

John Dewey
and
Moral Imagination

Pragmatism in Ethics



STEVEN FESMIRE

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The Deweyan Ideal

The failures of philosophy have come from lack of confidence in the directive powers that inhere in experience, if men have but the wit and courage to follow them.

—John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*

IMPROVISATIONAL MORAL INTELLIGENCE

Central to Dewey's approach is that ethics is understood as the art of helping people to live richer, more responsive, and more emotionally engaged lives.¹ This is closer to Aristotle than to Kant, who approaches ethics primarily as rational justification of an inherited moral system. Dewey's criticism is mitigated only slightly if the inherited system is correctly acknowledged—as it is for instance by Bernard Gert in contrast with Alan Donagan—to be embodied in imaginatively constituted and applied rules and ideals.

Pragmatist ethics acknowledges our inherited moral vocabulary, what Kant disparaged as “a disgusting mishmash of patchwork observations and half-reasoned principles.”² But it is not so driven by what borders on an obsession to forge a less repelling system of this mishmash by, for example, attempting with Gert to describe in advance a conclusive test, procedure, or formula to define what can count as rational or irrational action.³ This is not to say the creative endeavor of pragmatist ethics is free of obsessions. It is by temperament fixated on the world's qualitative ambiguity, on indeterminate, muddled situations and the imaginative virtues that fund our more admirable dealings with them.⁴

Martha Nussbaum's reintroduction of Aristotelian practical wisdom is significant in this context. In a poignant passage in *Love's Knowledge*, she observes that moral knowledge entails “seeing a complex, concrete reality in

a highly lucid and richly responsive way; it is taking in what is there, with imagination and feeling.”⁵ Moral decision making calls for refined sensitivity and immersion in events (in dialogue with a “rule-governed concern for general obligations,” which on her view plays an essential though subordinate role).⁶ It is a matter of artistry. “A responsible action,” she writes in a passage reminiscent of Havelock Ellis's 1923 *The Dance of Life*, “is a highly context-specific and nuanced and responsive thing whose rightness could not be captured in a description that fell short of the artistic.”⁷

Considered in this light, jazz improvisation suggests an unconventional metaphor for the harmony and discord of daily interpersonal life. A jazz combo spotlights and illustrates the empathetic, impromptu, and inherently social dimensions of moral compositions. This is especially helpful in framing ideals for interpersonal relationships and group interactions, dimensions of most moral situations. The metaphor corrects Dewey's unfortunate slips into cephalocentric descriptions of dramatic rehearsal. Moreover, it compensates for a possible misreading of deliberation as rehearsal for a ready-made drama. To whatever extent improvisation is essential to mediating interpersonal circumstances, the jazz metaphor calls attention to habits we need to cultivate, and it enables construction of improvisational ideals for which to strive.

As metaphor, conceiving social interactions in terms of jazz is limited in scope. Improvisational intelligence may play only a minor role, for example, in adversarial relationships, conflict mediation, bioethics, or environmental policy; how central or peripheral this role is will not be taken up here. And cultural differences must be acknowledged. Nevertheless, the metaphor calls attention to subtleties of communal interaction that would otherwise go unnoticed.

Ferrying the logic of jazz over to interpersonal conduct may initially raise caution flags, and for good reason. There are two extremes to which conduct tends, one the opposite of improvisation and the other popularly identified with it. One relies on routine ends, fixed doctrines, or closed systems of ready-made principles. It engenders cultural rigidity, conformity, and dogmatism, or is compatible with dictatorial coerciveness. The other relies on no forethought or discipline and results in behavior that is slapdash, unorganized, cursory, and discontinuous. It is haphazardly *unrehearsed*, “improvised” in the dictionary sense of offhand. Both extremes can have a deadening effect on moral imagination, especially on the phase of dramatic rehearsal. Dewey similarly criticized “hasty improvisation” and “patchwork policies” in progressive education (LW 13:109; LW 17:53).⁸

The middle course is experimental intelligence. It is guided neither by fixed ends that anesthetize perception of emerging events nor by patchwork trial and error that excludes imaginative forethought. Key aspects of this

middle course are embodied in jazz improvisation, including a rich, nuanced sort of imaginative rehearsal. The popular sense of improvisation as "spur of the moment" composition is of course there, particularly in some avant-garde jazz. But the extreme of offhanded recklessness and discontinuous drifting is alien to the jazz artist.

This becomes apparent when the stereotype of jazz artistry as anarchic is replaced by a realistic depiction of its tight structure and aesthetic richness. Unfortunately this was lost on Dewey, who implies that jazz and movies, like vulgar tabloids, are cheap arts sought out by the average person because *fine art is held up as remote from ordinary experience* (AE, LW 10:12).⁹ This may be true of much art, but not jazz. Dewey also conceives improvisation as "jerky, discontinuous movement" (LW 3:263). Ironically, jazz may generally be even more organized and continuous than moral experience. This conceptual structure contributes to its richness and coherence as metaphor.

Such is the nature of a novelty that one can never be fully prepared for it. One must improvise. At our best, we skillfully respond to each other with the aim of harmonizing interests. But coordinated impromptu thinking is difficult. Jazz pianist Bill Evans discusses the challenge of group improvisation on new material, observing of his celebrated collaboration with Miles Davis on the album *Kind of Blue*: "Aside from the weighty technical problem of collective coherent thinking, there is the very human, even social need for sympathy from all members to bend for the common result."¹⁰

A jazz musician—also consider bluegrass, blues, drum circles, and the like, with notable parallels in dance and theater—takes up the attitude of others by catching a cadence from the group's signals while anticipating the group's response to her own signals.¹¹ Drawing on the resources of tradition, memory, and long exercise, she plays *into* the past tone to discover the possibilities for future tones in the way moral imagination enables us to see the old in terms of the possible. This is not simply casual drifting into the next note, but movement toward an emerging sonorous image that is felt to unify the composition.

No "right" way to do this can be spelled out, but it is far from arbitrary. Only a novice would imagine anything beautiful could come from, on one hand, reposing in rules of composition, or on the other hand, arbitrarily imposing rhythms or tones on the rest of the group. It would not romanticize jazz to observe that beauty in improvisation emerges as members revel in supporting others, not when they jockey for a solo.

Prima donnas in jazz, and there are many, never quite live up to their potentials as artists. The virtuoso in jazz is practiced in listening, and at her best—even if only for a few moments—puts vanity behind. This enables her in those moments to go beyond simple recognition of a cue to perceive

and creatively respond to what it portends and signifies. Yet even the disciplined virtuoso may misread the tone of a composition. No matter how mutually sympathetic a community of musicians or moral-agents/patients may ideally be—and recall that the metaphor may be less applicable outside such a community—discordance is always possible. In fact, it is certain. This is both because the situation is existentially uncertain and because no amount of listening and learning can absolutely guarantee against misconstruing the "style" of another. Jazz musician and poet Michael Harper explains: "It's a matter of waiting for an opening rather than just rushing into what's happening. It's very much like a conversation. . . . The problem is that sometimes people don't always understand what the *tone* of the conversation is, but that happens to all of us in life, too."¹²

Moral-agents/patients must respond empathetically to each other instead of imposing insular designs, and they must rigorously imagine how others will respond to their actions. This is learned, with experience and practice. Only to the degree that we are immature, unexercised in thinking and uncultivated in perception, do we imagine anything enduringly good will come from immediate satisfaction of stray, self-interested desires. Mature deliberation faces problems as wholes and perceives the interdependence of parts. It shuns piecemeal and slapdash acts as much as ready-made solutions. In jazz as in conduct, a blueprint for action would impede the emergence of a unifying image charged with a felt direction of movement.

Simple recognition of cues that certain feelings or interests are at play—say, that someone is offended—is sufficient only for acting as customary propriety dictates. Within certain limits such rule-governed behavior may serve, as with everyday manners. But it falls far short of a "full perceptual realization" of particulars, in Dewey's helpful phrasing (AE, LW 10:182). Like most everyday perception, it is incomplete and oversimplified. It lacks deep perception—gained primarily through the give and take of communication—of individual causes and purposes: Why is she offended? How does this fit into the history of the life she is composing? Mere recognition of social cues also lacks the expanded perception of humane learning: In what way does her style differ from mine, perhaps due to race, gender, ethnicity, or nationality?¹³ Without deep perception, you won't "get it." Moral imagination may collapse into a pseudo-empathy of the Golden Rule variety (in one common interpretation),¹⁴ in which others' values and intentions are reduced to one's own. Yet even the most patient, communicative, and learned will honestly misread the tone of some situations, and no amount of cultivation of moral talent can guarantee against bad improvisations.

Moreover and perhaps most significantly, the tradition of the art form structures group improvisation and is remade through innovation, much as

customs and principles may flexibly guide moral behavior. There is ample disagreement about the role of tradition in jazz as in morality, but no matter how avant-garde one aspires to be (say, the Free Jazz of Ornette Coleman versus the more measured Miles Davis), one does not experiment in a vacuum. *Indeed, drawing from Mead's theory of the self, all people are in a sense born into a jazz combo and become differentiated as contributing members only as a result of participation in the group.*¹⁵

The partnership between innovation and tradition is addressed by Nussbaum in a striking yet undeveloped contrast of images. On her (unsympathetic) view, for the symphony player

all commitments and continuities are external; they come from the score and from the conductor. The player reads them off like anyone else. The jazz player, actively forging continuity, must choose in full awareness of and responsibility to the historical traditions of the form, and must actively honor at every moment his commitments to his fellow musicians, whom he had better know as well as possible as unique individuals. He should be more responsible than the score reader, and not less, to the unfolding continuities and structures of the work.¹⁶

Nussbaum neglects the role of imaginative perception in what Mary Reichling, in an essay on Dewey and musical imagination, calls the "sonorous image of the [composed] work that the performer wishes to achieve."¹⁷ But Nussbaum rightly highlights that we can improvise, morally and artistically, only because we do not create in a vacuum. Styles, techniques, and visions are funded. Harper sums this up in a tribute to John Coltrane's influence: "You're *never* starting at ground zero. Somebody took you to the place where you now are."¹⁸ The inescapability of cultural context in improvisational intelligence is distilled to delightful simplicity in a conversation between Charles Mingus and Timothy Leary, reported by Barry Kernfeld: "Mingus listens for a long time to Dr. Leary's anarchic approach to spontaneous art, Mingus's art, improvisation. 'You can't improvise on nothin' man,' Mingus says at last. 'You gotta improvise on somethin.'"¹⁹

THE DEWEYAN IDEAL

Inquiry, art, value, religion, and all other aspects of human existence are natural functions. They should be approached as such, despite the long-cherished faith in a nonnatural spring or a priori matrix for values and standards.

There is a great difference between something's being desired and its being judged worthy of approbation, between noncognitive prizing and