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# Toward a General Account of Improvisation

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Toward a General Account of Improvisation

by

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**Abstract:**

*There is widespread disagreement about how to understand musical improvisation in the current literature. My paper is motivated by the desire to settle this disagreement. I do this, in part, by emphasizing the important role action descriptions play in classifying specific actions as specific action-types, like improvised or intentional. In order to further settle the disagreement over the nature of musical improvisation, I defend a general account of improvisation, which can also aid in understanding a wide variety of specific types of improvisation. According to my general account, an improvised action is any unplanned and novel action performed by an agent within a predetermined improvisational framework. This definition helps make sense of the disagreement over the nature of musical improvisation, provides clarity for empirical project studying the neural correlates of improvised action and more generally helps us separate improvised action from other types of action, like planned or deliberate action, and also random action.*

**Introduction**

There is limited discussion of improvisation in contemporary analytic philosophy. Though improvisation seems to be a type of action, few philosophers of action have written on the subject. Most of what has been written on the subject has come from aestheticians, and focuses primarily on musical improvisation. A large bulk of the serious philosophical work on improvisation appears in two issues of the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. A special issue of that journal was dedicated to improvisation in 2000, and more recently, in 2010, the journal hosted a symposium on the subject. In addition to aesthetics, some cognitive neuroscientists studying creativity and improvisation in jazz music and hip-hop have waded into philosophical territory in their discussions of their empirical findings (see Limb & Braun 2008, Ellamil et al. 2012, Liu et al. 2012). In all of this literature very little is said about improvisation in general as a type of action. In the absence of a general account of improvised action there is little consensus about how we should understand musical improvisation and other specific types of improvised action. Likewise, it's not clear how to best understand the results of experiments that seek to understand the neural correlates of improvised action. The general account of improvised action offered in this paper hopes to help settle some of confusion surrounding these issues.

The paper will begin by looking at one of the disagreements folks are having about a particular kind of improvised action, namely, the ongoing debate about how to understand musical improvisation. Most of the authors working on musical improvisation are quick to point out a distinction between ‘improvisation’ in the *product sense*, used to discuss the musical piece that is created, and ‘improvisation’ in the *action sense*, used to discuss the action that creates the musical piece (see Alperson, 1984). So, for example we can talk about Miles Davis’s improvisation in terms of his action, or Miles Davis’s improvisation in terms of his song. The sense I am most interested in is the action sense. I will confine my talk to this sense of the word, except where otherwise noted. As Philip Alperson, one of the leading scholars working on improvisation, points out, there is sure to be some close connection between improvised actions and the products such actions produce (1984). With that being said, I do not intend to explore this connection in very much depth at this time.

Alperson describes the action sense of musical improvisation as “an activity of spontaneous music-making in which the improviser somehow practices simultaneously the interdependent functions of composition and performance” (1984). Carol S. Gould and Kenneth Keaton oppose Alperson’s view of improvisation, arguing, “improvisation is conceptually independent of spontaneity” (2000). They maintain that a performance of a piece of classical music, composed prior to performance, nevertheless still involves a degree of improvisation. Gould and Keaton point out that no matter how much detail a composer puts into a musical score, there will always be unspecified musical elements that the performer will have to improvise during the course of every performance. Alperson acknowledges these unplanned aspects of music playing, but says they amount to the *interpretation* of a piece, rather than the *improvisation* of one.

Gould and Keaton’s project can be seen as an attempt to dissolve the distinction between improvisation and interpretation as it’s commonly discussed in the literature. By taking this position Gould and Keaton also confront the popular idea that jazz and classical music can be distinguished in part by observing that playing jazz is an improvised activity while playing classical music is an interpretive activity. On Gould and Keaton’s view, improvisation is an essential feature of every musical performance. On Alperson’s view improvisation refers only to the spontaneous creation of new musical sequences, as in jazz.

In neuroscience, there is slightly more agreement about how to understand improvisation. However, the definition everyone agrees on is a bit obscure. Charles Limb is one of the leading neuroscientists studying the neural correlates of improvised action and creativity. In a study published in 2008, Limb put several jazz musicians into an fMRI scanner and had them improvise on a magnetically safe MIDI keyboard over a prerecorded track. In his discussion of his findings, Limb puts forth a brief definition of the object of his study. He says his study is about the neural correlates of 'spontaneous musical performance', which he defines as "immediate, on-line improvisation of novel melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic musical elements within a relevant musical context" (2008). The definition looks a bit like Alperson's. Instead of defining 'improvisation' in terms of 'spontaneity' though, he defines 'spontaneity' in terms of 'improvisation'. This is frustrating because, at this point, it is unclear how 'spontaneous performance' is supposed to tell us anything about 'improvisation' or vice versa. Simply equating 'spontaneous performance' with 'improvisation' does not seem to give us the information we need to understand the meaning of the phrase. Although Limb does not seem to be giving a thoroughgoing analysis of the concept of improvisation, such an analysis might lead to a better explanation of the data collected by Limb and his colleagues. So it seems like a great deal of a wide range of scholarly work on improvisation could benefit from having a well-defined general account of improvised action.

In this paper, I will propose a general account of improvisation, one that can help adjudicate disagreements about the nature of musical improvisation, as well as provide clarity to empirical projects seeking to understand the neural correlates of improvisation. I suggest a new definition of improvisation along the following lines – *an improvised action is any unplanned and novel action performed by an agent within a properly defined improvisational framework*. My hope is that in addition to clarifying the confusions and disagreements I've just mentioned this definition will also help distinguish improvisation in general from other kinds of action. The suggestion here is that by knowing what improvised actions are, we should be able to distinguish them from actions that are not improvised, like planned, deliberate, random or reflexive actions. My account will hopefully set improvisation apart from these other kinds of actions.

One final idea I want to advocate in this paper is that although improvisation is often discussed in terms of performance art, it is possible to think about improvisation in a wider context, as an essential component of our day-to-day activities. Thinking about improvisation in this way provides an even stronger motivation for the present study. Consider the following examples of improvisation—when we have a surprise encounter at the market with a friend, we improvise our way through some small talk, not having time to plan out any of the things we end up saying. When we realize the IKEA bed didn't come with all of its screws, we improvise solutions. When we obtain a new piece of complicated technology, we may toss the user manual aside and improvise with it as we learn how to properly use it. It might even be argued that we improvise our way through close relationships, marriages and child rearing. There are more obvious examples available to us, like dancing, being witty at a dinner party, running a seminar, playing fast-paced sports like basketball, hockey or ping-pong, etc. These are all examples of activities that I hope everyone agrees involve a great deal of improvisation.

My plan for the rest of the paper is as follows: before defending my general account of improvisation I first want to discuss the disagreement between Alperson and his critics in more depth. A discussion of how to adjudicate this disagreement will follow. In short, on my analysis, the disagreement arises between Alperson and his critics because they are not careful enough with how they describe the actions they are trying to classify as improvised. They are prone to vague assertions like 'jazz is improvised and classical music isn't'. On my view, there are aspects of both jazz and classical music performances that count as improvised actions, and other aspects of each that do not count as improvised actions. When we are careful about how we describe the actions involved in playing classical or jazz music, determining which of them are improvised and which are not becomes a relatively straightforward affair.

Following the discussion of Alperson and his critics will be a more in-depth discussion of my positive account of improvised action. My account consists of four parts that I will discuss in turn. First I will discuss why improvisations must be unplanned. Second I will discuss why improvisations must be novel. Third I will discuss why improvisations must be performed within a particular framework. Finally, I will conclude by saying something about the role of agency in improvisation. Keep in mind that even though most of my discussion focuses on musical improvisation, it

is supposed to be an analysis of improvised action in general. Therefore, anything I say about the structure of musical improvisation should also be applicable to the variety of day-to-day improvised actions previously mentioned. When possible I will use examples to make this point explicit. Now we proceed to the debate between Alperson and his critics over the nature of musical improvisation.

### **Musical Improvisation**

Alperson's view of improvisation relies on an understanding of the difference between composition and performance. Alperson defines composition as "that creative act of conceiving of and organizing the parts or elements which make up the pattern or design of the musical whole" (1984). He defines performance as "that executory activity by means of which a musical composition is then rendered into a sequence of sounds" (1984). According to Alperson, the "conventional" state of affairs in music is a two-stage process, whereby a composer composes a piece of music that at some later time is performed by some performer, who may or may not be the same person as the composer. What is unique about improvised action is that it involves collapsing these two processes into one activity. On Alperson's view, when a musician improvises she simultaneously becomes the composer and the performer of a new piece of music.<sup>1</sup>

Alperson discusses the ontology of improvised performances in terms of the type/token distinction. Following Joseph Margolis's version of the type/token distinction, Alperson describes a 'type' as an abstract particular that can be instantiated. Tokens are instantiations of types. For example, a sculptor might create a wooden statue. This statue would be a token of a type. Copies of the statue might be cast in bronze and each one of these along with the original wooden piece would be tokens of the abstract type. Alperson, following Margolis and Kant, adds to this familiar framework the concept of a 'megatype'. I take megatypes to be something like a 'fuzzy-type', capable of acting as a type for a limited variety of slightly different tokens<sup>2</sup>. So consider the megatype of "Johnny B. Goode". Chuck Berry's version,

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<sup>1</sup> This parallels Bill Evans' famous comment that musical improvisation is the process of 'composing one minute's music in one minute's time'.

<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Brit Brogaard for pointing out that there may be some similarities here to prototype theory, or Wittgenstein's discussion of family resemblances. The different performances of "Johnny B. Goode" I mentioned share enough similarities they can be said

Jimi Hendrix's version and the Rolling Stones' version are all tokens of this megatype, even though these versions sound very different from each other. So Alperson wants to know, how do cases of improvised music function in terms of this framework? Is an act of musical improvisation an instantiation of some already existing megatype? Or could it be the generation of some new megatype?

Central to Alperson's view is the claim that an improviser composes a new song just as she or he performs it, so it cannot be that an improvised performance instantiates an already existing megatype. Further, on Alperson's view, an improvised musical performance does not involve the creation of a new megatype either. This is because megatypes are supposed to admit a number of instantiations, and improvised songs do not do this. Alperson claims that it is *highly unlikely* that improvised performances would be exactly replicated in all "the musically relevant ways" (1984). Gould and Keaton point out the weakness of this part of Alperson's argument, as it seems to rest on probabilistic concerns, rather than on logical necessity (2000). While this seems like a valid criticism, I want to table it and finish presenting Alperson's view.

Alperson notes that recordings are very often made of improvised performances. One might be tempted to think that since these recordings can be used as a reference point for reproductions of the work, a megatype really is being created during an improvisation. In response to this Alperson writes, "However, such cases [i.e. recordings] would stand to the originals as copies of paintings stand to their originals, i.e., as tokens of a megatype, only if one thinks of improvisations as musical structures or designs" (1984). Alperson thinks we should not think of improvisations in terms of the musical structures or designs produced, i.e. in the product sense. Instead we should think of improvisation in terms of the action undertaken, i.e. in the action sense. On this view, it would be inappropriate to think of a recording as a token instance of an improvisation. Instead, he writes, "what we

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to be tied together to the extent to which they resemble a prototypical version of 'Johnny B. Goode', or because they are all similar enough to obviously belong to the same 'family', i.e. the family of songs rightly called "Johnny B. Goode". In keeping with the literature I'm dealing with, I plan to keep talking about megatypes, rather than prototypes or families. It seems as though megatype could be exchanged with one of these other terms without much trouble. Readers are invited to think about megatypes in terms of prototypes or families, if they so chose.

have is a record of a (unique) action” (1984). The megatype for an improvisation in the action sense would have to an abstraction of the actions that count as the performance, not an abstraction of the sounds produced by that performance. So if you transcribed and learned to play the notes on a recording of an improvised performance, your performance would not count as an instantiation of the original improvisation. This is because your performance would be missing one of the essential features of the original improvisation, namely that it was produced spontaneously rather than being played off of a score. The only way to faithfully reproduce an improvisation would be if some musician somehow happened to spontaneously replay the same notes played by the original improviser. The performance would have to be the same ‘in all the musically relevant way’—a highly unlikely occurrence, given the sheer range of possibilities afforded to players of improvised music.

Gould and Keaton have criticized Alperson’s view of improvisation, which strongly contrasts improvisation with what he calls the ‘conventional’ state of affairs in classical music. Gould and Keaton think performances of classical music do not differ in the extreme way Alperson suggests. They do agree that there are important difference between jazz and classical music, but they argue jazz and classical music “differ more in degree than in kind” (2000). On their view, improvisation arises from “a relation between the score and the performance event” (2000). They argue that, just like a jazz musician, “a classical performer interpreting a work produces a unique sound event and does so with an element of spontaneity”(2000). For example, they write, “While melodies and harmonies may be specified in advance, the precise realization of dynamics, rhythmic subtleties, timbre, intonation, and articulation arises at the moment of the performance and will vary (often considerably) from performance to performance, even when the piece is played by the same musician” (pg. 145). Typically these subtle aspects of playing music are not included in the composition. Deciding how to play these aspects is left up to the performer.

On Gould and Keaton’s view there is no real difference between what a jazz musician does and what a classical musician does. They argue that the one should be able to give the same analysis of the type/token distinction for classical music as Alperson gives for jazz music. That is, it is highly unlikely that a musician could ever faithfully reproduce a performance of a piece of classical music, due to all the subtle

and improvised differences players add to the composition during their performances. Gould and Keaton agree that the improvised solos of jazz allow for a wider degree of improvised action, but they maintain that the wide degree of improvisation available to a jazz musician does not make what she or he does essentially different from what a classical musician does. Both involve improvising certain aspects of the composition.

So what is the source of the disagreement between Gould and Keaton and Alperson, and what should be done about it? As previously mentioned, I think that the source of this disagreement is a result of the way the actions in question are described. In both of these opposing views, one finds talk about 'playing jazz' and 'playing classical music'. Talking about improvisation at this level of description is not likely to allow us to say anything of real interest with respect to improvisation. These descriptions are so general that they cannot be rightly be classified as essentially improvised or not. We need to examine finer grained descriptions of actions if we are to make such classifications. Lower level descriptions are more easily classified as being or not being improvised, as we will see.

In what follows I will show how being careful about action descriptions when classifying them as improvised or not can help settle the debate between Alperson and his critics. After my attempt to settle the debate about the nature of musical improvisation, I will defend the following general account of improvised action: an improvised action is any unplanned and novel action performed by an agent within a properly defined improvisational framework. I repeat this definition now because it will be useful to keep it in mind while I work on the problem at hand.

### **Response to Alperson and his Critics**

In order to press the importance of being careful about our descriptions when attempting to classify specific actions as specific action types, I want to reference the work of G.E.M. Anscombe, one of the founders of contemporary philosophy of action. Donald Davidson called her 1957 book *Intention*, "the most important treatment of action since Aristotle". Some of what Anscombe says about intentional actions can be roughly translated to apply to improvised actions as well. Anscombe argues that actions are intentional on some levels of description but not on others (1957). Similarly, I think actions are improvised on some levels of description but not

on others. Before we apply this Anscombian idea to improvised actions, we should first take note of how it gets set up for intentional actions.

Consider Anscombe's famous example of a man pumping water into the cistern of a house (1957). This person has plans to murder the people in the house with a poison she has somehow planted in the water supply. Anscombe considers a wide range of descriptions of this action. Some of the descriptions are of intentional actions, and some of them are not. For example, the person in the example is intentionally *pumping her arm*. She is intentionally *refilling the house's water supply*. She is also intentionally *poisoning the inhabitants of the house*. It would be wrong, however, to say that she is intentionally *contracting [such-and-such] muscles*, even though this is a description of the same action I just described at various other levels. *Contracting [such-and-such] muscles* is not a description of an improvised action because it does not satisfy Anscombe's requirement that a person must be *non-observationally aware* of what they are intentionally doing.

The basic claim here is if someone asks you 'why you are pumping your arm?' and you look, startle, and exclaim 'oh my, I hadn't noticed that my arm was pumping', then *pumping your arm* is not a description of an intentional action. Or, if you are nervously bouncing your leg during the final moments of a long seminar, someone might become annoyed and ask you to stop. Not realizing you were doing this until it was brought to your attention, you might say to the annoyed person, 'I'm sorry, but I wasn't doing it intentionally.'

To help explain Anscombe's requirement that we be non-observationally aware of our intentional actions, consider one last example—we are non-observationally aware of the position of our body parts. I do not have to look down to see if my knee is bent. I do not become aware that my knee is bent based on some tingling sensation being sent through my nervous system. I am aware that my knee is bent *non-observationally*. The awareness we have of our intentional actions is supposed to be similar. In standard cases, I do not need to observe my arm pumping in order to be aware of what I am doing. On Anscombe's view, being non-observationally aware of the things I am intentionally doing is just part of what it means to be doing something intentionally. That being said, we standardly do *not* have non-observational knowledge of *contracting [such-and-such] muscles* when we

are intentionally *pumping our arms*. If I had some sophisticated knowledge about human anatomy, I might be able to look down at my pumping arm and determine that [such-and-such] muscles were contracting. So it *is* possible for me to be aware of my activity at this level of description, but only after a bit of observation, which immediately exempts it from being classified as intentional. So how does all this apply to musical improvisation and improvisation in general?

We can start to apply these Anscombian ideas to musical improvisation by thinking about the different ways we describe the actions we take to be improvised. Consider that both classical and jazz musicians usually plan *to play [such-and-such] song*. In standard cases, this is usually not considered an improvised activity. *Playing [such-and-such] song* is an action one usually plans in advance. Sometimes such a plan is made explicit by a setlist, written by a bandleader and agreed upon by his group. In the case of the classical musician, part of her plan to *play [such-and-such] song* involves plans to *play [such-and-such] notes*. Remember that on my account, actions that are planned in advance do not count as improvised actions. So *playing [such-and-such] notes* does not count as a description of an improvised activity for the classical musician, because, in standard cases, the classical musician has planned to play those notes in advance.

With that being said, the same classical musician might not have included *playing with [such-and-such] dynamics and rhythm* in her plans to *play [such-and-such] song*. So for a classical musician *playing with [such-and-such] dynamics and rhythm* may indeed count as a description of an improvised action. So on my account, Gould and Keaton appear to be somewhat vindicated. Musical performance does seem to essentially involve some set of improvised actions, at least under certain descriptions. What is missing from their account is a process for identifying these actions. I have argued that this can be done by carefully attending to our action descriptions. Once we are clear about the specific action we have in mind, we can determine whether it falls inside or outside of my proposed definition. Actions like *playing jazz music* or *playing classical music* aren't easily categorized as fully improvised or fully non-improvised.

As for the jazz musician, he may only have a plan to *play such-and-such song*, without any plans to *play [such-and-such] notes with [such-and-such]*

*dynamics and rhythm*<sup>3</sup>. So, since the jazz musician does not plan out what notes he will play or how he will play them, we can say that he improvises these actions. The main difference between playing classical music and playing jazz music then is that playing jazz music involves the improvisation of a wider range of actions, again vindicating Gould and Keaton's position that jazz and classical performances differ in degree rather than kind. The jazz musician can improvise melodies, rhythms and dynamics, while the classical musician is standardly restricted by the conventions of classical music from improvising new melodies. The classical musician is, however, allowed to improvise rhythms, dynamics and other subtle aspects of her performance.

### **Are Improvised Actions Intentional?**

You may be wondering how closely the action description *playing [such-and-such] notes* parallels the action description *contracting [such-and-such] muscles*. The debate over this question amounts to the debate over whether improvising is an intentional action. That is, if *playing notes* is like *contracting muscles*, then playing notes is an unintentional action, in addition to being an improvised one. I tentatively suggest that the act of *improvising* seems like something someone does intentionally, as in the case where I know I am to take a solo after the second chorus<sup>4</sup>. In such a case, when the end of the second chorus comes, I have a plan to start improvising, and I proceed to improvise intentionally until the end of the section. From this we can observe something odd about my view: in cases when one plans to improvise in advance, *improvising* is not a description of an improvised action. Rather the improvised actions are the unplanned for subroutines that execute the plan to improvise, i.e. *playing [such-and-such] notes*, etc.

In contrast to the intentional act of *improvising*, lower level descriptions of action like *playing [such-and-such] notes*, may not count as a description of an

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<sup>3</sup> For the sake of argument, I am thinking here of a jazz piece that is totally improvised start to finish. Recently Keith Jarrett is perhaps most famous for performing this kind of totally improvised jazz. Jarrett is well known for his completely improvised concerts, which he performs often by himself, and sometimes with a trio – the later is an excellent display of what Bill Evans calls 'collective coherent thinking'.

intentional action. This is because, like *contracting [such-and-such] muscles*, one may not have non-observational knowledge of what one is doing while one is *playing [such-and-such] notes*. In standard cases of improvising, the performer may know he is improvising, but does not necessarily know what notes he is playing. Many of the jazz musicians I have personally spoke with describe improvisation as something that happens in an altered state of mind. They report that when they improvise they feel like they are daydreaming, mediating, or under some kind of hypnosis. They report that the notes they play just come to them. In fact, when they try to attend too closely to the notes they are playing, they begin to make mistakes and fall out of rhythm. So on a first pass, certain actions, like *playing [such-and-such] notes*, are likely to be unintentional, in addition to being unplanned and improvised.

### **A General Account of Improvisation**

As previously mentioned, on my account, actions need to be more than just unplanned if they are to count as improvised. They also need to be novel and performed within an improvisational framework. Since there are more opportunities to improvise in jazz performance, as we have just shown, we can say that the improvisational framework is wider in jazz than it is in classical performances, and thus playing jazz involves a higher degree of improvisation. A classical musician is afforded less freedom to improvise when compared to the freedom afforded to a jazz musician, and thus playing classical music involves a lower degree of improvisation. When freedom diminishes, so does the degree of improvisation. When our freedom becomes too abundant though, it might no longer make sense to say we are improvising either.

Additionally, according to my definition, the improvised parts of both classical and jazz performances must be novel actions. I include this constraint because an action that is unplanned but is a matter of routine should not count as improvised. For example, *bringing my bow up to my instrument*, is probably not part of any musicians plan to *play [such-and-such] song*. However, it is something that almost always happens when one executes a plan to *play [such-and-such] song*. It follows from this that *bringing my bow up to my instrument* is a description of a routine action, and thus it should not count as improvised. Now that we have all the

elements of my account out in the open, it is time to say a bit more about each, starting with the unplanned nature of improvised actions.

When we make plans to do something in the future, they are usually plans to perform an action under a certain description. For example, I have a plan to *ride the Metrolink tomorrow*. My plan to ride the Metrolink tomorrow includes the planning of some subroutines, like *packing my bag, making sure I have my wallet and Metrolink pass, driving my car to the station, parking* etc. However, even with all of these subroutines planned, my plan remains incomplete. There are sub-subroutines that are unformulated, but nevertheless essential, parts of my plan. For example, executing my plan to *drive my car to the station* involves *turning my car on, pressing the accelerator, steering the car, etc.* I definitely do not explicitly plan to do some or all of these things when I make my plan to ride the Metrolink tomorrow. These unplanned aspects of my behavior are the ones most likely to be improvised. This idea was clearly expressed in my discussion of musical improvisation. A jazz musician might have a plan to *play [such-and-such] song*, without planning all the specific subroutines that are required in order to execute such a plan, i.e. plans to *play [such-and-such] notes*. The unplanned subroutines of an action plan are usually the actions that end up counting as improvised.

The unplanned subroutines of my plan to *ride the Metrolink* do not necessarily count as improvised though. This is because my account requires improvised actions to be novel. Much like *bringing my bow up to my instrument*, the steps I take toward the Metrolink platform are a matter of routine. Riding the Metrolink is something I do almost every day and the steps I take to get there are almost the same day-in and day-out. The *steps I take toward the Metrolink platform* therefore are not novel actions. However, if I get to the Metrolink station and find a crime scene with police tape blocking the path I usually take toward the platform, I may be forced to take a new route towards where I want to be. These steps may then count as improvised. So what makes an action novel then?

Some readers may be worried that what counts as novel may be dependent on the audience<sup>5</sup>. For example, for some audiences, a stand-up comedian's material

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<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Brit Brogaard for this suggestion.

might be novel, in that they have never heard it before. On the other hand, the comedian's tour manager has heard his routine a thousand times. The comedian's material is definitely not novel for his tour manager. I want to try to eliminate this worry by defining novel in terms of the (mega)type/token distinction discussed by Alperson and others. We can say that a novel action is an action that is not an instantiation of an already existing megatype. So if a comedian is telling the same jokes night after night, his performances are not novel, because his routine instantiates an already existing megatype. If a comedian is working on new material based on suggestions from the audience or working with a group to create a totally new scene, like the players at Second City in Chicago do night after night, then these actions are novel.

Again we saw this played out in the discussion of musical improvisation. Songs, like the various versions of "Johnny B, Goode", which are repeated note for note night after night, are not improvised because they instantiate an already existing megatype. On the other hand, a concert performed by the award winning jazz pianist, Keith Jarrett is likely to be something that has never been heard before. Such a concert is novel, and if it is unplanned, should count as improvised. Consider how the novel and unplanned requirements of my definition work together. The very first full performance of a piece of classical music might be considered a novel action, in that it the specific melodies and harmonies that make up the piece had never been performed before. However, such a performance is not improvised, except in the way Gould and Keaton point out, because the players planned to play those notes in advance. So novel but planned actions are not improvised in the same way that unplanned but routine actions are not improvised.

Here's another worry: some actions, that are not necessarily novel, might indeed still be considered improvised. For example, a basketball team might practice a particular play during practice, and then five seasons later spontaneously use that play during a game<sup>6</sup>. Two possible responses to this worry present themselves. First, I might just hold my ground and say such a situation should not count as an improvised action, even though it was unplanned, because it was used in practice before and therefore is not novel. The other option, and the stronger response in my

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<sup>6</sup> thanks to John Brunero for this counter example.

opinion, is to say that the two actions are actually different in important respects. For example, presumably the play was originally run in a carefully controlled practice environment. It was run based on orders from a coach trying to make his team better. The second instance of the play was run during the course of a game, in response to a unique situation not present during the practice five years ago. So while the product of the action might appear to be the same, the action undertaken is actually quite different and, in terms of my definition, novel. Readers might note the similarity of this response to Alperson's response that a recording of an improvised performance might be replicated. The response turns on distinguishing between the two senses of 'improvisation', the action sense and the product sense. In the case of the replayed basketball play, the product may indeed be a reproduction, but the action is novel, and thus can still count as improvised.

A final worry is that there might be actions that are both unplanned and novel that nevertheless should not be considered improvised. Here I have in mind certain random actions, like *speaking in tongues*, *muscle spasms*, *slips of the tongue*, and maybe certain musical performances like *John Cages '4'33"* (pronounced "four minutes, thirty-three seconds"). To account for this worry my definition of improvised action requires that improvised actions be performed within a well-defined improvisational framework. What I have in mind here is something like a limited range of possible options for behavior<sup>7</sup>. If there are too many options available to an agent, then the action might not be improvised. If there are too few options available to an agent, then too the action might not be improvised

Take for example a case where the framework is too broad. John Cage's '4'33"' is a good example of this kind of case. The piece is a conceptual work made up of three-movements of complete silence from the performer(s). The total time it takes to play the three movements adds up to four minutes and thirty-three seconds, hence the title. The music of the piece is supposed to consists of the ambient noise

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<sup>7</sup> It might be possible to discuss the range of possible options for behavior in terms of the technical notion of 'affordances'. I have explored this idea in previous drafts of this paper but have decided to refrain from using it in the final version. I abandon affordances in part because it has proven to be too controversial and/or confusing for some readers and giving a full defense of it would take too much time. Further, relying on the ordinary way we talk about 'options' seems like it will suffice for present purposes. With that being said, I have not totally given up on the idea of using affordances in my account.

of the room in which the piece is being performed. The music is not a standard case of improvisation because the ambient noise in most rooms is almost totally random<sup>8</sup>—who could predict that some bird would chirp outside right at the beginning of the performance, or that the man in the sixth seat of the tenth row would cough lightly into his hand at the 1'45" mark, or that the man sitting eight rows behind him would shift in his squeaky seat as the piece concluded. The music produced by these actions is not improvised on my account, because it does not occur within a well-determined improvisational framework. The way '4'33"' is set up, the piece could be performed during any 4'33" interval of time, at any place a conductor chooses. On this reading, the number of possible performances of the piece is near infinite. So, even if we agree that performances of 4'33" are unplanned and novel in the relevant ways, the content of the piece is randomly determined, and not rightly considered improvised. If the framework were to be constrained a bit more, as in standard cases of jazz performances, then the performance could be considered improvised.

On the other hand, when a framework affords too few options, or even just one option, then actions performed within those frameworks are not improvised. Following a recipe is a good example of this. A recipe might call for 1 cup of sugar, 1 cup of milk, 2 cups of flour, 1 egg, 3 tablespoons of butter, a tablespoon of baking powder and a pinch of salt. *Putting this recipe together* is obviously not a description of an improvised action, because there is not a sufficient degree of freedom available to the cook. They must use 1 cup of sugar, 2 cups of flour etc. *Making an old family chili recipe* might allow for more freedom and be closer to an improvised action. One can decide during the making of the recipe how much chili powder to use, depending on how spicy one likes their food. One might feel inspired to add some dark beer, a splash of bourbon, extra onion or bacon bits, depending on how one feels and what ingredients one has available. The chili cook is free to improvise, whereas the pancake cook has to stick to the recipe.

When the framework opens up into a well-determined set of options, then one has the freedom to improvise within that framework. When the framework becomes

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<sup>8</sup> In this example I am thinking about improvisation in the product sense, rather than the action sense, as it is not clear who the performers of the music are. This makes it difficult to speak coherently about the actions involved in the performance.

too broad, one is no longer improvising but acting randomly. When the framework becomes too narrow, one is no longer improvising but following a recipe. It is not clear where to set the boundaries between improvisation and recipe following and improvisation and random action. It might be that there are no truly random actions or totally planned/deliberate actions. It might be that all actions are, in some sense, improvised actions, and that random actions and planned actions are a kind of idealized action type. I don't intend to defend this claim in this paper, but I do think it is worth pointing out here as a possibility to be further explored in later work.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude I want to point out that a common form of human behavior is the following-- one establishes some goal, and makes some plans to achieve that goal, including the planning of some basic subroutines. At a certain point, with some subroutines and some sub-subroutines left unplanned, one begins acting toward that goal. The unplanned subroutines of one's plan end up being improvised along the way. This is especially true of our behavior in new and unusual situations—think of MacGyver improvising his way out of a jail cell with nothing but a Swiss Army Knife and a roll of duct tape. In common every-day situations, like riding the Metrolink, the unplanned parts of the larger plan sometimes do not qualify as improvised because they are simply a matter of routine. To the extent that our lives have not become so routine that we find ourselves retracing our steps day-after-day, repeating the same old stories and ideas to the same tired people, we seem to improvise our way through a great deal of our waking life. On this view, improvising may be a symptom of an interesting life, devoid of boring repetitive routines.

Charles Limb, the neuroscientist studying improvisation mentioned at the outset, has made some interesting discoveries about what is going on in the brain when we improvise. By comparing fMRI data collected from musicians improvising with fMRI data collected from musicians playing over-learned musical sequences, Limb has begun to uncover the neural correlates of improvised action (2008). I should point out now, that thanks to my view we can understand improvisation as the performance of an unplanned, novel action performed within some predetermined improvisational framework, as opposed to just the spontaneous performance of certain types of actions, as Limb originally has it. Now when we talk about Limb's

findings, we can understand them in terms of my new definition, rather than the obscure terms his definition of improvisation is originally presented in.

Limb has found that there is significant overlap in the areas of the brain active during musical improvisation with areas of the brain active during the creation of autobiographical narrative. Limb and his colleagues suggests this is consistent with views of improvised music playing as an expression of one's 'personal musical voice, viewpoint or story' (2008). As if this were not interesting enough, Limb also suggests that the areas of the brain active during improvisation also overlap with areas of the brain thought to be involved in the neural instantiation of the self. Limb and his colleagues show that the areas of the brain active during improvisation overlap with brain areas associated with internally motivated, self-generated, and stimulus-independent behaviors (2008). This overlap could have potentially interesting effects on how we understand the self and the source of human agency. Unfortunately I have not said much about the role of agency in improvisation, though it is sure to play a big role.

Consider a case where someone performs an unplanned novel action, within a well-defined improvisational framework, but where the person's body is controlled by some angelic presence. Such a case does not seem like a case of improvisation, even though it fits within the core requirements of my definition. So improvised actions need to originate from some source of agency belonging to the person who is said to improvise. Exactly how we should understand agency and its role in improvisation is a matter outside of the bounds of this paper. The project of understanding the role of agency in improvisation should be explored in future work on this subject.

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