. This is not to say that everything is entirely “new.” Movement histories and habits, training practices, and shared knowledge influence the process. Practitioners who engage in more open-ended forms view their work as drawing from past influences, bringing the known into a new context, weaving familiar threads into new tapestries.

The characteristic features of EDI make it a complex and interesting case for theories of collective action, perhaps especially theories in which the planning by individuals plays a central role. These features include a high degree of individual freedom, a lack of fixed or hierarchical roles in the group, and a high degree of indeterminacy throughout, including lack of rigid decision procedures, detailed scripts or plans.

Our primary goals are to present a theory of collective action that is “reductive” (in a specific sense we shall make clear), apply it to the case of EDI, and show how the theory enriches our perspective on this artistic practice and its aesthetic value. While we do provide some motivation for the theory, showing that it is able accommodate intuitions about which cases count as collective actions, including cases of ensemble improvisation, we do not argue that it is preferable to the alternatives. Rather, we take it as given and investigate what light it can shed on this case.

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3 Term used by Judy Dunn, see Buckwalter (2010: 108)
4 Term used by Penny Campbell, see Buckwalter (2010: 49)
5 For relevant discussions in history and theory of EDI, see Buckwalter (2010), Foster (2002), Albright and Gere (2003), Goldman (2010), and Sgorbati et al. (2013).
6 See Clarke and Doffman (2017) for recent essays on collaborative improvisation in music. See also Belgrad (2016), Borgo (2016), and Hagberg (2016).
7 Susan Sgorbati and others, discussed in Buckwalter (2010: 12-31).
8 This might still be of interest to those attracted to non-reductive theories, as they may, and many of them do, build some elements of the reductive theory into their own.
As we’ll see, in light of the reductive theory, EDI emerges as a kind of ideal of collective action, one that models important social values as it cultivates and exercises our capacities for both autonomy and cooperation, liberty and community, and as such is praiseworthy as a collective achievement. A core part of its aesthetic value is easily missed by traditional approaches to aesthetics, but not by contemporary approaches (e.g., relational and social aesthetics). The theory also suggests productive questions in pedagogy, training, and practice for those keen to develop the co-creative potential of improvising together.

The article proceeds as follows. We begin by summarizing main approaches to collective action, and motivating the reductive, content approach defended by Bratman (2014) and Ludwig (2016), elaborating on its basic requirement—the we-intention condition—in general, and in relation to the case of EDI (sections 1 and 2). We distinguish between the “whole” of a collective intentional activity and its intentional “parts” (section 3) and explain how collective intentional actions can accommodate a high degree of uncertainty and spontaneity (sections 4 and 5). We then discuss improvisation training and how it develops the sorts of skills that support spontaneous ensemble dance making (section 6). In the final three sections, we elaborate on how ideals of cooperation and respect for individual autonomy are guiding principles of EDI (section 7), examine what it means to make autonomous choices in this context (section 8), and explain why these features of EDI are important parts of its value and should inform its aesthetic evaluation (section 9).

1. Collective Action and Collective Intentionality

Any account of collective action must distinguish it from a mere aggregate of individual acts. There is a difference, for example, between a group of people, simultaneously, yet incidentally, running to the rain shelter, and a dance group that does the same in a site-specific performance in the park (Searle 1990: 402). Their behavior might be identical, so that is not enough to distinguish the one from the other. The nature of intentions in each group is very different, and this suggests that the intention of participants is relevant to whether we have a case of collective action. But having similar intentions is not enough: I might intend to hike on this trail, and so might you (at the same time), and we might even coordinate our walking so as to avoid colliding, but it doesn’t follow that we are going on a hike together in the relevant sense. What is missing? It seems that the intended behaviors must coalesce, not by coincidence, nor merely by some external force; the coalescing behaviors must occur because it is something that is, at some level, collectively intended or aimed at.

But what exactly is this shared intentionality that serves to coordinate action? Suppose that we intend to move a piano together. According to group-agent or plural-subject accounts, there is an intention to move the piano, and the subject or agent of the intention is us, the group. On this view, there is an intention that literally attaches to a group subject or group agent (and not merely its members).⁹

A more common approach is to understand collective intentionality in terms of interrelated individual attitudes and intentions, without appeal to a plural or group subject. For example,

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⁹ See, for example, Gilbert’s (1989) discussion of “plural subjects.” See also, Pettit and List (2011).
according to special mode accounts (E.g., Searle 1990), just as believing and desiring that my lottery ticket is a winner are different kinds of states with similar content or subject matter, my intention that I move the piano and my intention that we move the piano are essentially different kinds of states. In contrast, proponents of content accounts take the relevant difference to be in the content or subject matter of the intentions—what, specifically, the intentions are about—rather than in their mode. For example, according to Bratman and Ludwig, each member of the group must have an intention whose content includes the joint activity; in our example, we must each intend that we move the piano.

Bratman and Ludwig’s content accounts are reductive theories in the sense that they construct their accounts of collective action by using and extending concepts for individual action and individual agency. In contrast, group-agent and special mode accounts are non-reductive.\(^1\) We do not argue here that the reductive approach is preferable to alternatives. Rather, we take the reductive strategy of accounts like those of Bratman and Ludwig as given and see what light can be shed on the nature of collective action if applied to the case of EDI.\(^1\)

Let ‘J’ be a joint activity, such as moving a piano, rowing a boat, robbing a bank, writing this article etc. We propose to take the following conditions as individually necessary and jointly sufficient for collective (intentional) action that we J:

1. **The we-intention condition**: Each intends that we J.
2. **The shared plan condition**: Each intends that we J in accordance with a shared plan at the time of action (the time of J-ing).\(^1\)
3. **The intention-action connection condition**: We J, and we do so because of successfully carrying out or acting on the intention that we J.

Two important points regarding the we-intention condition before moving on: First, it should be possible to understand the joint activity “J” independently of the idea of shared or collective intentionality; no essential reference to a shared intention or collective intentional action in the content of the intention is required. (Otherwise, the account would be circular.) Second, what each of us intends here is that we J, and so we follow Bratman in rejecting what is often called the own-action condition, the claim that the subject having the intention to act must be identical to the intended agent of the action: “We seem...to be at home with a parent’s intention that his son clean up his room, or a teacher’s intention that the class discussion have a certain character, or a

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\(^1\) One complication that we are ignoring here is that even some content accounts are non-reductive (see Tuomela 2005 and 2018).

\(^1\) Bratman’s Shared Agency (2014) and Ludwig’s From Individual to Plural Agency (2016) are broadly compatible, and similar in many ways. Bratman attempts to provide conditions that are **sufficient**, but not all of which are strictly **necessary** for collective action. Others, like Ludwig, worry that not all of Bratman’s conditions capture something distinctive or characteristic of collective intentional activity. Ludwig aims to provide a set of conditions that are necessary **and** sufficient for collective action, and the conditions we provide are essentially Ludwig’s (see Ludwig 2016: 206ff), though they are very similar to a core part of Bratman’s set of sufficient conditions (see Bratman 2014: 152). We’ll see that in the context of EDI the core conditions are typically satisfied by a condition of “mutual responsiveness” that plays an important role in Bratman’s account. This condition is not strictly necessary for collective action, but is typically the way in which we satisfy one or more of the conditions.

\(^1\) 2 entails 1, but it’s useful to separate them.
composer’s intention that the performance of a finale be grand....” (Bratman 2014: 60). We will clarify other parts of the account in the sections that follow.

2. I Intend That We Make A Dance

What is the “J,” the main joint activity that is intended in the case of EDI? It is the practice, performance, or creation of a spontaneous work with an improvisation ensemble. We might express the intention by saying, “I intend that we make a dance,” referring to a single practice session or performance. But there is typically more involved, at least implicitly, in the intention. The aim is not merely to improvise nor to make just anything. An ensemble intends to be “tight,” to borrow a phrase from jazz and other musicians. Serious practitioners intend to improvise together to make a dance that is good or of high quality in certain respects—for example, a work with a “choreographic” result, coherent organization, and intriguing aesthetic qualities. The joint activity can thus be quite complex, involving a cluster of goals, many of which are shared and some of which are a matter of degree (making a dance, making a good dance, making a dance that is good in specific ways, etc.). We may have succeeded in making a dance, and even succeeded in make one with such-and-such attributes, yet failed to make one with such-and-such other attributes.

Having this we-intention does not require that our underlying reasons and motives be shared. For example, I might intend that we move the piano because I want it in my house, and you might so intend because you’ll get paid to do it. Similarly, underlying motives for joining an ensemble need not be shared. Members’ different training histories, aesthetic values, and idiosyncratic goals inform reasons for joining, yet the shared intent to make an improvised work is likely supported by at least some shared experience and preparation in the field of dance. Often, dancers join certain groups over others based, in part, on the degree of shared values at the outset. Indeed, whether the dancers are let into a group can depend on whether they have matching values or intentions. “[O]ur shared agency,” Bratman says, “frequently draws on subtle and frequently unarticulated commonalities of sensibility” (2014: 34-35), and this is certainly true in our artistic context. The degree of an ensemble’s underlying commonality can determine whether the group has more or less of a head start in reaching the intended goals of the joint activity.

Now that we have described the “J” in this particular joint activity, how do we understand the “we” in this case? Sometimes the members of a group are determined directly, as when I intend that “we” move the piano, and “we” refers to individuals picked out by direct perception or by name. But this direct knowledge of each individual is not always at work and is not required. In many cases, the membership is determined indirectly, by some description like “the people at this party.” In the case of EDI, I do not need to know which individual is behind me, or what that person is doing, to hold a we-intention. This is even clearer in cases where the number of people in a collective action is far too large for its individual members to be known, let alone directly perceived and tracked—for example, a flash mob, city parade, or protest march. In neither case is membership in the intended “we” contingent on direct knowledge of each and every individual. We are not saying here that believing oneself to be a member of a group is sufficient to be one—perhaps some recognition condition, to the effect that some sort of acknowledgement,
now or in the past, from relevant members of group is needed, even if there is no demand to
know them all or know their particular intentions.13

A related point: Dancers may come and go during the performance, (be “on” or “off”) and this
need not end the joint activity, nor does it change the “we” in the joint endeavor. It may seem an
odd concept at first, but consider that, as a solo emerges and the performance is centered on a
single dancer, each ensemble member must recognize the solo as such, and with each other
member, refrain from entering the space. We might capture this by the contrast between “I
intend that we dance” and “I intend that we make a dance.” Different individuals might be directly
involved at different times, and others’ actions may consist of waiting, witnessing and tracking
how the work is unfolding. In many cases, including paradigm cases of collective action,
individuals can play different roles yet maintain the necessary intention that we J.

These points demonstrate how, despite changes in the perspectives or roles of individuals in the
ensemble, the content of the primary “we-intention” (that we make a dance) can remain
consistent throughout, both for any individual over time, and across different members.

3. Parts and Wholes

At the end of the previous section, we distinguished between the primary intention shared by the
whole ensemble, an intention that we make a dance, and other specific intentions possibly only
shared by some sub-group in the ensemble. These might include the intention that we dance at the
same time, that we stand aside to make space for a soloist, that we roll the piano into a spotlight,
that we mirror or counter each other’s gestures, that we engage in wordplay, that we line-up or
disperse, and so on. If members of the sub-group have the same we-intention to do X, and they
succeed in performing X by carrying out the shared intention, then such sub-group activities
count as collective activities.

What is the relation between the collective activity of making a dance and these “smaller” collective
actions or activities? Well, these are constituent parts of the activity of making a dance, just as our
moving the piano out of the truck, through the front door, and up the flight of stairs are parts of
the collective intentional activity of moving the piano up to the second floor. Sub-groups of
individuals may take turns or play different roles at different times – getting the piano onto the
dolly, turning one end while the other is held still, taking the door off to expand the opening.
Many collective achievements are thus constituted, at least in part, by “smaller” collective
achievements of the whole group or some part of the group. This is not to say that this is always
the case or must be the case. Collective actions are often constituted primarily of individual
actions. Factory workers on an assembly line might each perform an individual action that does
not involve any others, and all these individual actions might together constitute the making of
the product. If the workers share the intention to make the product and the product is made
because of this intention, then it can count as a collective action.

A collective performance can similarly be constituted, in large part, by various individual actions.
A three-member dance might, for example, be constituted by three solos consisting of individual
motions; each soloist, in turn, takes (or is given) the spotlight as the other two members abstain

13 We are grateful to a journal of the referee for helping us see the need to be clearer here.
from joining; or three members decide to perform simultaneous solos, perhaps thinking it interesting to put individual choices side-by-side. A more typical performance draws on a spectrum of constituent parts, from individual to sub-group to whole group actions. Individual actions are of course always needed—they form the basis of any collective choreographic event, improvised or otherwise. However, with no pre-planned choreography, it would be difficult for an ensemble to attain or even approach its aesthetic ideals for the performance without building on collective intentions and actions of sub-groups. Moreover, even if some movements are accidental or at some level unintended, they provide fodder for subsequent actions of the group or its members. We’ll return to these ideas in our discussions of spontaneity (section 5) and training for coordination (section 6).

4. Sharing and intending under uncertainty

Our account requires that individuals act in accordance with a shared plan at the time of action. Note that we are not requiring that all details and sub-plans be shared or agreed upon. Two people can succeed in playing chess together, as a collective intentional act, even though part of their intention is to frustrate certain sub-plans of the other. In so doing, they agree to play chess in accordance with a shared plan, without agreeing on all sub-plans. In other cases, one person might deceive another with respect to certain sub-plans towards a common goal, but only enough to outshine or outdo the other, not enough to get in the way of the collective activity (Ludwig 2016: 253).

Moreover, the account doesn’t strictly require that the plan be shared in the sense that each person knows that others have similar intentions and plans. It doesn’t even require that each person believes that others have similar intentions and plans. What is required is that they have the same plan in mind at the time of action, whether they know or believe that they all do or not. This might seem like a mistake. Shouldn’t there be some communication, confirmation, or ongoing interaction, in order that their plans mesh? In other words, shouldn’t they satisfy Bratman’s mutual responsiveness condition (2014: 79): “Each is responsive, in her relevant intentions and actions, to the relevant intentions and actions of the other, in a way that keeps track of, and guides in the direction of, her intended end of their joint action....”?

Not necessarily. Consider the idea of responsiveness first. As Bratman explains, being mutually responsive to the relevant intentions and actions of others plays an important role in many ordinary cases of collective action, yet he recognizes that it is not required in all cases. Consider the case of synchronized divers, in which the meshing of sub-plans is “pre-packaged”; once the divers leave the board, they have little to no opportunity to respond to each other, but must carry out the prescribed plan as best they can (Bratman 2014: 81). Mutual responsiveness is thus not strictly necessary for collective action.

It also doesn’t seem, on reflection, that knowledge, belief, or even a high degree of confidence that the relevant intentions and plans are shared is required. We have no difficulty thinking of

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14 To see how a shared plan can accommodate some variation or “margin of error,” see Ludwig (2016: 214).
cases of individuals intending to do things despite very low confidence in success (intending to reach the summit of Everest, or to convince an uncle to switch political parties), so why not think the same when it comes to joint actions? Ludwig provides an illustrative example: a country has just been the target of a pre-emptive nuclear strike, and three missile operators at separate locations are responsible for operating silo 451. Though their communication channels are cut, and no one knows if any of the rest of the team is still alive:

Each punches in his code, and then turns his key, hoping that there are still others who are doing their parts, however unlikely it may seem; and so they launch the missile in silo 451 together, according to their prearranged plan, and they do so intentionally. [2016: 221]

Notice that not only is this another case (like the synchronized divers) in which the collective action does not require mutual responsiveness, but the subjects fail to have much confidence, let alone know, that others are acting on the relevant plan. Denying that these conditions are necessary allows us to accommodate cases of collective action involving uncertainty and little or no explicit verbal communication, which is relevant to EDI. While there is communication in an ensemble, it is not the kind that definitively exposes and sorts out individual intentions in the same way that a conversation or a pre-arranged plan might.

Though these conditions are not strictly necessary for collective action, satisfying them often helps the participants to collectively intend and carry out the joint activity. For example, it is often by knowing or at least believing that others have the relevant intentions that we are moved to adopt the intention as well. And mutual responsiveness to the relevant intentions and actions of participants often explains how we manage to mesh sub-plans well enough to succeed. As we examine the case of EDI further, we’ll see that, given the lack knowledge of specific sub-plans and intentions of others, mutual responsiveness becomes a core skill for the expert improviser and plays a pivotal role in this type of joint activity.

5. Plans, Spontaneity, and Indeterminacy

For some improvisers, the word ‘plan’ may initially cause negative reactions bordering on anaphylaxis. After all, improvisation essentially involves a high degree of spontaneity. However, what is meant by ‘plan’ in theories of collective action can differ from how the term is often understood. After clarifying Bratman and Ludwig’s uses of the term, we will ask: what does a shared plan look like in the dance improvisation context, and how and when does it typically come to be adopted or shared?

Although Bratman’s theory is “a planning theory of acting together,” and takes planning capacities as central to the exercise of individual and collective agency, “these planning capacities are embedded in a complex psychic economy that also involves abilities to characterize one’s plans in...open ways, and to be spontaneous and flexible as time goes by” (2014: 24). Bratman takes such traits as openness, spontaneity, and flexibility, to be “practical virtues that are involved in well-functioning planning agency” (24). Bratman is explicit that one’s plans are typically and
sometimes grossly incomplete, and need not involve having specific steps or means to the goal in mind beforehand (see 2014: 23-4).

Ludwig’s account also allows for spontaneity. When we think of plans, we usually think of a kind of recipe for action, “a series of actions carried out in a particular order with the goal of thereby bringing about an event or state of affairs” (Ludwig 2016: 213); and when it comes to a plan for collective action, we usually think of an assignment of roles for carrying out parts of the plan. However, Ludwig allows that, in the limiting case, a plan could just consist of one step. Moreover, even for complex activities, participants in a collective can share a plan but leave open the exact steps. As we have already mentioned, what Ludwig requires is that the members act “in accordance with a common plan at the time of action” (Ludwig 2016: 206). He thus allows that in many cases a specific shared plan is deferred to the moment of acting, while in other cases there is a “pre-arranged shared plan” (Ludwig 2016: 221).

It is this last sense of plan-as-pre-arranged-steps that we employ in our title, “unplanned coordination.” In this ordinary and common sense of the term, EDI is “unplanned” in that there are few, if any, prearranged steps or prescribed specific roles (beyond being improvisers) to the activity. Most plans are made on the spot (“at the time of action”), through a group process, and without explicit verbal consultation, and in that sense, they are unplanned or unscripted. Yes, we plan to coordinate, but we don’t have a plan as to how exactly we will go about it. To the contrary: we intend that we not plan what we will do until we’re doing it. In this sense, we could better capture the we-intention thus: I intend that we make a dance, without knowing in advance what steps we will perform.

In lieu of prescribed steps, how do members in a dance ensemble contend with this level of uncertainty in the collective activity? A relevant training prompt is that “you do not need to know what you are going to do, but you do need to know what you are doing.” That you know in the moment what you are doing may seem obvious, but in fact, it takes practice to stay awake to your own actions, and not attend exclusively to others, or be distracted by things external to the process. Amidst the internal complexities of group creation, intention arises out of perceiving what’s happening, and for improvisers, the convergence of perceiving, intending, and acting can be instantaneous. With training, appropriate intentions can be formed-and-carried-out, rather than formed and deferred to a later opportunity for execution. Thus, an ensemble can share a specific plan, in Ludwig’s words, “at the time of action.”

There are other ways that improvisation accommodates some planning, whether individual or collective, that is cross-temporal since, over the course of a longer performance, intentions can be recurring, remembered, or ongoingly adjusted in the process of tracking an overall sequence. As a work unfolds, an individual, sub-group, or whole ensemble can call back a previous theme, for example, to harmonize the ending with what happened in the beginning. Though future-directed intentions may form as performers respond to emerging scenarios, they are also ready to abandon those intentions just as quickly as their points of view begin to shift and scenarios constantly arise and change. One of the challenges for an improviser is to be spontaneously and

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15 The Architects, a 5-member dance improvisation ensemble.
creatively responsive to what is going on in that instant, while also tracking and supporting the coherence of the overall work.

6. Training for Coordination

In EDI, there are training techniques to develop and strengthen the ability of participants to be mutually responsive. For example, teacher-practitioners in *The Architects* present techniques understood broadly as types of ensemble-building. These practices instill an expanded attention and relevant skills, enabling dancers to act on individual impulses and toward group outcomes simultaneously. To that end, dancers train to achieve individual virtuosity and expertise, but they do so in a group context. Each member is challenged to be aware simultaneously of her own impulse and intent, what others are doing, and what is happening in the ensemble overall. The individual’s capacity to make (often sudden) choreographic choices at the convergence of self, other, and group, is a skill that steers and unifies the unfolding performance. This kind of multi-awareness is the brass tacks of EDI.

Major aspects of training for this type of artistic practice are concerned with the ability to improve perception and attention.16 Good dance improvisation pedagogies teach complex modes of “listening” to both inner and outer sources of information. Inner listening strategies improve attention to sensation and use sensory stimuli to direct movement exploration. Dancers immerse themselves in kinesthesia, but also imagination, feeling, thought, and memory. An important awareness to build is the awareness of one’s own perceptual process. This meta-awareness may be prompted by the directive “notice what you notice.”17 While inner listening is considered fundamental fuel for individual intent and action, intent is also sparked by profuse external stimuli (visual, auditory and tactile) making it a challenge to absorb and relate in organized ways. Tuning one’s listening in both directions, inner and outer, is a core skill in ensemble participation.

Consider a training strategy that instructs each dancer in a duet to develop her own choreography (as in dancing a solo) while simultaneously noticing her partner’s actions.18 To look over at a partner and not automatically begin following and joining what she does is a skill that is surprisingly difficult, especially for dancers whose early training involves learning by imitation. To spontaneously join and match what others are doing also requires training. Once an improviser can do either, adopt a partner's movement or develop her own, this dual capacity then affords and expands choreographic choices, for example, to mirror and incorporate, or contrast and counter what others are doing.

Such training improves group coordination and coherence in the work; at the same time, it cultivates the robust agency of individuals by developing their capacities to make their own choices in a constantly evolving event. This turns out to be a crucial balancing act since the freedom and power to act upon the unfolding work is distributed (ideally equally) among members. Given the distributed agency to affect the work, a dance is likely to be disorganized if

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16 See the discussion of Penny Campbell on "ensemble awareness" in Buckwalter (2010:16-17).
17 *The Architects*, Katherine Ferrier.
18 Peter Schmitz, at WIPI: Work in the Performance of Improvisation
members of the ensemble are heavily biased toward inner attention, and fail to join, relate, or intersect with others. On the other hand, a dance is likely to be simplistic or repetitive if individuals are consistently biased toward outer attention, disconnected from their own creative thinking, and primarily focused on following others. (Of course, it’s also possible that dancers who are attentive, both inwardly and outwardly, fail or refuse to engage in constructive ways with what they perceive. This would be a failure of mutual responsiveness that affects the outcome.) The ensemble ethos not only calls for respecting others in the group, but also for balancing that respect with a responsibility to the emerging composition, and with a commitment to one’s own artistry and creativity. This balancing act casts an interesting light on what counts here as cooperation (more on this in sections 7 and 8). Practitioners learn early on that cooperation in EDI is not identical to agreement. The unplanned coordination that co-creates the work doesn’t foreclose anyone’s ability to counter, abstain, protest, or diverge in some way. It is sometimes a tacit and sometimes an explicit value in the ensemble ethos that disagreement about where the work is going, or should go, and the counteractions that arise, are central to the creativity and innovation of the ensemble. Though participating in a collective act, dancers are developing virtuosity as individual decision-makers. In the following sections, we will consider what significance these skills and capacities may have beyond being means to good improvisational composition.

7. Cooperative and Non-Hierarchical Collective Action

Bratman distinguishes between a collective action and what we might call cooperative action. An action can be collective and yet uncooperative, in the sense that someone is forced or coerced, or somehow tricked or deceived, into engaging in the activity. For example, two parents might be coerced into helping someone carry out a crime, such as robbing a bank, under the (possibly false) threat that their kidnapped children would be harmed. In such a case, the conditions for collective action might be satisfied. The parents might decide to commit to the task and work together to perform it under immense pressure. In other cases, the sort of deception or coercion at play might interfere too much with the activity and lead to failures of collective action. Although these actions or activities are collective, there is a sense in which they are most certainly not cases of shared agency: agency is not genuinely respected or valued, except as a mere means to the kidnappers ends. So not every collective activity is a cooperative one.

Even when collective activities are uncoerced, they may involve extensive plans that are outsourced or imposed on the group by some means (e.g., factory workers following prescribed action sequences, or musicians playing in an orchestra from notes on a score). In some of these cases, individuals might freely decide whether to take part, but have significantly reduced latitude in how to participate in the joint activity.

For example, a traditional dance company typically functions through assigned roles such as director, choreographer, and performer, and affords the planning and decision-making to some while withholding it from others, even and especially in the creative workings of the company. This is a traditional model for repertory companies whose plans are established by choreographers and carried out by dancers who often have far less latitude in carrying out the assigned roles. This way of producing and performing a dance can meet conditions for collective
action, but there is a direct and inverse relationship between the specificity of the prearranged plans (that are carried out via hierarchical roles) and the extent of freedom that participants (disproportionately) have with respect to how to carry out the joint activity.

By contrast to the above examples, EDI aspires to be non-coercive, egalitarian or non-hierarchical, and co-creative. Each member is responsible for the process and choreographic quality of the work. The primary activity—making a dance—is not outsourced or imposed, but is formed via an internal, ongoing negotiation that each individual may affect directly. Roles are not assigned or fixed; they are fluid—at any given moment, different individuals may, for example, lead, follow, join, observe, or diverge, and may switch roles as the work unfolds. Even when the egalitarian ideals held by an ensemble are not perfectly carried out, the fundamental distribution of agency over the work tends to frustrate those who would try to hoard power in the group; just as soon as a soloist upstages a chorus or a narrator begins controlling the story, lo and behold, the soloist is swept up by six dancers pushing a piano, and the narrator is suddenly (and humorously) drowned out by the musician. It’s possible that an ensemble fails in their ideal aspirations to the point of becoming dysfunctional, managing bullies or cliques in the group. While this would seriously undercut the ideal ensemble ethos described here, members are free in various ways to confront “dance hogs” who take up too much space, propose practices that address imbalances, or ultimately, to quit, or to join or form a new ensemble. This highlights an important caveat: the egalitarian functioning of an ensemble is not automatic; such ideals must be out in the open, must shape the practices and behavior of the group, influence its membership, and in highly successful ensembles, must be included as a measure in ongoing self-evaluation.19

Part of the value of EDI is that it is, or at least aims to be, a highly coordinated and highly cooperative, non-hierarchical collective practice, one that, given the attributes described above, might even be said to maximize the freedom of individuals while maintaining the collective nature of the activity. Whether or not these aims are perfectly met, this case productively complicates any crude formulation that pits the efficacy of the complex collective act against the freedom and power of the individuals who participate in it. But to fully appreciate this point, it helps to reflect on individual autonomy and how it might be exercised in the improvisational context.

19 These ideals are explicit in the Architects’ pedagogy and practice at MICI: Movement Intensive in Compositional Improvisation. See also Fischlin, Heble and Lipsitz (2013) for broad discussion on the tension between “liberatory” ideals and the obstacles to their achievement in jazz “musicking” (chapter 2 & 3) and for discussion of failure to respect and serve the relationships that are at the center of the music (chapter 6): “Despite claims about improvisation’s liberatory potential, there are ample instances of improvisational musical practices that don’t work in the model ways that we’re suggesting they ought to...these instances need to be confronted squarely and honestly. Where they’ve deployed authoritarian musical gestures, where they’ve been focused on the development of their own virtuoso techniques than with the collective endeavor. But even in the so-called failed improvisations there always remains the spark of what might have been: the fact that chances were taken (or not) and that the performative agency enacted, however successfully, can still teach the listener something valuable.” (205)
8. Autonomy and Freedom in the Group

In the previous section, we noted that collective activities need not be cooperative or free from external forces like coercion and physical restraint; and they need not involve a significant degree of freedom with respect to how individuals contribute to the joint activity. EDI enjoys both to a high degree—not because there are no specific goals and anything goes, but because there is no specific plan as to how to achieve the goals, and creative, spontaneous input from the members is by definition part of the practice. But it is important not to confuse either of these—freedom from coercion and physical constraint, and freedom in how to achieve the goal—with autonomy, the capacity to govern one’s own actions. Freedom from external constraint might be necessary for autonomous choice, but it is not sufficient; a young child, or an adult with a severe addiction, may fail to act autonomously. Freedom in how to achieve a goal is neither necessary nor sufficient for autonomy, since one might act autonomously in pursuing a goal in full realization that there’s only one way to achieve it. And it is not sufficient, since the fact that many options are, in principle, open to one does not show that an option was taken up autonomously. Even in the absence of external forces that narrow or restrict the options available, certain internal, psychological forces (e.g., addiction) can undermine or diminish one’s capacity to govern one’s own actions.

As Buss and Westlund (2018) make clear, one of the central challenges for accounts of autonomy is to distinguish the autonomy-disrupting internal factors from those that are involved in the self-governing process. Following Westlund, we find it useful to think of autonomy as requiring a “dialogical disposition to hold oneself answerable to external, critical perspectives on one’s action-guiding commitments” (2009: 26). This provides at least an initial answer to the question of what sort of ability is involved in one’s capacity to govern one’s own actions. On this view, in order to “count as governing one’s practical reasoning, rather than being in the grip of considerations that drive it, one must be open to engagement with the critical perspectives of others” (35). This is “a feature of the agent’s psychology, and thus internal to the agent” but “nonetheless a disposition to be engaged by what is external to the agent, that is, by points of view other than her own” (22). Autonomy is, in a way, irreducibly social or relational, for it requires “an irreducibly dialogical form of reflectiveness and responsiveness to others” (28). However, it is modestly relational in that, unlike some other accounts (e.g., Oshana 2003), it doesn’t require that anything approaching an ideal social context be in place, or that one stand in egalitarian relations to others. This is important, since it allows us to say that at least in some cases, a person in non-ideal circumstances can autonomously engage with others and even autonomously endorse a non-ideal situation.\(^{20}\)

A simple example from Westlund will help us better appreciate her account before we apply it to EDI. Consider an Afghan woman who willingly embraces the rules imposed by the Taliban. On some views, like that of Oshana (2003), she should not be considered autonomous no matter what her attitude toward the strictures imposed upon her. While Westlund agrees that relations

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\(^{20}\) The account is neutral with respect to the compatibilist and incompatibilist debate, as it only provides a necessary condition for autonomy. That is, one might accept Westlund’s account and claim that being autonomous is compatible with determinism; or one might add to the account some condition to the effect that the choice must be caused by the agent and not determined by preceding events.
of subordination can often undermine one’s autonomy, she rightly takes issue with Oshana’s stronger claim.

A “Taliban woman” who is prepared to take up and respond to perspectives of others, even if she is unconvinced by their arguments, is strikingly different from one who is not. We may find the content of her commitments to be utterly wrong-headed, maybe even in part suspect they will erode her own autonomy competency over irreparably stunt the development of such competency in her daughters. But to treat her as non-autonomous even as she speaks on behalf of her self-subordinating commitments is to refuse to take the possibility of such dialogue with her at face value: not only does this woman lack authority over her social circumstances, our treatment implies, she lacks authority over her own voice. And this flies in the face of the evidence she gives of such authority in engaging in just the kind of critical dialogue in which one might expect reflective, self-governing agents to engage. [2009: 29]

Note that for one’s choice or action to be autonomous, it is not required that it be a good one (that it be reasonable, optimific, morally permissible, etc.). One might make a bad choice while still being disposed to engage other perspectives, to consider them seriously. But the disposition must be genuine; that one seems to oneself to be autonomous, disposed to engage with others’ perspectives, is not enough, since that might itself be an illusion; and that one has a basic ability to engage with others’ perspectives is not enough either, since having the ability is compatible with not ever being disposed to use it. Note, moreover, that one’s autonomy might vary from context to context: I might be disposed to engage other perspectives on political matters but not on religious ones. Or I might be disposed to consider others’ views on the state of my finances, but not on the state of my marriage.

Let us return to the context of EDI. Before focusing on autonomy in this context, let’s briefly discuss freedom and opportunity for action. Consider an ensemble member who begins a dance by choosing to stand somewhere in the studio space. This presents a certain constraint in that I am unable to initiate the beginning (because someone else played that role) and should I desire to occupy that very space, I am unable to do so. But I am now free (and inspired?) to act in numerous other ways; I can take any number of actions that place me in relation to this individual. This relation could have spatial, contextual, dramatic, or other qualities. The fact of being an autonomous agent has not essentially changed; the freedom to act, though minimally constrained as described, is in other ways prompted, given an expanded context and opportunity to be exercised.

We often expand the reach of our agency through the presence of others. We can collectively produce compositional and aesthetic forms that no one of us is able to create alone, for example, impressive lifts, catapults, or other physical feats. Some compositional forms require group activity, such as call and response, foreground/background arrangements or temporal structures like canon. When a group of people perform the same action at the same time, this is called ‘unison’, a form that can change the significance of an action simply by performing it as a collective. That the presence of others might expand one’s options illustrates how freedom and cooperation are deeply intertwined in EDI.
What does it mean to say that an ensemble member’s choices and actions are autonomous? In keeping with Westlund’s model, it would mean that the agent is disposed to engage with the perspectives of others in making one’s own choice. The relevant perspectives considered might be hypothetical ones (different courses of action in the improviser’s own imagination), but they certainly include actual others in the ensemble. In this context, these perspectives have a shared or overlapping starting point. The intention is to make a dance together, one that aspires to certain aesthetic ideals, but also certain cooperative and egalitarian ideals: everyone is to be treated as an equal, with no fixed hierarchical structure, coercion, or manipulation; no one’s suggestive movements should be prioritized or ignored merely because of who they are; everyone is expected to contribute and take responsibility for the creation of the work. The intentional movements, gestures, and interactions of the improvisers are understood by all to be part of the dance, and as material that may suggest other movements and interactions. These shared assumptions and intentions help determine how to interpret the actions of others in the space, making a certain kind of dialogue possible. To be autonomous with respect to these choices requires that one be disposed to engage with the perspectives of other improvisers (perspectives that are suggested by their actions in the space) in making one’s own choice of action. In this context, far from autonomy and cooperation being opposed to each other, genuinely autonomous action on the part of those who share these assumptions or starting points, tends toward cooperation, since it involves a disposition to engage with perspectives other than one’s own.

It is worth noting that recent literature on the aesthetics of improvisation explicitly invokes the idea of a dialogical process, in a way that makes Westlund’s account strikingly apt, and connects it with the idea of mutual responsiveness.

Group improvisation involves essentially dialogical engagements between the improvisers, so that they are compelled to communicate with one another, all parties receiving, negotiating, responding to, and attempting to create meaningful (musical or performance) utterances and gestures in real time. The precise way this dialogue unfolds has often been portrayed as the primary locus of the aesthetic distinctiveness of improvisation (Monson 1996), but – the pivotal point – the dialogical aesthetic practice is also, immanently, a social interaction. In other words...improvisation cannot but empractice or manifest a social aesthetics. [Born et al. 2017: 10]

It is important to recall that an autonomous choice is not necessarily a good choice. One might be strongly disposed to consider the relevant perspectives of others, but for some reason fail to do so. In EDI, one may fail for lack of training, an inflated ego, or attention fatigue. Even if the ensemble avoids the more ugly and obvious ways to disrespect or devalue another’s autonomy (e.g., coercion or deception), subtle failures could remain (e.g., manipulation). These failures could undermine the egalitarian ideal of EDI and, moreover, it’s aesthetic success. We might build this into the we-intention schematically thus: I intend that we make a dance that meets such-and-such aesthetic, cooperative and egalitarian ideals.21

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21 Recall, as discussed in section 2, that the joint activity can be complex, involving a cluster of goals, at least some of which are a matter of degree. We may succeed in making a dance that satisfies certain goals, while failing to make a dance that satisfied others. So even if, for example, we fall short of respecting each member equally, it does not follow that we have failed in all relevant respects.
As we shall see in more detail in the next section, there is a sense in which the egalitarian and cooperative features of a good instance of EDI aren’t just means to aesthetic value; nor are they merely extrinsic, pragmatic or moral ideals. They are, rather, partly constitutive of the aesthetic value. For what is on display in a good case of EDI is a significant collective achievement, one that manifests an impressive, spontaneous, jointly cooperative and individually highly autonomous activity that meets demanding aesthetic or artistic standards. That can be a beautiful thing to behold, its beauty at least partly a function of our admiration and love for cooperative achievements of autonomous individuals in society more broadly.

As the complex relationship of autonomy, freedom, and collectivity in EDI comes into high relief, this should prompt sophisticated ensembles to ask investigative and pedagogical questions about their modes of training. For example, are all participants respected and valued? Are their abilities fostered and supported, their perspectives and contributions welcomed and taken seriously in the creative process? To what extent and in what ways do their practices expand or limit the freedom of participants? What are the more specific social and aesthetic ideals that they share? How are aspects of the training aligned with the ensemble’s social ethos and its preferred aesthetic.

9. Value and Evaluation

How does our discussion of collective action theory inform the aesthetic evaluation of EDI? If evaluated in ways that (non-improvisational) choreography is typically assessed, for example by examining its formal composition, precision, or synchronization, many of its iterations would be judged inadequate and inferior to “set” choreography. On these points, the spontaneously organized, thematized, and performed cannot easily compete with choreography that is honed over long periods of reflecting and editing. But one of the beauties of EDI stems from the lack of opportunity for reflecting and editing. The virtuosity on display is that of composing something—coherent, organized, innovative, or surprising—while contending with significant uncertainty regarding what is about to be composed, and doing so cooperatively and without hierarchical, pre-assigned or fixed roles. To evaluate its form while ignoring the spontaneity of its production is to miss the point, or at least miss the central nature of its virtuosity. Likewise, to evaluate it without regard to the mutual responsiveness and cooperation on display is to ignore some of its core virtues. In seeing it as a cooperative action, we can begin to appreciate EDI not only as an artistic achievement, but also a social one; dancers freely work together in complex and cooperative ways on a difficult task—wresting order and meaning out of what, at times, seems like thin air.

In their introduction to Improvisation and Social Aesthetics, Born, Lewis, and Straw claim that improvisation, “regardless of its medium, has often been conceived by both its practitioners and its theorists as being intimately inflected by the social formations in which it is created and as being, in aesthetically relevant ways, a social practice in itself” (Born et al. 2017: 9). While earlier frameworks ignore social relations that, it can be argued, constitute or animate aesthetic experience, social aesthetics takes these aspects more seriously, and is thus a particularly promising framework for an aesthetic analysis of ensemble improvisation. Social aesthetics “direct[s] attention to the social relations and social dynamics immanent in… performance works
and practices as aesthetic events” (Born et al. 2017: 9). EDI is an overtly social process, one where, at least when things go well, cooperative art-making is achieved via a robust exercise of individuals’ autonomy, and importantly, this cooperative and egalitarian social relation is displayed. The social, creative process that generates the work is not separate from it, but in some sense is the work. As EDI performs and displays its own making in a complex social process, an aesthetic framework is needed that looks for the source of the aesthetic experience with a wider aperture, frameworks such as relational (Bourriaud 2002, Kester 2011) or social aesthetics (Born et al. 2017). These theories emerged to contend with newer modes of art and performance that, in one way or another, engage or “stage” actual social relations or interactions, and have “something other than a simple aesthetic consumption in mind”—often, works that “blur creation and exhibition” (Bourriaud 2002: 28, 39). Bourriaud’s phrase, “simple aesthetic consumption,” refers in part to the way that earlier aesthetic frameworks analyze the satisfaction that is derived from the formal or representational properties of the art object. Whether the value is judged by degrees of unity, harmony or coherence, or by some sort of successful representation or communication, traditional aesthetics primarily consider the art object apart from its creation, its makers, beholders, and their relations.

These traditional ideas have permeated much of aesthetic evaluation in western concert dance and choreography. Doris Humphrey, one of the so-called four pioneers of modern dance22, wrote an influential text called The Art of Making Dances (1959) in which she explained how to make good choreography by discussing formal topics such as “design,” “dynamic,” and “gesture,” and proposed rules of thumb such as “symmetry lacks life,” and famously, “all dances are too long” (159). Another famous mid-century thinker who influenced dance analysis was Rudolph Laban, whose formal system LMA, Laban Movement Analysis, focused on four categories: body, effort (sub-elements: space, weight, time, flow), shape, and space. Building, in part, on Laban’s work is The Intimate Act of Choreography (Blom and Chaplin 1982), an oft-used text in academic choreography classes. In it, practitioners are led to explore time, space, and force as “choreographic elements,” along with “devices” for making and manipulating movement so as to produce works that exhibit a sort of holy formal trinity: unity, variety, and contrast. While some traditional evaluative frameworks for choreography highlight, or at least include, dramatic or theatrical characteristics and the feelings they provoke, the social relations they take to be “in the work” are those merely represented in the drama portrayed.

In contrast, social aesthetics takes the real social relations between the improvisers as improvisers, and not merely the social relations and roles that they represent or act out (if any), to be part of the artwork or artistic event itself. As Born et al. put it, “the artwork itself – the ‘object of aesthetic appreciation’ in traditional aesthetics – entails, more obviously than in the non- or less improvised arts, processes of social interaction” (2017: 9). Thus, in addition to considering its formal and dramatic qualities, the analysis and evaluation of EDI must consider the social relations and social ethos that constitute the work. The proper appreciation of EDI thus invites, indeed demands, a social aesthetic that recognizes that “social relations can themselves get into, partake in, and animate aesthetic imagination and experience” (Born et al. 2017: 2-3).

Now, as we have argued, when we focus on the sort of social relations embodied in a good performance of EDI, we see, with the help of our theory of collective action, that it constitutes a significant collective achievement, one that manifests an impressive, spontaneous, jointly cooperative and individually highly autonomous activity that meets demanding aesthetic or artistic standards. A good case of EDI thus emerges as an ideal form of collective action, not merely in being a clear case of collective action (though it is that), but in being a good or valuable case of collective action. And its being socially good in this way is arguably not a mere extrinsic feature of the artwork, but part of its aesthetic value.

In addition to its social-aesthetic value, what might be the socio-political import of a collective act that prioritizes cooperation while keeping central the autonomy and freedom of individuals who participate? Do such forms merely reflect outlying social possibilities, or might they be modeling and generating new ones? What benefit might there be to collective acts that are also spontaneous, publicly displayed, and aesthetic or affective in nature? Much of the improvisation literature in dance theory (Goldman 2010, Buckwalter 2010, Foster 2002), but especially in jazz music theory (Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz 2013) stands at the crossroads of these questions. And in this literature, the proposed answers to such questions typically build on the following (by now familiar) points: improvisation allows for co-creation without already having a plan, much less an imposed plan; it enacts and displays an ideal sort of social relation; and accomplishes this by prioritizing shared agency and—importantly—by inventing and practicing concrete techniques for doing so.

In harmony with these and other discussions of improvisation in music and dance theory, our examination of EDI as a collective action suggests that it is rational to question received ideas about doing things together, especially assumptions that pre-planning and hierarchical structures, or mild forms of coercion, are necessary to do complex group activities, or that the expedience of these forms of collective action outweighs the values they sacrifice. It may be that, compared to the typically small group format of ensemble improvisation, radically up-scaled groups and activities require more pre-packaged structures, roles, or recipes. Still, it seems rational to ask: just how much? It may be that activities with extremely high stakes or crucial goals cannot tolerate improvisation’s open-endedness. Though again, it seems reasonable to ask, in what cases or contexts might prioritizing the values elaborated here outweigh other kinds of achievement?

Perhaps the kind of sociality that EDI practices could be translated for different contexts, taken up seriously or systematically so that theoretical and practical wisdom is mined and applied to socio-political challenges. This translation to other contexts might result in practical methods for effective cooperation in groups with diverse identities and perspectives. If so, such application could inform debates about the relation of individual freedom and communal responsibility, cooperation and competition, and contribute to innovation in matters of social justice.

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