Anonymous  
**Posted: 02 Oct 2006 19:53**  
Post subject: October 2006: Improvisation and Ethics

Throughout the month, the invited commentaries from Carl Joakim Gagnon, Eric Lewis, Brian Soucek, and John G. Stackhouse, Jr., will be posted in this section. To leave your own response to Daniel Groll's essay or to one of the commentaries, choose "post reply." In order to post a reply, you must register with a personal user ID and password.

Debra Erickson  
Editor, Religion and Culture Web Forum

Anonymous  
**Posted: 02 Oct 2006 20:08**  
Post subject: Eric Lewis's reply to Daniel Groll

I am very sympathetic with D. Groll's proposal to see structural similarities between improvising in music, and ethical deliberation. I am less certain about his intention (if it is his intention) to argue for ethical cognitivism's ability to account for ethical pluralism via an analogy with musical improvisation, and its ability to embody pluralism within a system of musical constraints. However, this debate will have to await another day. For now I will be brief, and merely suggestive. Groll's paper is rich, and much of it deserves careful comment, and should, as Groll himself realizes, be expanded upon. What follows are some very quick comments, intended to stimulate further debate. It is important not to read "flow" as necessarily being anti-cognitive. Many in the past have moved from flows seeming non-cognitive nature to it being anti-cognitive, concluding that improvisations are therefore random or unintentional. As Groll notes, preparation enables flow, as perhaps moral education may often allow for morally "correct" action with little if any conscious moral deliberation needed.
As Groll notes, “The parallel between the preparation necessary to improvise musically and living well is, to me at least, quite striking.” I agree, and this has also been noted by many improvisers. Indeed the Chicago-based Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) has built recognition of this parallel into their charter. One might (as I do) want to side with the AACM and make even a stronger claim—that group improvisation is not merely structurally similar to ethical deliberation, but an actual instance of it, to improvise is to engage in a social practice with a political/ethical core—one’s interactions with fellow improvisers in the act of improvising are ethical interactions.

An argument for this claim is beyond the scope of this comment (and indeed nothing Groll claims entails that he disagrees). Let me suggest, within the context of Groll’s most interesting paper, an avenue towards seeing this. It concerns the nature of constraints, both musical and ethical. Groll claims musicians are realists, since they call upon “musical facts” when explaining what they did. Yet what are musical facts? These, I claim, are far from given independently of one’s musical practices (similarly with “ethical facts” and ethical practices). As an improviser, I might talk of the need to “return to the tonic” as explaining a particular gesture. But equally I might talk of a desire to “disrupt the harmonic flow,” or more generally “throw a span into the works,” or even “piss off the bass player who was playing too loud.” Indeed, I may speak of “creating a space for my new improvising partner to speak,” or of “invoking the spirit of dead children.” One person’s musical fact may be another’s social/ethical fact, and vice versa.

Similarly, what one sees, phenomenologically, as the constraints on ethical theorizing depends crucially on who does the phenomenological survey. Often it seems that an ethical theorist merely introspects, and then asks her colleagues, hardly a model for revealing ethical pluralism, if it exists. This is like a “pure” be-bop improviser wondering about her musical constraints, and only turning to fellow be-boppers for enlightenment. (And which be-boppers—those “schooled” in be-bop as a particular form of harmonic invention, or those, like its originators, who employed overt political/social discourse to describe their practices?) Does not, in effect, accepting either moral or musical pluralism throw into question the fixity of the realm of moral and musical facts? Do not many present global crises suggest this?

This suggests a role for moral dilemmas in musical improvisation. Perhaps “good improvisations” are all those that raise, in effect, moral dilemmas, and perhaps the freer the improvisation, the less the group operates under constraints, the easier this is. Perhaps the hallmark of the virtuous person is not how she differs from the less virtuous when faced with everyday ethical decisions, but when faced with moral dilemmas, with exceptional cases. Might not this also be the case with musical improvisation? Might not an improviser most manifest her improvisational “superiority” when faced with the musical equivalent of...
a moral dilemma? This is, I think, what free improvisers always face, and, to be purposefully contentious, this demonstrates the moral superiority of free group improvisation, or perhaps of masters of this art.

To make any sense of these hasty claims one needs to argue for the moral/social nature of improvising. While Groll makes great headway towards demonstrating that ethical deliberation may be, in effect, a form of musical improvisational deliberation, the converse may well be true. Perhaps, as I believe, improvising is equally a form of ethical action. In any case, the deep inter-relations between the two need to be pursued further, and I hope Groll himself continues his inquiries, and that others may follow.

==========

Eric Lewis
McGill University

Anonymous

Posted: 02 Oct 2006 20:12    Post subject: John G. Stackhouse, Jr.’s reply to Daniel Groll

I am delighted to read Daniel Groll’s piece on ethical and musical improvisation, not least because it actually displays knowledge of both fields, rather than offering the more common display of a philosopher or theologian gesturing vaguely at music to jazz up his otherwise dull lecture.

In reply, I want to pursue just a few threads of this provocative essay. First, I’m reminded of Jeremy Begbie’s fine book, Theology, Music, and Time (Cambridge), that shows us how thinking about music more generally (Begbie is a trained classical musician as well as a theologian) can help us think better about theology. For instance, Begbie shows how each repetition of a motif is not just “the same thing again,” but each instance has its place in the musical line, and what has come before and what is to come afterward shapes our appreciation of this instance now—as is true of, say, taking communion on a given Sunday morning. Groll hasn’t quite done that yet—the links he shows are more suggestive than revelatory, as I think he would agree—but he prods us in a similar, fruitful direction.

I also am reminded of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Ethics, in which he (also a trained musician) challenges us to act as adults, not as children—a very different metaphor, but one which says to me, “Don’t just stick to the notes as written: you’re ready to make your own music: Improvise!” That’s a positive note, but there is a negative one as well, in that Bonhoeffer found neither his Lutheran tradition nor, indeed, the Scriptures themselves to provide him with a “script” to follow in dealing with Hitler and the Nazi horror. Loyal to Lutheranism and steeped in Scripture, Bonhoeffer improvised and his example, every bit as much as his reflection—his “theory”—challenges us all to do the same.
Groll talks of tension between “flow” and “preparation,” and well he should. As former U of C professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi makes clear in his popular book on that concept, as well as in his subsequent book on creativity, “flow” is precisely the result of hours of learning, practice, experimentation, failure, reflection, and constant attention to every little step along the way—whether in downhill skiing, playing the piano, or public speaking. Having done my share of jazz improvisation myself, I know that the success of the moment of flow depends very much on all the scales and arpeggios I bored myself with in practice, all the music I studied and wrote out, all the other artists I analyzed and copied (phronesis indeed), and all the mistakes I made previously!

Ethically, we improvise well because we have previously grooved deep habits of mind and heart by learning, absorption, recollection, and practice. Spiritual disciplines are the classic practices of spiritual life, the artifices that require so much concentration and effort, that help us develop the “second nature” by which we now “naturally” span ethical octaves, reach high notes, bow gently, and create “spontaneously.”

Yet I should say that we must be careful about celebrating too much the “automatic” over the “intentional.” The angels and saints are confirmed in virtue, and my hope is that some day I might enjoy such a degree of sanctification (after, oh, quite a while in whatever purgatory awaits Protestants). But, as C. S. Lewis reminds us, there is something specially heroic about the man with a pathological fear of cats who deliberately lifts one out of harm’s way.

Finally, I think the category of “restraint” is a fascinating one to consider both musically and ethically. For an improvisation made in his time by J. S. Bach is thoroughly “hemmed in” by the expectations of his day, compared with an improvisation made by Charlie Parker some centuries later. Indeed, the improvisation made in this particular song on this particular night might “work” well while that very same riff would be jarringly wrong in the very next song—think “blues shuffle” versus “ballad.”

Yes, I know the old jazz player’s dictum: “There are no mistakes, just delayed resolutions.” But we all laugh at that because, as Groll attests, it isn’t true: There are mistakes in improvisation, and not just anything goes. Indeed, it’s interesting and important to reflect on just how little scope there is, most times, for what can and can’t “go” in a particular musical or ethical situation—a flat contradiction of the fads for utter freedom that have, again interestingly, afflicted both jazz and ethics at least since the mid-twentieth-century.

Thanks, then, to Daniel Groll for this stimulating prelude to what I hope will be a whole suite of reflections on this subject.

====
Anonymous  
Posted: 10 Oct 2006 16:15  Post subject: Carl Joakim Gagnon's reply to Daniel Groll

The hypertext novels of Michael Joyce consist of fragments of a story, linked to other fragments by various hyperlinks. The reader chooses which ones to follow and consequently co-authors the final narrative. In doing so, she exercises a kind of creativity, but it is on a different order than in a typical jazz improvisation. It is probably closer to what Daniel Groll, in his suggestive analysis of seven of the ways in which ethical decision-making resembles musical improvisation, would call an activity "identified primarily in terms of features that are fixed in advance," as opposed to improvised performances, which are "identified primarily in terms of the features that fill in the underdetermined elements" (5). Importantly, though, Joyce’s novels are not scripted in the way a typical performance of classical music is, and just how the final product is going to look is seriously underdetermined. What is fixed in advance are the novel’s fragments, which function as pre-existing and fixed building blocks that the reader can combine in a finite number of ways. The novel becomes a kind of literary machine, which allows the reader to improvise – but the building blocks remain fixed.

I bring up Joyce’s novels because they seem to require a level of improvisation somewhere between a jazz improvisation and a classical performance. Clearly the analogy between a moral agent and a jazz musician is more apt than that between a moral agent and a classical musician reading a score. But it is worth noting that the analogy is also more apt than that between a moral agent and a Joycean reader-author.

There are many reasons, but one of them might depend on agreeing that the principles that we invoke when explaining why something is a good musical improvisation or a good moral response are nothing like the “fixed building blocks” of Joyce’s novel. To a budding jazz musician or an inexperienced moral agent, admittedly, the conventions of jazz and the conventions of morality can seem precisely like such building blocks. To take a personal example, when I first started improvising on the saxophone, I began by copying solos I liked by musicians like Sonny Rollins or Miles Davis. Gradually, I developed a small repertoire of neat phrases, ways of transitioning from one chord to another, and the like – the building blocks of solos. But (even if I never got very far down that road) pretty soon what one is doing is no longer anything best thought of as collating pre-existing musical phrases, but rather reshaping and inventing phrases in fundamentally creative ways, through actions both created by and helping create one’s own developing and increasingly independent musical personality.
Moral development seems similar. We begin by a clumsy initiation to the field of “morality” through the basic rules we are taught as children – “Don’t steal,” “Don’t lie,” and so on. But as we become increasingly experienced moral agents, more alive to moral complexities, competing allegiances and the like, moral judgment becomes less and less similar to the act of simply subsuming an act under a principle.

The question is how unlike “subsuming an act under a principle” mature moral judgment is. Reflecting on how either “principled” or “improvised” an ethical or musical action is would require we get clearer on this.

One option (which to me makes moral improvisation seem most like musical improvisation) lies in accepting the view known as moral particularism. It begins from the observation that virtually all our moral principles seem to be shot through with exceptions, and concludes that the reasons we invoke in condemning or approving an action are not best thought of as reasonably stable entities, but as irreducibly context-dependent for their valence. (Thus, moral particularists point out, there are situations where it may be permissible or even obligatory to lie: the classic example remains “while hiding Jews from the Nazis.”) In morality, one cannot get to an overall moral judgment of an act through a process of deciding what different principles apply and, as it were, adding these principles up. It is, instead, the holistic judgment of the action-in-context that is required to understand what valence various “moral reasons” we choose to would have.

It can be objected that this makes the moment of judgment a bit mysterious, but it makes it mysterious in similar ways to the ways in which aesthetic judgment is mysterious. On such a view, moral theory can be helpful both pedagogically and in helping to justify and understand moral judgments. But, like virtue ethicists, moral particularists insist that the ultimate criterion for judging whether an act is X is by consulting the judgment of a mature agent competent in X. It implies that both the moral or musical improviser is faced with a more fluid array of choices than the Joycean reader-author. And it hints that it is only in beginning to acknowledge one’s own responsibility for one’s solo – that one cannot not forever rely on building one’s solos out of other people’s musical phrases, or one’s ethical life out of other people’s rules – that true agency begins.

These notes are hardly even suggestive, but it seems to me that, to continue the discussion Daniel Groll began, we would need to further consider how “principled” either moral or musical judgment is.

========

Carl Joakim Gagnon
Columbia University
Anonymous


Comment
Daniel Groll’s “Improvisation and Ethics”

Dealing in analogies is sometimes a dangerous trade. Just knowing when to ply it is the first challenge. Given that everything is like everything else in some respect, it’s often difficult to tell whether two things are enough alike, or better, relevantly enough alike, to be useful. And useful for what? That’s the first question that springs to my mind after reading and very much enjoying Daniel Groll’s paper.

Let me make that question a bit clearer. Groll’s account of improvisation is insightful, and the similarities he finds in the ethical realm are, to me, absolutely convincing. But say that we grant Groll his analogy. Say that musical improvisation and the sort of moral improvisation discussed by certain ethical theorists are as deeply analogous as Groll claims. What follows then? I can think of several possibilities.

1. Groll might say that, because of their analogy, musical improvisation can make us better moral improvisers. Eric Lewis suggests something like this in his comment, writing there that group improvisation is an instance of ethical deliberation and interaction. If improvisatory musical choices just are moral choices, to call someone a ‘good improviser’ is to make both an aesthetic and a moral claim. I don’t see Groll arguing for this in his paper, and I doubt he should.

2. Groll might say rather that musical improvisation doesn’t help us become moral; rather it helps us understand moral improvisation. That is to say, it helps elucidate the claims made by those (like Nussbaum, Diamond, etc.) who make improvisation central to their ethical theories. Clearly Groll would agree with this.

3. The claim which Groll explicitly makes at the start of his paper, however, is a stronger, though similar one. As he puts it, his hope “is that clarifying how paradigm cases of improvisation work will shed light on the structure of ethical action.” How is this different from #2, above? Where that used musical improvisation to shed light on certain theories of ethical action, the hope expressed here is that it will shed light on ethical action itself. This assumes, as Groll also explicitly does, that ethical action is correctly described in terms of improvisation. One way, then, of using the analogy—the third in my list here—would be to help convince us of this assumption. The second approach seeks to explain certain moral theories; this third approach would give us a reason to believe in them. I’m not sure whether Groll would support this last approach or not.

Historically, analogies between aesthetics and ethics have been used in all three ways. Philosophers like Shaftesbury and Hutcheson in the eighteenth century influentially adopted the third approach. As
Hutcheson said early in his Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue (1725), understanding our sense of beauty—a ‘sixth sense’ he added to those like smell and sight—helps to convince us that there is one still higher: the moral sense. In the same century, Kant took the second approach, using aesthetic judgment as a model for practical reason. Since, for Kant, we cannot experience the good directly, our experience of the beautiful offers us an experience that is helpfully analogous. (The is argued in his section in the Third Critique on “Beauty as the Symbol of Morality.”) But Kant also suggested that developing our aesthetic taste can assist us in becoming moral agents (the first approach above). Beauty, he thought, teaches us to love with the disinterest which Kant’s moral theory required. His admirer, Schiller, went on to make this the very basis of his Letters on Aesthetic Education.

My invoking precedent like this is in no way meant to challenge the originality of Groll’s argument. Quite the contrary: a striking fact about all these eighteenth-century authors is that the analogies they draw are always between aesthetic and moral judgment. Groll’s analogies—for the most part, at least—are based instead on artistic production. His argument centers on the maker of art, the musical improviser, not the critic. I think this is crucial, and highly promising. It’s worth thinking further about how the analogies shift when we stop talking about links between aesthetic and moral value, judgment, or third-person experience, and start talking about how improvising onstage is, from a first-person perspective, akin to living a moral life. I’m grateful to Daniel Groll for giving us that opportunity.

========

Brian Soucek
University of Chicago

daniel.groll

Posted: 15 Oct 2006 21:54    Post subject: Reply to Replies

Let me begin by thanking all the commentators for their thoughtful and thought provoking comments. I wish I could give a more systematic response to the rough ideas presented in my paper by way of responding to some of the ideas expressed by Lewis, Stackhouse, Soucek and Gagnon, but I’m afraid that since I am no longer working on the issues presented in the paper (I hope to come back to it some time), my thoughts are still very sketchy. And so the ideas below won’t do much to fill in the large gaps in the original paper. Instead, they are just thoughts that arose while reading the responses.

Having said that, I think Soucek's analysis of what, precisely, my thesis is is correct: I think understanding how improvisation works in a paradigm case will (perhaps) not only illuminate certain moral theories, but certain *true* moral theories, and so, as Soucek notes, my paper contains an implicit endorsement of the kinds of moral theories I think
are made clearer by introducing the concept of improvisation. (That was the intent anyway. I'm no longer sure that introducing the concept of improvisation makes anything clearer.) As such, Soucek is also right that I am not arguing for Lewis stronger claim that musical improvisation is itself an instance of moral improvisation.

And, to meet Lewis' purposeful contentiousness (which, as he surely knows, hit its mark given my - relative to his - straightlaced jazz tastes!), I will go further and say that not only did I not argue for the stronger claim, but it is not something I would want to argue for. It is, for me at least, an open question whether music can express political or moral ideas, but that's not the point I will push here. Instead, I'm interested in the more minimal claim: music need not push any sort of political or moral agenda and when it does not, there's no interesting sense in which musical improvisation is ethical improvisation. Of course it's true that to improvise well in a group, you need to be sensitive, so to speak, to the needs of the other musicians, able to cooperate and sometimes willing to subordinate one's own "needs" for the sake of something larger. But this is also true of a member of a group of nefarious thieves. Groups of people can use minimal "moral" structures to pursue very bad ends and the fact that they need the minimal structures does nothing to make their actions praiseworthy. The more general point is that I think more or less nothing follows about someone's moral character from the fact that someone is an excellent improviser: so far as I can see, there is nothing at all incoherent in being a top notch improviser and a complete jackass (Miles Davis?). Of course, a group of musicians could see their music as directed toward making a political and moral statement and in this way we might say that their musical improvisation is also moral improvisation, but even here I am doubtful and, to fight contentiousness with contentiousness, I might even maintain that even if the music is a vehicle for some kind of political/moral statement, the value of the *musical improvisation* is not touched by the quality of the moral message.

Gagnon is most correct to notice that my position seems very closely related to the position in ethics called "Moral Particularism." Now it turns out that nailing down what, precisely, particularism in ethics amounts to is infamously difficult: some formulations seem trivial, while others seem fantastically implausible. Thinking about particularism in the musical and moral case, in relation to Gagnon's thoughts, actually suggested to me a possible disanalogy between music and morals. One version of particularism maintains that no property, moral or otherwise, has a fixed "valence": what in one context is a good-making feature of a choice/decision/action can, in another context, be a netural or even bad-making feature of a choice/decision/action. The usual example is that of pleasure: in some contexts the fact that something will give you pleasure is a reason to do pursue it (positive valence). In other contexts, however, it is a reason not to do it: the fact that you might get pleasure from sadistic activities does not put a check in the "plus" column when deciding whether to pursue sadistic activities. Instead, it puts a check in the "minus" column. The problem with this
strong version of particularism is that it seems obviously false: surely (what are called) "thick" moral concepts *always* have positive valence. That an action would be just or courageous (name any other virtue), while perhaps not definitive, are surely always reasons to perform the action. So I would not count myself a moral particularist, at least of this stripe.

But what about in the musical case? Here the situation strikes me as more hopeful for an adherent to what we might call "musical particularism." Are there *any* properties that we can ascribe to a piece of music (beyond the empty and thin one's like "good" and "bad") that have a fixed valence? I actually can't think of any off the bat. I'm not sure what the implications are, but it is at least an interesting thought.

To conclude, I want to briefly say that I found the kinds of examples and considerations raised by Stackhouse to be very interesting and illuminating. The question of whether the "automatic" is always better than the "intentional" pulls me in different direction on different weekdays (I would say, however, that I don't think the right way to put the difference is in terms of "automatic" and "intentional.")) For the most part, I am sympathetic to the idea held by most virtue ethicists that part of being good involves having the right emotions and dispositions: insofar as one struggles to be moral, one is not virtuous but merely continent. Having said that, I feel the force of Christine Korsgaard's criticism that this is a "good dog" model of ethics and that it is just undeniable that we often, if not always, feel moral obligation as just that: an obligation to do the good that is often in tension with what we feel like doing.

I'm not entirely sure what the analogous positions within the musical realm might be: the moral point seems to be one about the motivation to do what is right and it's not clear there's something similar going on in the musical case. Having said that, perhaps a version of Stackhouse's point can be seen in the contrast between two ways of improvising, represented by (for example) John Coltrane and Paul Desmond. Of course Coltrane had total command of his horn, but one can hear (and see in pictures and movies) that he is, in some sense, fighting every step of the way to get what he wants out that horn. One does not say, when listening to Coltrane (at least middle and late Coltrane), "He makes it sound so easy!" Paul Desmond, on the other hand, really does make it sound easy, as though there was only, and obviously, one way to go in the solo. In different moods and on different days, I see the appeal of both approaches.

Thanks again to all the commentators. I appreciate your time and insight into my most sketchily presented ideas.