

Improvisation as Normative Practice

(Georg W. Bertram, Vortrag an der Hongik University, 28. Oktober 2022)

How is an ontology of improvisation possible? After all, it might seem that improvisations contradict the very idea of ontology. They are, one might think, happenings that lack stable being and, thus, exceed the bounds of ontological reflection. What is more, improvisation in the sense of “bricolage” (Lévi-Strauss) can be seen as a strategy to overcome metaphysics in general, since it promises an understanding of human practices that does not rely on stable foundations. Therefore, a critic might call even searching for an ontology of improvisation a serious theoretical mistake. But this reasoning would be deeply misleading because it supposes ontology as an enterprise that excludes processes, transformation, and instability. Even though improvisations are not static, they have a specific being that provides the basis for calling something an improvisation. My presentation investigates the being in question.

Those who are not skeptical about the very idea of the ontology of improvisation tend to construct their ontology of improvisation around the question as to whether improvisations constitute works. They rely on a common distinction within the philosophy of art, which differentiates between works of art and mere performances that do not attain the status of works. According to this perspective, the most important aim of the philosophy of improvisation is to identify why improvisations aren't works and, thus, to define the features of this specific type of artistic value and the ways in which it is fundamentally different from the type realized by works.

The distinction between composition and improvisation within the philosophy of music serves an analogous function. Compositions, one is tempted to think, are works with a stable structure that more or less prescribes how performances should take place, whereas (“total”) improvisations involve no such prescription. Even thinkers who reject such a sharp distinction between composition and improvisation tend to delineate what an improvisation is by drawing on this distinction. In this sense, the distinction between works (of art) or compositions, on the one hand, and improvisations as performances, on the other, informs different ways of constructing an ontology of improvisation.

Contrasting improvisations with works (of art) or compositions fits with how many improvising artists understand their craft as something fundamentally different from what is realized by works of art. Improvisations aim at creating a type of artistic value that transcends what one might call “aesthetics of works” (cf. Eco). One might say that this image is an aspect of the artistic marketing structure of improvisations (think, for instance, of the works and theories of John Cage, Eddie Prévost, and Derek Bailey). But it is, in general, problematic to build a conception of something primarily on how its practitioners understand it. To illustrate, if one bases an analysis of what family is solely on the basis of

how its members interact with one another and the roles they assume, one risks overlooking the essential societal role of family. In short, how those immediately involved understand a certain practice can always be part of a one-sided self-conception – a false consciousness. Thus, rigorous analysis always needs to question the perspective of the engaged.

And indeed, juxtaposing improvisation with composition is highly problematic; as Italian philosopher Alessandro Bertinetto has shown, it necessarily yields conclusions that fail to adequately grasp the specificity of improvisation. If one claims that there is “no categorical distinction between improvisation and performance,” but rather “a continuum of practices” (Cook 2017: 64), one might think that improvisation should not be understood in contrast to musical composition, but that the very idea of composition should be rethought on the basis of the concept of improvisation. But this move still doesn’t help us determine the specificity of improvisation. It is just an expression of the insight that the concept of composition does not help us understand what improvisation is.

Another reason ontological reflection on improvisation needs reorientation is that improvisation cannot be restricted to art. Improvisation is an essential aspect of everyday practice (cf. Ryle and others). Because of this, it is not possible to ground ontological reflection on improvisation in a distinction that is inseparably attached to art. We have to start with another basic concept. In what follows, I identify practice as the genus to which improvisation belongs. I then argue that improvisation has to be understood as a specific type of normative practice. According to this conception, improvisation’s specificity can be defined by the fact that in it, guiding norms are developed on the spot.

My argument is structured in four parts. The first develops a rough conception of what improvisation is. Against this background, the second part articulates the basic structure of improvisation in terms of impulse and response. The third part explains the way in which the impulse-and-response structure has to be understood as the basis of the specific type of normative practice that improvisation is. Finally, the fourth part summarizes the specificity of improvisation being a normative practice.

1 Towards a Preliminary Concept of Improvisation

What is an improvisation? An improvisation is a practice that develops something on the spot. Those who improvise do not know what to do in advance. They develop what they do while doing it. But this definition of improvisation necessitates determining what it means to characterize events as practices. A practice is an event where something is done. But what is done can be done within very different frameworks. I’d like to distinguish between three types of practices in order to establish a preliminary conception of improvisation: the first type being rule-governed practices, the second improvisational practices, and the third practices in which something is simply done differently.

Rule-governed practices are practices that are determined by pre-given rules (be they prescriptive or constitutive ones; cf. von Wright and Searle). Within these practices, rules are applied. Improvisations are practices characterized by a lack of pre-given rules (though from this it does not follow that within improvisations there are no norms at play – see Section 3 of this paper). But practices that are not rule-governed encompass more types of practice than improvisational practices alone. Another type of non-rule-governed practices might be called practices in which something is simply done differently. If I cook a meal and just omit salt for the sake of mere curiosity or fun, I am not improvising. I am just doing something differently. For my cooking to be improvisational, I would need to develop a dish through a series of actions not guided by a fixed recipe or something similar. In this way, improvisational practices are distinct from practices that just differ from how things are done habitually.

But what does it mean to situate improvisation between, on the one hand, practices that are governed by pre-given rules and, on the other, practices in which something is just done differently? We can get a better understanding of how to distinguish between the three types of practices by invoking the concept of the unexpected. While the unexpected is an essential element of improvisation, it does not play any role in either rule-governed practices or practices in which something is just done differently. This is especially apparent in practices that are determined by pre-given rules. If practices are guided by rules, only two different end results are possible, namely, cases in which the rules are followed and cases in which they are broken. Neither possibility is unexpected. The same holds for a practice in which something is just done differently. Where randomness reigns, nothing unexpected can happen.

In comparison with the two other types of practice characterized thus far, improvisation can be specified through the concept of the unexpected. The example of cooking is telling in this regard. If I just omit salt, the result cannot be unexpected in a strict sense. This is different in the case of improvising while cooking. Here, it may be the case that the result of the omission of salt is unexpected. Maybe I leave out salt in the hope that this would make the dish taste interesting. But since the taste is not as interesting as I thought, I am forced to react to the unexpected result and modify my approach to the dish. It is typical for improvisation that something unexpected prompts a reaction and changes the way the practice is continued.

Phenomenologically, the unexpected can play two different roles within an improvisation. First, it can be the starting point of improvisational practices. The famous case of Apollo 13 can be explained in this way. The unexpected explosion of one of the spacecraft's oxygen tanks forced the crew to leave the command module and install itself in the lunar module on its way back to Earth. But since the system for removing carbon dioxide from the lunar module was not designed to handle this unanticipated long journey, the crew was forced to improvise a modification to the system. A different form of the unexpected occurs if it is produced within the improvisation itself. Think of the improvisation of a jazz

quartet and an unexpected fill-in played by the drummer. An unexpected event like this does not have to mean a great deal. In lots of artistic improvisations, all kinds of unexpected things occur, each providing slight breaks or changes within what is played. In this way, the unexpected is an essential element of improvisational practice.

These preparatory reflections help determine what an ontology of improvisation should consist of. We have to understand improvisation as a practice the specificity of which can be better grasped through the dialectics between the expected and the unexpected. Even though one might think that acting on expectations is not a feature of improvisation in the strict sense, a closer look reveals it to be an essential dimension of it. Think of the improvisation of a jazz quartet. If, through some action of the drummer, a specific rhythmic structure is established, it is expected for the players to react to the drummer's input in some fashion. What is established during the improvisation evokes expectations. This does not mean that, in continuing, the players are forced to follow the expectations in question. Rather, they themselves are invited to contribute new impulses that realize something unexpected. In this way, the unexpected is developed against the background of a development of expectations. In what follows, I will explain how the dynamics between the expected and the unexpected are essential for improvisation.

2 The Basic Structure of Improvisation: The Single Action Approach vs. the Interaction Approach

Improvisation is a type of practice. Thus, it is tempting to conceive actions as its basic units. One approach to this thesis might be to say that every action determines the course of an improvisation anew by selecting between different options. This idea could be elaborated further by stating that the spontaneous selection about how to continue is restricted by a complex structure of constraints that shape the action's options.

If you sit by yourself playing the piano, you have to act within the constraints of the instrument, of your playing skills, of your understanding of harmonic structures, etc. Bound by these constraints, you make choices about how to go on while improvising. Or think of another example: While discussing a scientific presentation together with an audience, you select elements of possible answers under the constraints of academic habits, social customs, rules of courtesy, and so on. It might seem that the second case poses a lot more constraints than the first, thus making it more difficult to choose what to do. This could explain why it feels harder to give a scientific presentation than it is to improvise at home on the piano. Some of the actions realize something expected, others bring unexpected things into being.

Let's call the description of improvisation outlined here the "single-action approach" to an ontology of improvisation. The basic idea of the approach states that improvisations are developed through single

actions that continuously change the structures of the more overarching improvisational practice in question. Every new action brings the improvisation to a new stage, which itself then becomes the basis of further actions (cf. Brandom for a related explanation of linguistic practices). Even though it might seem promising to conceive of improvisation in terms of single actions, the approach is mistaken. Its main defect lies in the very idea that improvising can be adequately described as a matter of selecting among options. The approach suggests that improvising is a moment-to-moment activity that entails both moments of more expected and moments of less expected choices. The approach provides no account of why we can draw the distinction between what is expected and what is unexpected and why, in improvising, we have to make choices at all. The approach fails to answer the question as to why and how certain choices are meaningful within an improvisation. To answer this question, it is necessary to shed light on the relation between two acts within an improvisation. In what way does one act of selection orient the act that follows it? And why is it possible to conceive of some actions within an improvisation as acts that present something unexpected, whereas other acts are considered to set forth the expected? In order to answer these questions, we have to explain how different actions within an improvisation are bound up with one another.

Another shortcoming of the single action approach is that it does not offer an adequate account of group improvisations. Think again of a jazz quartet. It consists of four players improvising. If we take single actions to be constitutive of their improvisation, we cannot really distinguish between what a single saxophone player improvises alone from what she improvises while playing with other players. The single-action approach makes it appear as if, in both cases, she would treat the sounds she produces and those produced by others as external constraints for her actions. Think of when a saxophonist practices by playing along with a recording of three instruments (“playing on an Aebersold”). The recording gives, so it seems, the very same orientation a live improvisation with three other players would give. But this is definitively false. Even though a recording of other instruments may be helpful for training purposes, practicing like this is different from group improvisation. The difference is clear: In the practice situation, whatever the saxophone player improvises does not mean anything to other players. The opposite holds true when she improvises with three other players within a jazz quartet.

Identifying the shortcomings of the single-action approach highlights that an adequate explanation of improvisation should offer an account of interactions within improvisation. I, thus, call the position that I present and defend in what follows an interaction account of improvisation. The account is meant to explain both how actions within improvisations are bound up with one another and what motivates choices within improvisations. When I play the piano by myself, it may happen that I just play what I have already played several times before. But I can also try something new. When I do that, I am, in the very next moment, confronted with the problem of how to continue. One option is that I toss out what I just played; maybe I thought it was boring or just didn't lead anywhere. This could result in the absence

of any attempt to respond to what is new. But it is equally possible that I try to continue and develop the new idea further. In this case, my ensuing actions provide answers to what could be regarded as an initial impulse. This gives us an idea of how the basic relationships among actions within an improvisation can be interpreted – it is a relation of impulse and response, of call and answer.

The structure of impulse and response is best exemplified by actual interactions within an improvisation. If, in dance improvisation, someone moves her arm with a specific rhythm, the fellow improvisers are confronted with the question of how to react. Their reactions can, in the abstract, take three forms. The first option is that they take up the rhythm of the impulse and move with a similar rhythm. The second option is some kind of counter-action. This can be done in at least two different ways: On the one hand, counter-actions can open a dialogical structure of statements and contradictions that together realize a community of conflict between different perspectives. On the other hand, counter-actions can stage an irresolvable antagonism that ends in a lack of community. The third option is the sheer lack of an answer. This may result out of ignorance or negative assessment. The fellow improvisers may just not have been attentive enough to perceive the affordance that the impulse provided for them. Or they might think that it's not worth it to react to the impulse. In the latter case, they implicitly evaluate the impulse as not providing a launchpad for a plausible further development of the improvisation.

Taking the connection between impulse and response as the germ of improvisation allows us to understand that improvisations are all about how to react to impulses that improvisers are confronted with within the improvisation itself. This becomes clearer if we say that every impulse can itself be understood as a response. The dancer's impulse is motivated by what has been developed within the improvisation beforehand. It is itself a – negative or positive – response to expectations formed in the process of improvising. Strictly understood, no impulse within an improvisation is a beginning (cf. Derrida). Even the start of an improvisational performance has to be understood as a reaction to previous improvisations and whatever else improvisations react to. Thus, every act in an improvisation is, in principle, both an impulse and a response.

As a response to previous impulses, every action within an improvisation implies an essential dimension of perception. Someone who improvises can only succeed if she not only produces actions but is, at the same time, receptive to the actions she is reacting to (be it her own or those of others). According to the interaction approach, production, and reception coincide within improvisations. In order to explain the relationship between the expected and the unexpected in an improvisation, the coincidence in question is crucial: Expectations are bound up with how improvisers perceive what has been realized in the course of improvising. Only by being perceptively open in this way do improvisers have the ability to react to expectations that have been constructed during the improvisation and, by extension, the ability to create something unexpected sometimes.

The interaction approach of impulse and response enables us to understand why an explanation of improvisation that focuses on single actions is misleading. Such an explanation makes it seem as if the constraints that bind singular actions stem from outside. But improvisations establish structures and constraints within the improvisation itself. The general form of constraints within an improvisation can be captured through the concept of impulse: Actions within improvisations are constrained by the impulses that they respond to. Improvisations consist of chains of actions that construct constraints for themselves. For sure, this does not imply that there are no external constraints relevant for improvisations. Lots of external constraints are relevant. But they are not the basis on which actions within improvisations are connected with one another. Their connectedness has to be explained on the basis of internal constraints.

As discussed above, the single-action approach does not provide an answer to the question of why a choice selected within an improvisation is meaningful for future actions. The foregoing reflections have brought us to a point at which we can explain why this is so. The single-action approach makes it seem as if every action within an improvisation stands on its own. It suggests that improvisers would, in every moment, have to establish something meaningful out of lots of different options they are confronted with as if improvisation were a *creatio ex nihilo*, formed on the basis of external constraints. This gives the impression that every improvisational action produces something meaningful in and through itself. But this contradicts the very idea of producing something meaningful because what is meaningful has to be meaningful for future actions. For the single-action approach, every action determines what is meaningful for itself, and, thus, no past action counts as being meaningful for it. From this follows that no (past) action has the potential to be meaningful for future actions. But, if it is not meaningful for some future action, it isn't meaningful at all. This is to say that the single-action approach's explanation of actions as producing something meaningful is, at the same time, an explanation to the effect that nothing meaningful is realized.

The interaction account helps us overcome this contradiction. If we understand improvisational actions as responses, we understand how they can produce something meaningful. They are meaningful to future responses for which they provide impulses. As realizing something meaningful, improvisational actions are impulses that wait for responses. In the abstract, these responses have the options characterized above: They may take up the impulse, produce some kind of counter-action, or not respond to it at all. At least through the first two types, the impulse is taken as meaningful. As such, it can last for whole improvisational performances and even much longer. Impulses in improvisations can shape the way a performance unfolds. They can even shape many coming performances as well – think of John Coltrane's style of playing the saxophone. This gives us an explanation of how what is expected is established within improvisations. What is expected is established through chains of practices that

develop out of impulses. These chains are the background against which something unexpected can be created by new impulses.

To sum up, what has been said thus far, I'd like to emphasize that the ontology of improvisation has to begin with the interaction of impulse and response as the kernel of what improvisation is. Note first that, as the examples suggest, impulse and response do not necessarily have to be produced by different performers. The structure of impulse and response is constitutive of both solo and group improvisations. And note second that the interaction of impulse and response often includes much more than two actions. In most cases, impulses within improvisations are interlinked with lots of responses that unfold over time.

3 Norms in Statu Nascendi

The impulse-and-response structure of improvisation poses the question as to how the connection between the two elements has to be understood. Let's consider again an impulse realized within an improvisation. How does an impulse bind actions that respond to it? As we have already seen, responses that hold the impulse to be meaningful have different options. They can prolong what the impulse provides, or they can set a counter-impulse. When a response prolongs an impulse (through repetition, variation, or some other technique), the response retroactively determines the impulse as a normative authority for itself. The impulse sets a norm to which the responding actions have to adhere if they aim to prolong it.

Two aspects of the normativity in question are decisive here: First, the response is essential for a norm to be established. Impulses, as such, in the sense of single actions, do not constitute norms. They provide affordances for norms that are only ever constituted through reactions. Second, it is decisive for the concept of normativity involved that norms are brought into existence and developed over time. They are not everlasting stable entities but, rather, change with the development of the practices guided by them. As to the second type of reaction, if impulses are answered with counter-impulses, conflicting norms are brought into play that can be further unfolded during improvisation. Conflicts between norms mutually shape and refine them.

In this way, the interaction approach to improvisation conceives of improvisation as a specific type of normative practice. According to a common understanding that I touched on above, normative practices are practices that apply norms. This is to say that the norms in question precede the practices in the sense that their content is determined independently of the practices in question. One does not necessarily have to understand the norms as being totally independent of practices (as something like Platonic entities) in order to embrace this viewpoint, because it is sufficient to distinguish structurally

between the constitution and the application of norms. This could be called a “two-phase” model of normativity. The very idea of applying norms can be grounded on the premise that the constitution of norms precedes practices that are guided by them.

However, improvisations cannot be understood as normative practices in this sense because improvisational practices do not rely on norms that are established in advance. One might object, saying that many improvisations are based on material that precedes them. When some organ player improvises on a hymn or a jazz musician improvises on “My Favourite Things,” they are committed to a structure that exerts normative force on them. But commitments like this do not constitute improvisations as normative practices because the repetition of a specific structure as such does not define them as improvisations. Rather, the normativity of improvisations is established through the way in which different elements within them are bound to one another.

Another objection might counter, saying that impulses – which, as I have argued, are essential elements of improvisations – have to be understood as norms that precede responses. But this would be a misunderstanding, for a simple reason. Within improvisations, norms are retroactively established through responses. The most important lesson of the interaction approach is that an impulse within an improvisation does not stand on its own. The impulse only becomes what it is through the responses that follow it. Thus, it has to be regarded as a potential norm. Responses to the impulse “decide” whether a norm comes into being. Within group improvisations, decisions like this connect different individuals with one another in a way that helps form the group. When improvisers play together, they constitute an improvisation through their collaborative effort.

This explanation can draw some support from Jacques Derrida’s and Ludwig Wittgenstein’s reflections on repetition and rule-following. They make clear that norms within improvisations have to be constituted through repetition. Importantly, repetition does not presuppose norms, but has to be understood as their basis. The basic form of repetition is when a second practice picks up what has been established in a first practice. What the first practice “proposes” is established as a norm through the second practice. The connection of first and second practice builds the nucleus of a chain of repetitions that can be continued by a series of other practices. Through chains like this, norms are established and prolonged. Thus, norms are constituted through potentially endless repetitions. Think of jazz standards. The harmonic scheme of a jazz standard (like Gershwin’s “I Got Rhythm”) can be endlessly reiterated; every new instantiation of it is bound up with changes. Thus, the chain of practices through which a norm is established within improvisations has to be understood as a chain of constant variation and change.

In this way, Derrida’s and Wittgenstein’s conceptions of normative practices allow us to understand how these practices can be bound up with constant change. Their philosophies enable us to appreciate the

thought that norms do not necessarily have a pre-given identity. Rather, their identity can always develop and, thus, entails change. This opens up space for a different conception of what the application of a norm looks like. Here, application is not the reiteration of a norm that is already established. Rather, application is a practice that re-establishes the norm (cf. Gadamer for a related explanation). In other words, within improvisation, the constitution of norms and their application cannot be distinguished. In contradistinction to the two-phase model, the interaction approach reveals that the normative structure only evidences one phase – a phase in which constitution and application are inextricably connected with one another. This is the first fundamental feature of improvisation as a normative practice.

A second characteristic consists of the constant renewal of norms. In every moment of an improvisation, new impulses can call for the constitution of new norms. Every impulse within an improvisation can be understood as questioning the norms that governed the improvisation up until the moment it chimed in. Impulses question norms in an ambiguous sense, though. On the one hand, the questioning can be an aspect of what it means to apply norms that have already been guiding the improvisation. On the other hand, the questioning can be an attempt to establish new norms and, thus, instigate a break. The fundamental ambiguity results from the double potential inherent in impulses, as there is no clear-cut distinction between continuity and discontinuity, between constant change and complete renewal.

Note that this is a conceptual claim. We can doubtlessly think of experiences of clear continuity and clear discontinuity in improvisations, such as when the character of an improvisation changes completely from one moment to the other. Still, this kind of experienced discontinuity could perhaps be understood as a form of continuity in the sense that what preceded it gave an affordance to instigate the radical shift. Such continuity within discontinuity exemplifies the meaning of the notion that improvisations contain no clear-cut distinction between continuity and discontinuity. Every impulse can prompt a development in either direction. It can effect a new application of already established norms, and at the same time, it can attempt to kick off something new. Improvisation as a normative practice is a constant struggle between continuation and starting something new. Wittgenstein coined a pithy phrase to grasp this sort of structure: “We make up the rules as we go along” (Wittgenstein 1958: § 83). Improvisations engage in a constant making up of norms.

A third characteristic of improvisation as a normative practice has been implied in the foregoing reflections: its temporal structure. According to a common misunderstanding, improvisation happens in the here and now. But, as the elucidation of the connection between impulse and response demonstrates, the basic temporal structure of an impulse is not the present. Rather, it is oriented towards the future because an impulse always requires an answer to realize itself. As explained, only through responses to impulses are norms established within an improvisation. In addition, every impulse is itself a response to past impulses, and it might itself contribute to the constitution of norms

by taking past impulses as being authoritative for itself. Thus, the temporal structure of improvisational normative practices can be captured in the formula: “opening up the future by responding to the past.”

In this way, the impulse-and-response structure of improvisation is bound up with a specific temporal structure of normativity. This temporality can be illustrated with a concept from chemistry – norms within improvisations are always *in statu nascendi*. The instability of guiding norms is a defining feature of improvisations as normative practices. They wait to be developed further through future responses, which, in turn, constantly question the norms that impulses establish. The norms established within improvisational practices are renewed again and again. In this sense, improvisations are bound by norms that are always in the making.

Defining improvisation in this way helps us understand how its creative aspect is based on normative structures. As I have argued, improvisations are not composed of single actions. Rather, they are structured by interactions that adhere to an impulse-and-response structure. Thus, it is not possible to grasp the creative aspect of improvisation by referring to single actions. The creative dimension has to be explained with reference to interactions as the structuring elements of improvisation. On these grounds, the creative dimension of improvisation has to be conceived of as being bound up with its normativity. Improvisation is a form of creativity realized through normative practice. The constant making of norms (*norms in statu nascendi*) is what explains improvisation’s creativity.

4 Summary: Improvisation as a Normative Practice

What is improvisation? I started my reflections with the claim that improvisation as a practice has to be distinguished both from practices governed by pre-given rules and practices in which something is simply done differently. We have seen that it is possible to account for this distinction by conceiving of improvisation as a specific type of normative practice. Improvisation is characterized by the fact that, within it, norms are constantly in the making. They are established and renewed by webs of impulses and responses, which have the double potential of, on the one hand, reproducing and, on the other hand, breaking norms. Bringing forth impulses and responses presupposes – and this would be a topic for another presentation – performative, perceptual, and evaluative skills that are transformed within the practice of impulse and response itself. Improvisation presupposes an openness towards skills being questioned and transformed. Improvisation is a practice in which norms (and skills) are developed in strong correlation to one another. In turn, their intertwined development is bound up with a temporal structure that exceeds the present. On the basis of past developments, improvisational practices open up the future, in the sense that they wait for future practices to determine their normative impact. The ontology of improvisation can be summarized as such: Improvisations are normative practices in which

(a) norms are established *in statu nascendi* through (b) the constant and future-oriented production of impulses and responses that (c) transform the norms (and skills) of improvisation itself.