

IMPROVISATION AND ETHICS: IMPROVISING MUSIC, IMPROVISING ETHICS

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In recent years, the concept of “moral improvisation” has come to occupy a place in the ethical thought of philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum, Barbara Herman and Cora Diamond. What is this idea all about? Our moral lives are said to be improvisatory insofar as we do not approach situations with a script, so to speak; instead, we respond to situations in a way that is reminiscent of the improvising musician or actor. Martha Nussbaum, in her analysis of James’ *Golden Bowl* says that Maggie Verner realizes that she has “become an actress who suddenly discovers that her script is not written in advance and she must ‘quite heroically’ improvise her role.”¹ This realization is, according to Nussbaum, an ethical success on the part of Maggie. Along similar lines, the idea of improvisation comes up in discussions of the *new*—when faced with novel circumstances we must extend the application of our moral concepts, perhaps to the point of jettisoning some of our prior commitments:

A mature moral agent should [...] have some ability to negotiate complex or changing circumstances. Procedures of deliberation anchored in (the right kinds of) moral concepts give her resources to respond to unexpected or unfamiliar events; she can challenge or even set aside familiar moral practices in order to accommodate a new situation. In doing this, she engages in a kind of moral improvisation.²

In a related vein, the concept of moral improvisation is meant to reflect the notion that morality requires a kind of flexibility that is at odds with a strict, theoretical framework, whereby moral

conclusion are (ideally) primarily a deductive achievement. Cora Diamond takes up this kind of position, arguing against William Frankena:

As Frankena sees moral thought, it goes on in a situation with fixed, given possibilities; the terms of choice, the alternatives, are something for which no one has responsibility (except so far as one has by one's previous actions brought into existence certain fixed elements of the situation). The moral agent must now take these fixed alternatives as they are and must determine which of them is supported by the strongest moral reasons. The notion of improvisation signals an entirely different view of what is involved in the moral life, in life *simpliciter*, in which possibility and the exercise of creativity are linked. [...] The idea of possibilities as fixed in advance and built into the situation locates the moral agent's responsibility and his freedom in quite a different place from where one sees it if one takes the capacity for improvisation as essential in any account of our moral life.³

Clearly, the ideas expressed by Nussbaum, Herman, and Diamond have substantial overlap, and I think they are all right to claim that something like improvisation is “essential in any account of our moral life.” Having said that, it is hard to determine exactly what the concept of improvisation amounts to: in what sense is improvisation something that contrasts with “simply” following a script? What does it mean to say that a situation is *new* and, as such, demands moral improvisation? And in what sense are we partly responsible for, indeed free to *create*, the possibilities that define the situations we find ourselves in?

By way of substantiating the idea that improvisation is central to our (ethical) lives, this paper has the modest aim of simply provoking the thought that there is a striking connection between a paradigmatic case of improvisation and a set of concerns that are central to debates about the status of moral judgments. I begin by considering the paradigm case of improvisation, namely *musical improvisation*, outlining a set of marks that are central (if neither necessary nor sufficient) for improvisation. I then consider each mark in relation to a set of concerns in metaethics. The hope is that clarifying how paradigm cases of improvisation work will shed light on the structure of ethical action.

The Marks of Improvisation

In musical improvisation, a group of musicians get together with little more than the bare guidelines for how to proceed (usually in the form of a chord structure) and yet are able to create wonderful music. I would like to outline what we might call the marks of (good) improvisation, based on this paradigm case.

1) *Flow* – This might be best put by noting that in actually doing something, a good improviser’s actions are not accompanied by explicit reflection on those actions. Instead, the improviser simply responds to the situation and, if she is good, responds well. There is no weighing of options or calculating outcomes. Improvisation, then, will involve a lack of what we might call explicit systematization of the deliberative process. It would also seem strange to think that a complex chain of practical reasoning is going on “implicitly” or in the background in these instances. Phenomenologically (and anecdotally), jazz musicians will often say that they play best when they “stop thinking and just play.” We might want to say that the ability to respond appropriately is best thought of as a kind of sensitivity.

2) *Lack of Predetermination* – This is perhaps the clearest, or most obvious, mark of improvisation but it is actually quite difficult to say to what it amounts. What is clear is that lack of predetermination is *not* an epistemological point: it is not that there is some definite thing that the musicians are going play, some structure waiting to be discovered, and that the musicians simply do not *know* what it is. In short, improvisation is not essentially what we might call a *discovery-centered* practice. Instead, what the musicians will play is undetermined in the sense that there seems to be no fact of the matter about what will be played, no set of notes waiting for discovery, prior to the actual playing.

Of course, we also do not think that what the musicians are going to play is wildly undetermined. We often have a fairly good idea what kinds of general things are going to happen, perhaps because we know a lot about the musicians and, as such, know that they rarely, if ever, abandon the chord structure, or change the time-feel or play anything other than typical bebop scales. So, it might be better to say that improvisation involves serious *underdetermination*: while certain elements are more or less fixed, other are not; and, even within those that are, there is a huge amount of variation in how those fixed elements are realized.

Another important aspect of the mark of *underdetermination* is that what is left undetermined is not trivial, but forms the core of what is valuable in the action. This is important because there is a way in which all actions which operate according to guidelines or rules are underdetermined—a vast number of elements of realizing a musical score are not determined in advance, but we would not want to say that in typical instances, classical musicians are improvising.⁴ One way of marking off improvised performances from non-improvised performances is to suggest that in the first case the work is identified primarily in terms of the features that fill in the underdetermined elements—for example, the soloist's solo over the predetermined chords—whereas pieces that are not improvised are identified primarily in terms of the features that are fixed in advance.⁵

Finally, for this mark, it seems that there are at least two ways in which we might speak of something being determined in advance. First, someone might know more or less precisely what she is going to do as, for example, when someone has planned the steps in a dance. Second, someone might not know exactly what is going to happen (that is, he does not know what the situation will be like), but he does know that whatever he encounters, there is a rule that determines how he should proceed and that that rule is at a level of specificity so as to give

actual guidance to the agent. It seems clear that improvisation cuts against the first kind of predetermination. Whether it fits with the second kind depends on how one conceives of action-guiding principles. Unfortunately, this is too large an issue to deal with here and, as such, I won't say any more about it.

3) Expression – We hear a good improvisation as an expression of the improviser's musical character. Unlike the sense of expression that is often used in this context, I do not mean anything metaphysically loaded or new-agey. All I mean is that we can hear, in a particular improvisation, the kinds of musical commitments that a musician has made. It is interesting note that we can understand these commitments across a number of (overlapping) dimensions: we can understand a particular passage in light of what has come a few bars before, or perhaps a few choruses before; we can hear an entire solo, or piece, in light of the other work a musician has done; and we can hear a particular musician's playing in the light of what other people have played (and their musical commitments), whether those people have played with the first person, or form the tradition within which the first person locates himself. The point, simply, is that there are a number of ways of rendering intelligible the musical commitments of a particular player and, as a result, understanding their musical character.

4) Preparation – This is, perhaps, where naïve conceptions of improvisation fall off the cart. Improvising well takes tremendous preparation *even if no particular instance need involve serious preparation*. We might think of the preparation needed as involving the formation of character such that individual decisions, individual instances of improvisation, flow out of the character in a seemingly unproblematic way. This kind of preparation is not, of course, independent of actually improvising, but it does not simply consist of this. It can, and often does, involve serious theoretical commitments. At the very least, a good improviser is going to know a

lot of music theory (though this is not always the case⁶) and, beyond certain basics, how one construes the musical features of a work often involves telling some kind of a story (“How does the chord progression get from here to there?”) that itself reveals a certain kind of picture, vision, view etc of what is important and how it all hangs together. There are some fairly different, sometimes radically different, theoretical apparatuses for understanding the harmonic structure of a piece and one’s commitments here will make all the difference in how one improvises.⁷

Since developing the kind of character necessary to improvise well is no small task, we should make a distinction. Improvising (whether in ethics or music) can be *demanding for* an agent insofar as improvising well requires lots of work and dedication. But insofar as the agent is well prepared, it might be the case that improvising is not *demanding on* the agent, where this just means that the agent tends not to experience any *particular* instance of improvising as particularly demanding—their training has made particular instances of improvising a kind of second nature. The claim, basically, is that a task can be very demanding for an agent without being demanding on the agent from a phenomenological or deliberative point of view.

5) Pluralism – There are many ways to improvise well in a given situation and there is no incompatibility between different good improvisations; in the very least, there is no obvious sense in which they “contradict” each other. Moreover, there is a certain intrinsic value in this kind of pluralism—it is not something we want to get rid of, at least in the musical case. In short, there is, in fact, no convergence in “style” and this is not something we want anyway (of course, when we describe things at a general enough level, plurality disappears and, likewise, if we specify things too much, things that are in fact importantly similar can appear essentially different).

6) Constraint – It is not up to the individual improviser to judge whether a particular improvisation is good. There are certain ways of going on that simply get it wrong. This kind of constraint is at least *compatible* with thinking that there are facts of the matter that dictate, on their own, a certain kind of response.

7) Intrinsic Value in the Activity – We think that good improvisations are not valuable merely as means to an end such that *if* we could arrive at the same result (the same notes say) without improvising we could simply dispense with the practice of improvising. There is value in exercising a certain kind of capacity, such as the one(s) used in the process of improvisation.

These marks are not meant to be necessary or sufficient conditions that constrain a definition of improvisation. No doubt more marks could be found and, needless to say, *much* more could be said about what each mark amounts to. Having said that, it seems striking, at least to me, that these marks of improvisation in the musical case align with issues central to metaethical debates in a fairly clear way. The remainder of this paper is devoted to unpacking some of these connections, with a particular focus on the relation of Marks 3 and 5 to Mark 6.

Marks 1, 3, and 4 (*Flow, Expression, and Preparation*) map on very nicely to the diverse group of ethical theories that fall under the umbrella of “virtue ethics.” The idea that ethical action should flow from the agent, without recourse to calculation or systematic deliberation, finds voice in thinkers as different as Bernard Williams and John McDowell. Williams famously argues that a husband who saves his wife over a stranger because saving one’s wife is the right thing to do exhibits a certain ethical lack insofar as he has “one thought too many.”⁸ McDowell argues that the virtuous agent is distinguished from the continent agent precisely in the fact that the virtuous agent’s “deliberation” is free of weighing and calculating:

The distinction [between the virtuous person and the continent person] becomes intelligible if we stop assuming that the virtuous person's judgment is a result of balancing reasons for and against. The view of a situation that he arrives at by exercising his *sensitivity* is one in which some aspect of the situation is seen as constituting a reason for acting in some way; this reason is apprehended, not as outweighing or overriding any reasons for acting in other ways, which would otherwise be constituted by other aspects of the situation (the present danger, say), but as silencing them.⁹

Elsewhere, McDowell argues for a picture of justification that is almost perceptual: the virtuous person simply *sees* the thing to do and, at a certain point, can say no more than "You have to see it," by way of justification.¹⁰

Marks 3 and 4, *Expression* and *Preparation*, fit nicely with a roughly Aristotelian conception of character as a set of dispositions inculcated by way of practice. For Aristotle, one of the criteria of virtuous action is that an action be done from "a firm and unchanging disposition,"¹¹ such that the particular action is seen as flowing out from the kind of person someone is in general—we render the performing of a certain action intelligible in light of the agent's broader commitments and overall character.¹² Particular moral choices are an expression of the agent's view of things, of her character (though this is not all expression amounts to—more below).

This leads nicely to the idea that as with musical improvisation, living well involves substantial preparation—another roughly Aristotelian idea. In order to be virtuous, we must be educated in the right kind of way so as have our dispositions properly shaped. Without this background formation of character in place, there is no way to act well, since it is only in light of our moral development that we come to appreciate things from the right point of view. The parallel between the preparation necessary to improvise musically and to live well is, to me at least, quite striking. In neither case does the preparation consist of coming to know a set of rules or principles which we then apply in all cases we confront (which is not to deny that there are

rough rules and principles that we might use to help bring people into the moral space¹³) and certainly we do not prepare by considering (*per impossibile*) every case we might encounter. Instead, the point of preparation, in both the musical and ethical cases, is to *attune* one to certain kinds of considerations;¹⁴ to make one see or hear situations in a particular way; and to develop the dispositions to respond appropriately to how one sees or hears things. And in both cases, the preparation is the locus of a substantial kind of ethical or musical work, respectively, that is not *just* a means to right action, but itself constitutes kind of self-standing ethical or musical activity.¹⁵

This conception of preparation (and expression) fits together nicely with what we said about the first mark, *Flow*. Virtue ethicists are sometimes read as advocating for an unreflective view of morality and, as we have seen, there is merit to this characterization, insofar as virtuous action often does not involve the kind of implicit, systematic reflection philosophers like to imagine is occurring. But in order for this kind of non-deliberative action-in-the-moment to take place, virtue ethicists argue that the right kind of background conditions need to be in place; and securing these conditions involves substantial work and can (though it need not) involve explicit reflection on one's own commitments. In this sense, just as the good improviser does not experience improvising in particular situations as particularly demanding (inasmuch as it does not involve a struggle), but still finds the practice of improvising and all the work it entails demanding, so too the virtuous agent will not (usually) experience particular moral choices as demanding, even if living well in general is.

Mark 5, *Pluralism*, can be understood in a number of ways. That there is great plurality in the ethical domain is beyond dispute. But the claim made in the discussion of *Plurality* was not simply that there *is* great plurality within the space of musical improvisation, but that

convergence of views is not desirable in this case anyway. It is not at all clear that this is also true within the ethical space.¹⁶ Of course, we all might agree that from a practical point of view pluralism is very valuable, perhaps because it is only via a healthy pluralism that we approach *the* truth of things; or, even more pragmatically, we might acknowledge that societies that do not value pluralism tend to do violence to all kinds of other things we value. But these defenses make pluralism either instrumentally or incidentally valuable. In both cases, there is an implicit commitment to idea that there is a right way of seeing things.

But this is obviously *not* like the commitment to pluralism found in the case of improvised music (or the art world in general), where the idea is that there is simply something valuable in having all kinds of different musical characters, with different ways of going on, present. It might seem that if we want to stick to idea that there is a striking analogy between the marks of improvisation and the marks of the ethical space, then we must embrace some kind of non-cognitivism or anti-realism¹⁷ about ethics in order to accommodate a normative commitment to pluralism. In doing so, we would both explain the actual plurality of ethical views and, with some additional work, be able to give a normative account as well—plurality is central to, and ineliminable in, ethics because ethical judgments just are not the kinds of things for which convergence, as a reflection of a honing in on reality, is an issue.¹⁸ Put another way, if we do not think that moral judgments are truth-apt in some fairly straightforward, or paradigmatic, way,¹⁹ then we will have no problems both accounting for and even condoning a plurality of ethical views.²⁰

But there are at least two considerations that should give us pause before accepting this conclusion. First, the sixth mark of improvisation is *Constraint* and, at first blush, this seems to cut against a strong anti-realist defense of pluralism. Here in particular the parallels between the

musical and ethical cases are striking. In the musical case, the constraint is usually taken to be grounded in something beyond the preferences of the players or even, perhaps, a whole tradition (though the tradition itself will impose constraint on what counts as playing in the tradition). In explaining why so-and-so did such-and-such here, a good explanation (in the form of analysis) will point to features of the *music* to explain how things fit together. If you are uncertain about why I played *this-here*, a good explanation will show you how the music itself accommodated, or perhaps even called for, the kind of thing I played. At no point will I advert to an explanation that depends on a certain arational preference of mine. In short, in my experience, many musicians are *realists* of some kind—there are musical facts which dictate how music works; and these facts (ought to) constrain us as improvisers, players, composers and listeners.²¹ In the very least, it seems clear that musical practice not only involves substantial criticism of other people's musical choices but also has an involved theoretical and technical framework within which such disagreements—*genuine* disagreements—take place. So, the pluralism that is a normative commitment of the musical world is not such as to discount a strong kind of constraint that outstrips what I, you, or all of us value or enjoy.

In the ethical case, the realist wants to say something similar—ethical theories that try to account for the kind of constraint implicit in moral judgments in terms of non-cognitive states do not do justice to our phenomenology of ethical life. Ordinary practice suggests that moral disagreements are *genuine* disagreement, irreducible to non-cognitivist states, and that evidence can be adduced to convince someone of one's position—or so the story goes. To borrow some terminology from David Wiggins: ethical phenomenology has the marks of being truth-governed. Of course, non-cognitivists have responses to this supposed feature of moral experience, so the mark of *Constraint* does not automatically tell in favor of cognitivism. The

point, recall, was simply to show that a commitment to pluralism is not enough to win the day for the non-cognitivist if only because there is another mark, *Constraint*, that pulls in the opposite direction.

The second reason the mark of *Pluralism* ought not automatically tell in favor of non-cognitivism is that just as the non-cognitivist attempts to deal with the constraint embedded in the moral space in non-cognitivist terms, the cognitivist attempts to deal with pluralism in cognitivist terms. The worry about pluralism from a cognitivist point of view is that it appears to cut against the idea that a truth-governed space ought to exhibit, or at least ought to be able to exhibit, some kind of convergence that is explainable in part in terms of the way things really are. Insofar as we are committed not simply to *de facto* pluralism, but a kind of normative pluralism, the ethical space seems like it is not even the kind of thing for which convergence is a mark—except, perhaps, as a negative mark (i.e., convergence here would constitute a sort of loss).

My aim is not to defend cognitivism in light of this worry. Instead, I simply note that cognitivists (of a kind) such as McDowell and Wiggins simply reject the idea that convergence is a mark of truth. To be fair, Wiggins does not reject the idea of convergence wholesale, but attempts to show that the kind of convergence needed for cognitivism is available so long as we move from the picture of an “unrelativized practical judgment to [picture of a]...person-relativized practical judgment.”²² McDowell, on the other hand, *does* seem suggest that convergence within the ethical simply is not something that should bother cognitivists:

...[A]lthough a sensible person will never be confident that his evaluative outlook is incapable of improvement, that need not stop him supposing, of some of his evaluative responses, that their objects really do merit them. He will be able to back up this supposition with explanations that show how the responses are well placed; the explanations will share the contentiousness of the values whose reality they certify, but

that should not prevent him from accepting the explanations any more than (what nobody thinks) it should prevent him from endorsing the values.²³

In a footnote to this sentence, McDowell adds:

I can see no reason why we should not regard the contentiousness as ineliminable. The effect would be to detach the explanatory test from a requirement of convergence. As far as I can see, this separation would be a good thing.²⁴

Needless to say, working out exactly what Wiggins and McDowell mean is beyond the scope of this paper. All I hope to have shown here is that some forms of cognitivism tackle the mark of *Pluralism* head on in an attempt to show that it poses no problem for cognitivism.

I want conclude in these final pages by considering an *aspect* of Mark 2, *Underdetermination*, about which I have said nothing. I suspect that more can, and needs to be, said about this mark than any of the others and, as such, it is the least well served by general comments of the sort I have been offering here. As such, I want to tackle just one part of it by linking this mark with the marks of *Expression* and *Pluralism*. Recall that *expression* in this context captures the idea that our actions express and can be made sense of in light of our characters. If we combine this idea with that of *pluralism* (the idea that there are many ways of going on ethically and that this is a good thing), then we can give some content to the mark of *underdetermination*. Recall that one of the characteristics of underdetermination in the musical case is that the improviser is not simply confronted with an epistemic puzzle; instead, there is, in some way, no answer to the question, “What should happen here?” prior to the improviser finding herself in a particular situation and going on in a certain way. If we think that what one does, or ought to do, is an expression of one’s character *and* that there is a real plurality of characters out there (as seems to be true in the musical case), then underdetermination might mean that getting clear on the structure of a situation without any reference to the agent who finds herself in that situation is not sufficient for determining what ought to be done. Put another

way, facts about the agent's character—what sort of values, commitments and plans she has—play an essential role in structuring the situation in which the agent finds herself.

This is not an unfamiliar idea—the idea that “an individual person has a set of desires, concerns, or as I shall call them, projects, which help constitute a *character*,” is central to Williams' conception of ethics.²⁵ This idea that what one should do must take into consideration one's own character is, perhaps, most at home, or at least most familiar, in a non-cognitivist framework; Williams here quickly moves from *desires* to *concerns* to *character*. But we might question this assimilation and wonder whether one's commitments and plans are not reducible to non-cognitive states.²⁶

Peter Winch and Wiggins (following Winch) each attempt to offer something like a cognitivist picture of the ethical space that allows room for plurality and differences in character. Wiggins sometimes calls this picture “cognitive underdetermination.”²⁷ The idea is most easily brought out in the context of moral dilemmas where we are inclined to say that there is no single right answer—each choice brings with it a substantial loss. As such, we might choose one course over another in light of our other commitments without, thereby, being committed to thinking that others should make this choice.²⁸

But while moral dilemmas might provide the easiest case for buying into cognitive underdetermination, it should not be seen as the only case. Instead, without claiming that all situations are like this, it might be the case that *many* ethical decisions are underdetermined in the sense that what we choose to do flows out of our prior commitments, plans and intentions. It might even be the case, though I will not defend it here, that some course of action is *necessary* for me, but not for you, in light of our separate commitments.²⁹ The reason that this is not simply a version of non-cognitivism is twofold. First, as mentioned above, it is not clear that we should

construe a person's commitments, plans, and intentions as simply an outcropping of, and reducible to, non-cognitive elements in one's "subjective motivational set."³⁰ It may be the case that one's plans, commitments, etc., are partly constituted by the moral fabric of the world (or ought to be), but that that moral fabric underdetermines, perhaps because of reasons having to do with our finitude, how we ought to go about living. The second reason not to assimilate cognitive underdetermination to non-cognitivism falls out of this last point. Just as actual, moral features of the world (ought to) play a role in forming our characters, so too in particular situations, moral facts (that do not include facts about the agent's character) will play a significant role in structuring what good ways there are of acting; however, they will not exhaustively decide how one should act. It is a false dichotomy to assume that that either: 1) there are no moral facts and, as such, ethics depends entirely on non-cognitive starting points; or 2) there are moral facts and, as such, subjective facts about the agent are irrelevant to determining to right thing to do *here-now*. It seems clear that there is no temptation to accept this dichotomy in the musical case—musical facts constrain the good improviser in all kinds of ways, but within that constraint, there are still all kinds of room for going on in different ways. And it is in virtue of this space that different musical characters emerge. I see no reason why such an answer is not available in the ethical case as well.

I want to conclude by making explicit something that is probably already clear: the notion of moral improvisation is not meant to introduce a radically new concept into our conception of ethics. Instead, it is meant to pick out a number of features that at least one line of ethical thought sees as central, and to relate them systematically through the concept of improvisation. So, understanding the concept of moral improvisation will involve clarifying elements of our ethical lives (according to a certain conception of ethics) that are already familiar to us. In this paper, I

hope to have shown that there is a strong similarity between the marks of improvisation and the marks of the ethical such that clarifying how the former works might well shed light on the latter.

¹ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1990), 91. Nussbaum unpacks the metaphor of theatrical improvisation further on p. 94.

² Barbara Herman, unpublished paper, 15.

³ Cora Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy and the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 312.

⁴ I do not mean to imply here that the underdetermined elements in a score are trivial.

⁵ A (weak) bit of evidence for this point is found in the fact that record stores organize classical recordings according to composer, while jazz recordings are organized according to artist.

⁶ Cases where this is not true raise interesting questions for the role of theory in practice—it seems that someone can have a very highly developed sensitivity that allows him to be an excellent practitioner of something without having any theoretical apparatus to describe the practice.

⁷ Beyond these kinds of commitments, a good improviser will often have all sorts of views (though they are sometimes, maybe often, implicit) about how one should approach the very project of improvising, either on one's own, or with a group. At the most general level, this will involve thoughts, commitments, or what have you about what the whole point of improvising is—the evolution of jazz can probably be charted in terms of evolving *ideas* about what a group of improvising musicians should be doing. There are all kinds of parameters here, of course, and individual styles and different genres emerge insofar as musicians differ across these parameters.

⁸ Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 18.

⁹ John McDowell, *Mind, Value, & Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 55-56. My emphasis.

¹⁰ McDowell, *Mind, Value, & Reality*, 29.

¹¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, S. Broadie & C. Rowe eds. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1105a30.

¹² McDowell, *Mind, Value, & Reality*, 71.

¹³ Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), 39.

¹⁴ Sabina Lovibond, *Ethical Formation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 37. See also Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*, 351-52.

¹⁵ I take this point to be like that made by Iris Murdoch in "The Idea of Perfection." In that essay, Murdoch argues, among other things, that construing the locus of ethical activity too narrowly makes us blind to where a substantial part of our moral lives take place, namely in the ongoing attempt to shape our characters, views, dispositions (our "inner life"), etc., as opposed to in "overt" action. This is the force, I take it, of Murdoch's mother-in-law example. See Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of the Good* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1971), 16-19.

¹⁶ Though it seems undeniably true that this is something we value in the political space. And I suspect that once we concede this point, the case for the ethical space can be made as well.

¹⁷ Very roughly, non-cognitivism/anti-realism about ethics is the view that moral judgments do not express facts or truths about the world in the way that, for example, scientific judgments do. Instead, according to non-cognitivism, moral judgments are, at base, expressions of our reactive attitudes to non-moral facts in the world. This kind of view is "non-cognitive" because according to it, our basic reactive attitudes do not consist in beliefs about the world, but are instead (roughly) desires about how we would like the world to be. See *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1998), s.v. "objectivity," available at: <http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/N074SECT1> (accessed 24 September 2006) for a more expansive definition.

¹⁸ I take this to be more or less Williams' view. See Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), ch. 8.

¹⁹ I add the qualification to cover views, such as Gibbard's and Blackburn's, which admit that moral judgments are truth-apt, but offer an account of how this is so such the truth-aptness of these kinds of judgments end up being different from the truth-aptness of other kinds of judgments, such as scientific judgments. I am indebted to Zed Adams for pointing this out.

²⁰ I am aware that there is a gap between accepting non-cognitivism and condoning a pluralist ethic. My point, simply, is that non-cognitivism appears to have the easiest time accounting for, both in an explanatory and normative sense, pluralism.

²¹ I am not claiming that this is a well worked out view or that there are not other considerations that musicians and music-lovers also find compelling that cut against this kind of view. I am simply pointing out that this kind of view is, in my experience, prevalent among musicians and music lovers.

²² Wiggins, *Needs, Value, Truth*, 170. The entire essay is devoted to showing how a certain kind of cognitivism, what Wiggins calls “weak cognitivism” can accommodate all the marks of truth. On the other hand, Wiggins does say in the postscript to the essays in *Needs, Values and Truth* that “a subject matter can be essentially contestable yet principled” (314).

²³ McDowell, *Mind, Value, & Reality*, 145.

²⁴ McDowell, *Mind, Value, & Reality*, 145 n45.

²⁵ Williams, *Moral Luck*, 5.

²⁶ Though he himself endorses a kind of non-cognitivism at the end of the day, Bratman is clear that his picture of intentions (and plans?) being independent, irreducible mental states can accommodate a cognitive account. See Michael E. Bratman, *Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason* (Cambridge, MA: CSLI Publications, 1999), 52.

²⁷ Wiggins, *Needs, Value, Truth*, 124. An extensive discussion of this idea takes place from 124-132.

²⁸ This is the force, I take it, of Winch’s discussion of Captain Vere in *Billy Budd*. See Peter Winch, *Ethics and Action* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), 151-170. A similar kind of example can be found in Peter Winch, *Trying to Make Sense* (New York, NY: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 167-180.

²⁹ This appears to be true in cases where I have made a promise and you have not. The more general claim, then, will be established if we think that having a coherent character by way of various commitments, plans etc. is not unlike making a promise. Certainly having a commitment is not that far off from making a promise.

³⁰ Williams, *Moral Luck*, 103. While Williams tends to discuss subjective motivational sets in terms of desires, he is quite clear that this is not all we need think is in there (105).