

‘Yes, and ...’: having it all in improvisation studies

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December 2020

For S. Ravn, J. McGuirk, & S. Høffding (eds.), *Improvisation: the competences of not being in control* (London: Routledge).

Short bio

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1. Having it all

As one of the first readers of this fine collection of essays in improvisation studies, I’ve been interactively constructing my experiences and interpretations of the chapters as I go along. Engaged reading – like all our characteristic activities – has a substantial improvisatory dimension. Readers are neither passively downloading data transmitted fully-formed from the contributors’ minds, nor making up whatever we like, projecting our own views onto a blank slate of a book. In forging and sharing here my own idiosyncratic responses, I reach out to other, future readers by welcoming and inviting creative pushback, aiming to open up options, to accept and expand on the rich fare these authors offer us.

My highly selective comments revolve around a series of ‘yes, and ...’ responses to some themes in these essays. To respond with ‘yes, and ...’ is to accept and expand on what’s happening in the moment, here, in the collaborative spirit of the improv theatre practices which have fuelled much research on creativity and improvisation (Sawyer & DeZutter 2009; Seham 2001, 2016; see Salmela’s chapter), and which are increasingly exported into professional training in other fields, from medical education to organisation science (Vera & Crossan 2005; Leonard & Yorton 2015; Hoffmann-Longtin, Rossing, & Weinstein 2018). Running with others’ ideas and actions – rather than immediately contesting or resisting them – can be pleasurable and liberating, opening us into a fullness of feeling, even where it doesn’t swiftly develop into the kind of shared history of trust that allows us to steal horses together. Transferring ‘yes, and ...’ instincts from performance art to intellectual and political

contexts can also help other voices to be heard, countering the persistent failures of uptake and other hostile practices of interpretation that can undermine alternative narratives, affects, and views (Campbell 1997; McIlwain 2009). As I'll suggest, the 'accept and expand' communicative strategy of experienced improvisers has its own limits and costs. But as communities, and as researchers and philosophers, we could sometimes do with a little more 'yes, and ...', a little more trust-building. In improvisatory spirit, then, I want here to do some 'lumping' as opposed to the 'splitting' to which we philosophers are often prone: I suggest, with regard to a number of the apparent tensions or paradoxes bubbling under and across these essays, that we can have it all.

The editors note a 'central tension between planning ... and improvisation' as one theme that binds a number of essays, from the initial exchange between Hakli and Preston, and onwards. This is spot on: yet there are also hints of a more expansive and inclusive alternative problem space. Riffing off these rich and diverse studies, I suggest that neither of the terms 'improvisation' and 'planning' labels a unitary or well-defined phenomenon. I want to go beyond the points that improvisation and planning are not mutually exclusive; and that, as Preston rightly argues, placing them on a continuous spectrum still allows for substantial qualitative differences between them. There's not just one dimension in play here. It's not just that planning too can be improvised, and that improvisation can be planned. The dimensions are independent: activities can be both planned and improvised. But there are not just two dimensions in play, either. Further, both sets of phenomena – 'planning' and 'improvisation' – take many different forms, and the kinds of action and cognition involved vary on many distinct dimensions. It is not easy systematically to dismantle, or explode, entrenched dichotomies. My 'yes, and ...' invitations to authors and readers alike gently embrace a range of inclusive and welcome possibilities that this book opens up, with a promise or a hope that despite our critical training we don't always have to choose. We can fruitfully study both everyday and expert improvisation, and both collaborative and individual action; we can engage equally with philosophical theory and lived improvisational practice; we can privilege immersion in the present moment without downgrading memory and history; and rather than pitching bodily forces against cognitive control, we can catch their integration or meshing in flexible intelligent improvised action.

2. Everyday expertise and applied philosophy

I home in first on the wonderfully provocative essay by Krueger and Salice, which resonates with a number of the other contributions and which I'll revisit below, to expand on a first apparent tension, between everyday improvised action and expert artistic forms. These authors argue that 'we should enlarge the scope of analysis and shift attention from *expert* improvisation (which has narrow relevance in our daily life) to *inexpert* improvisation'. We can agree with their claim that improvisation is 'a pervasive phenomenon in our lives', and with McGuirk's parallel point that improvisation 'is not a rarefied capacity possessed by the few ..., but is an aspect of action generally understood', without having to drop or sideline enquiry into expertise. Why can't we do both, and have it all?

Only if we expected improvisation to take the same form and involve the same processes across all contexts would the increased study of everyday improvisation require such 'a shift of analytic focus'. The range of frameworks deployed in these pages could fuel a properly pluralist approach, with concepts and methods that link general theory of action and general social theory to the study of expertise in other domains, without privileging any one domain. These essays cumulatively continue the work of the remarkable 2-volume *Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies* (Lewis & Piekut, 2016a) by 'expanding the frame of reference beyond the artistic' (Lewis & Piekut, 2016b, p. 13), without thereby losing sight of the specificity of improvisatory practices in music, dance, and performance, and within distinct genres of each.

A narrow account of what expert improvisation is grounds Krueger and Salice's surprising claim that it 'has narrow relevance in our daily life'. Their category of expert improvisation includes only cases in which 'improvisation is the goal of the action', and is something that the agent explicitly sets as their (proximate) goal. Here, it's the improvisation itself that the dancer or jazz musician produces that is assessed (as a goal in itself) as more or less striking and successful, rather than (or in addition to) their actions and performances under other, broader descriptions.

These cases may not be a useful model for 'expert improvisation' in general. In the vast majority of instances of expert improvisation, improvisation is not itself a goal. Expert surgeons aim at successful medical operations, expert cricket batters at making runs and winning games, and expert air traffic controllers at smooth control of air traffic. Yet in each case, the expert often improvises: not because improvisation is a goal in itself, but because, in the course of ordinary and extraordinary performance alike, dynamic and challenging situations demand it. The experienced practitioner in each domain does know that they can improvise, but (unlike the genuinely rarefied cases in jazz and dance on which Krueger and Salice's category is based) what has intrinsic value is successful performance, not the improvisation which is sometimes needed to help achieve it.

Krueger and Salice acknowledge that both expert and inexpert improvisation include many different practices, and that the two forms may overlap. But because they treat 'expert improvisation' as fundamentally 'something that the expert sets as a goal for herself', their classification misses its heart. Improvisatory action in the diverse forms of broader expert performance is engrossing and fascinating not – in general – because it is in itself the expert's goal, but because their trained perceptual, cognitive, emotional, motor, or collaborative skills include capacities to adapt flexibly to changing circumstances, to make intelligent use of new opportunities, or to find apt courses of action on the fly, on the way towards (sometimes) achieving the successful performances which are their goal. One inclusive message of this volume, I suggest, is that improvisation is typically an everyday aspect of expert performance, rather than its explicitly-set goal.

Krueger and Salice's classification also falters in treating everyday improvisation as primarily 'inexpert'. They are right to reject the 'uniqueness assumption' that 'improvisation is a temporary and novel form of action distinct from the "normal" (ie, non-improvised) modes of action that characterize most of our everyday skilled behavior'. But because much everyday action is (precisely) thus 'skilled', we should contest Krueger and Salice's characterisation of 'our default way of inhabiting our world' as 'inexpert improvisation'. The criterion on which they focus, whether or not improvisation is itself a goal, does not help us understand the embedded plasticity of everyday improvisatory action and evaluation, which they fully acknowledge. Our flexible everyday activities are indeed responsive and scaffolded, as Krueger and Salice argue: for this reason they should not be characterised as 'inexpert'.

The scope of improvisation studies should be kept broad and inclusive, in pluralist style. Yes, there may be a range of differences across different contexts and domains of improvisation. But this doesn't mean we need sharp distinctions either between artistic and everyday improvisation, or between expert and inexpert improvisation. There are not two distinct phenomena here, but many. Improvisation takes many forms across many different fields of expert performance, and many different forms in everyday life, and these forms (and the concepts and tools we need to study them) may overlap. We want to map connections rather than seek mutually exclusive categories, shuttling between particularity and pattern.

Likewise, there is no need to choose between, or to see any deep tension between, theoretical and practice-centred analyses of improvisation. This volume's careful editorial strategy confirms that we need both, both separately and together. A number of contributions, most clearly perhaps those by

Ravn and by Høffding & Snekkestad, bring new work on improvisational practice to bear on existing theoretical concerns: others draw vividly on existing studies of artistic or educational improvisation in the wild. So again, as in this book, we can try to have it all.

Improvisation is one field in which the topic must trump any single research tradition, where the domain surely dictates some disregard for disciplinary lines (again compare Lewis & Piekut 2016b, p. 13). Philosophers, cognitive scientists, and social theorists alike can have it all. As is done across these essays, we can acknowledge the central historical role of music and other performance arts in improvisation studies, while also deliberately expanding our range to include other kinds of performances and professions: improvisation studies ranges from the educational contexts productively discussed in McGuirk's chapter, through to sport or medicine, on to cooking and driving and conversing and working, and all the things we do alone and together partly through improvisation.

In each case, we seek mutual benefit, bringing independently-motivated questions, concepts, and approaches from improvisation studies into dialogue with existing debates, challenges, or puzzles within such rich domains of practice and their associated discourses. There are great potential advantages for theorists in some level of immersion in existing communities of practice: we will tend to find holistic and often resilient systems within which improvisatory action is supported, swathes of applied research that is often highly sophisticated even if disconnected from broader cross-domain theory, and practitioners often keen to share and to be seen and appreciated – with their individual and joint histories and experiences, their subcultural assumptions and in-talk and concerns, their care for their community and their traditions. Accepting the foundational theoretical work in which this volume's contributors are fully engaged, we can also note how they expand our methods, in some cases nudging theory closer to engagement with or practice of ethnographic studies of improvisation. We need all of these projects, shuttling between more controlled and analytic approaches to the diverse forms and components of improvisatory action, and more absorbed and integrative approaches to improvisation in the wild, talking and listening hard along the way, perhaps even while becoming apprentice or participant (Downey, Dalidowicz, & Mason, 2015; Sutton & Bicknell, 2020). If there is to be a special role for philosophers in improvisation studies, this would be my tip, working across basic and applied research: philosophers as catalysts and go-betweens, as many contributors to this volume are already operating, working across and connecting social theory and cognitive science, attending fully to practice in integrative theorizing.

3. Stretched temporality, active history, and collaborative processes

The musicians, dancers, and other performers discussed in the central chapters of this book have developed extraordinary sensitivity to the complex settings, sites, and situations in which they operate. Quick to pick up any unique or changing features of their performance ecologies – which might relate to their own bodies, moods, and needs, to their collaborators or audiences, to the acoustics or architecture, or any number of other subtly embedded cues and signals – they are able rapidly to adjust action and intention to fit the needs of the moment. Although such improvisatory capacities are fallible, these performers more often than not draw effectively on their layers of embodied experience in a field to find a path that works now.

Improvisation can thus involve an intriguingly stretched temporality, which is probed in a number of these essays. Both observers and practitioners often characterise improvisatory action as unusually present-centred: performers are alive in and to and through the moment, riding the dynamic-but-enduring present in a kinesthetic or musical melody that constantly changes to fit the needs of the now. Individual or shared 'flow' experiences, as discussed in a number of chapters, are often seen as particularly present-centred, as something of special intensity or significance emerges in the

moment. Yet this does not mean that improvisation is contained within the present alone. Temporally too, we can have it all: past and future also feature centrally in these studies. This can be hard to see clearly, in large part because the operation of both past and future in the phenomenology of improvisation may often be immanent; it is perhaps especially challenging with regard to the roles of history and the past. So, again, let's try the 'yes, and ...' response: to accept the present moment as unusually salient in improvisatory action, and to expand.

The future does not typically or primarily figure in improvisation as destination or goal: rather, it is constantly made, as action sequences emerge, across a range of timescales at once. The skilled performer's uncanny anticipation can sometimes seem to be a form of living in the future, either expanding the present or being always already just those few steps ahead, operating with all the time in the world where the rest of us would be scrambling to catch up and regroup.

This is already also to implicate past experience. It's not just perception and action that are tightly, iteratively coupled in an individual's or a small group's ongoing improvisation, taking the performance from moment to moment, and onwards. Layers of experience are also alive in accumulated knowledge, deployed not slowly and effortfully and with deliberation but in all the ways that experts engage in dynamic, context-sensitive thinking in action. Memory and history are here not disembodied libraries of separate past exemplars, but integrated, affectively-saturated, action-oriented resources that span brain, body, and world. Ingold and Hallam describe the temporal nature of improvisation thus: 'the past, far from being set off against the present as a repository of finished business, is continually active in the present, pressing against the future. In this pressure lies the work of memory, imagined not as a register or drawer in which records of past events are filed away, but as the guiding hand of a consciousness that, as it goes along, also remembers the way' (2007, p. 11). As Rothfield argues, the 'reactive' forces of history and the past also come alive in improvisatory embodied action. Immersion in the present moment is not a flight from memory, but a rare, grooved form of access to it.

More generally, 'thinking' – whether we link it to cognitive control or agency – does not have to be pitched *against* the embodied freedom or loss of control by which improvisation is often characterised. There are more than two kinds of processes in action control, and expanded approaches to improvisation investigate how it rests in and emerges from a vast and rich *psychology*. This is a psychology that is embodied and dynamic for sure, often deeply social and collaborative, and firmly distributed across uneven and heterogeneous ecologies of physical and cultural resources: these authors work to dismantle residual dichotomies between mind and body, or control and freedom, trying to identify the forms of knowing and thinking that do really mesh with and in action, in improvisatory practice.

Crossley, Benson, Rothfield, and Salmela also remind us that a *shared* performance history brings distinctive opportunities and problems for effective improvisation. There is no fundamental discontinuity between individual and group levels of analysis: we can have both. Salmela's terrifically original treatment of group flow shows that even while new creative and affective dynamics emerge in some instances of *joint* improvisation, we can still fruitfully study what individuals (different band members, for example, with their own skills and moods) *bring to* the group, and what those different individuals then *do in* the group performance. Joint improvisation – in the arts, in sport, and in other forms of complex teamwork – is typically not a form or product of swarm intelligence, in which collective outcomes result from the aggregation of more or less homogeneous component actions: shared history operates in more uneven ways as heterogeneous individuals pool their wills and skills in creating something new and apt together (Sutton & Tribble 2014).

This gives rise to one of the most intriguing puzzle domains in improvisation studies: what are the microprocesses of communication and collaboration in small improvising groups? Because directions in joint action have to emerge on the run, standard, linear, clunky modes of interaction between individuals will not work. As a result of their shared history, some small groups find alternate media or modalities of communication-in-action that operate rapidly and effectively. In some cases we can track eye gaze or other gestural and postural cues operating between individuals; in other cases, deeply grooved shared enculturation within specific performance ecologies means that different group members with similar experience will be simultaneously nudged in complementary directions. These are rich fields for deploying mixed methods in interaction studies that might bridge ethnographic and experimental analyses of joint improvisation (Kimmel, Hristova, & Kussmaul 2018).

4. 'Yes, but ...': distributed and vulnerable improvisation

In *Citizen*, her powerful meditation on the daily challenges of experiencing racism in America, Claudia Rankine writes (2014, p.8):

You are reminded of a conversation you had recently, comparing the merits of sentences constructed implicitly with “yes, and” rather than “yes, but”. You and your friend decided that “yes, and” attested to a life with no turn-off, no alternative routes.

If thought in general is, as Artaud suggested, ‘a luxury of peacetime’ (1947/ 1976, p.505), perhaps ‘yes, and ...’ responses are a particular symptom of social and economic comfort.

Krueger and Salice ably defend a ‘wide’ perspective on improvisation, by which it is not a ‘head-bound’ capacity, but ‘a robustly distributed (i.e., beyond-the-head) affair, one that involves the ongoing integration of sensorimotor processes with environmental artifacts and institutions that we interact with on a day-to-day basis’. On such broadly ‘4E’ approaches to creativity and improvisation (Clarke & Doffman, 2017; Wheeler, 2018; Torrance & Schumann, 2019), cognition and action can spread across shifting webs of interconnected elements in complex ecologies (Hutchins 2010). What Krueger and Salice add to such a ‘wide’ perspective is the key further point that this deeply *relational* nature of mind and action means ‘that we are deeply *vulnerable* to manipulation by ecological constraints’. In brief final comments, I want to accept and expand on this important insight.

Such vulnerability takes both inherent and context-sensitive forms (Mackenzie, Rogers, & Dodds, 2014). Most generally, our dependence on others and on supportive environments, groups, and institutions means that our minds and lives – our capacities for emotion-regulation and for effective action, both planned and improvised – are inherently precarious. This is not a matter of pathology or deficit but an intrinsic aspect of our inherently open and incomplete mental lives (Harcourt, 2016). And then, more specifically, distinctive forms of scaffolding and distinctive patterns of distribution ground context-dependent vulnerability. There are many and widespread differences in the access that individuals and groups have to particular forms of cognitive and affective scaffolding. There are varying constraints on our opportunities to modulate or tweak the niches which maintain and support our emotions, thoughts, and actions. This is one of the more subtle mechanisms of power.

Where improvisation occurs against a sufficiently stable background, failure can be managed. This is perhaps why breakdown, disruption, and dispute are often not central topics in improvisation studies. It would be good to understand better how individuals and groups can repair trouble in improvised action more or less skilfully and fluently. The ‘yes, and ...’ instinct means, in the extreme, that there are no mistakes. Resilient technical, social, and institutional systems have built-in buffers against more severe forms of failure. Disputes and trouble still arise, for example when credit (aesthetic or financial) is at stake, as Benson notes. But in general, the capacity to accept and then expand on what a situation affords, on any set of action opportunities, is itself a luxury, a safety net.

In other circumstances, everyday improvisation is more heavily constrained, less a matter of choice and more a context-dependent necessity. Improvisation can be scary as well as marvellous, which is another reason we're fascinated with the processes that underpin it. In some situations, where there is no safety net, the costs of failure are higher.

So perhaps, in an expanded approach to improvisation, the 'yes, and ...' response can be accepted and complemented with a 'yes, but ...'. Alongside the comfortably inclusive urge with which I started, there is room for resistance and critique, for the calling out of errors, for starting all over again. Having it all may indeed sometimes require acknowledging tensions, paradoxes, and uneasiness. I look forward with enthusiasm to the unpredictable responses of other readers to these rewarding essays.

Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful to the editors and to Kath Bicknell for very helpful comments on an earlier draft. This work is supported by Australian Research Council Discovery Project grant DP180100107, and by ongoing discussions with my colleagues in our Cognitive Ecologies Lab at Macquarie University.

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