

IMPROVISATION PROVIDES A WINDOW INTO IMPLICIT PROCESSES:
THOUGHTS ON PHILIP RINGSTROM'S WORK, IN DIALOGUE WITH PHILOSOPHER EUGENE
GENDLIN

Email Lynn Preston for a longer version of this paper, which includes a case example.

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This paper examines the intersection of Philip Ringstrom's clinical ideas about improvisation, and philosopher Eugene Gendlin's use of improvisation as illustrative of his meta-theory. Both of these theorists are drawing vitally useful analogies to the nature of the psychotherapeutic process from strikingly different but wonderfully mutually enriching perspectives. My article seeks to embody something of the freshness of my live conversation with Gendlin and also demonstrate the larger interplay of philosophy, theory, and clinical practice. I am hoping that the dialogic structure of the paper will bring the reader into the flow of improvisational experimentation.

Introduction

In recent years the psychoanalytic conversation has been brimming with new meanings, models, and metaphors. It is as if our new paradigm sensibility, which challenges us to speak and write with a less reified and more multidimensional consciousness has spawned a growing body of images, ideas and models. Along with multiple perspectives on implicit experience, and references to chaos and complexity theory, an interest in improvisation is part of this contemporary movement. The influx of these innovations is, I believe, a creative effort to conceptualize human interaction with non-linear, non-dualistic and non-reified constructs.

The improvisational arts - theatre, music, dance and writing – offer new, grounding, experience-near images which can help us wrap our minds around the complexities of non-linear systems thinking. We see in our mind's eye actors playing off of each other in impromptu scenes. We can recall the sounds of a group of jazz musicians jamming. We know how at special moments we ourselves have spontaneously said something better than we could have if we had crafted it with years of effort. We think of the moments in a session when, without conscious consideration, we say or do something surprising that just fits, although it would not ordinarily have occurred to us. How do we understand these occurrences? What enables this unplanned, unthought out - rightness? What can we learn about the workings of "emergence" from these ordinary yet extra-ordinary events?

When I discovered Philip Ringstrom's work on improvisation, I was not only excited by its vitality, vibrancy and clinical usefulness, I was also attracted to its theoretical possibilities. It adds yet another

dimension to explorations of implicit experience in which I have been immersed for several years. (See my paper; “The Edge of Awareness; Gendlin’s contribution to Explorations of the Implicit” in press.) I have been fascinated with the accumulating cross fertilization of approaches to explorations of the implicit as they broaden our conceptions of consciousness and of the psychoanalytic project. I have been particularly interested in how Eugene Gendlin’s philosophy of the implicit informs and elaborates these explorations. The experience of improvisation highlights moments when self reflection is not overtly guiding our self expression; it puts us directly in contact with the vast resources of implicit knowing.

1. It is a cold afternoon in New York City. I am off to see Eugene Gendlin. He is looking well after his recent illness, I am eager to continue our dialogue about philosophy and psychotherapy and pursue my project of bringing his “philosophy of the implicit” into the psychoanalytic conversation. I begin by chatting with him about my current interest in Philip Ringstrom’s take on improvisation as it adds to our thinking about implicit experience. I can tell that Gendlin is savoring the possibilities for dialogue here.

I am surprised and delighted when he hands me his unpublished paper “Improvisation Provides.” I have taught Gendlin’s work for many years, and pride myself on thinking *I know about* all his theory. But he is full of surprises and here is another one. He has written about just the topic I chose to warm up this cold afternoon.

2. My talk with Gendlin begins with a spirited summary of Ringstrom’s ideas.

I tell Gendlin that for Ringstrom, the guidelines of improvisational theater provide a new relational ethic for psychoanalysis. The primary rule of thumb in such an ethic is the cultivation of a “yes and” response that carries the interaction forward rather than a “yes but” sort of response that closes down the engagement. “An improvisational scene,” he tells us, “results from one party setting something in motion while the other takes what is given and moves it one step further. It “plays off of and with patterns emergent in both parties. In so doing, it teases out and plays with patterns that are linear and non-linear, verbal and non-verbal, actively allowing contexts of experiencing to influence their development” (2005 p.8) He argues that this kind of ethic cultivates the sense of safety that is crucial to play, and is able to create “a warm bath of curiosity” (2005 p.4) so central to an alive analysis. . He describes his own psychoanalytic experience with John Lindon as; “living in the realm of the improvisational instead of the realm of the scripted” (2006 p.85) a freedom culminating in “a kind of symmetry of engagement while still grasping an asymmetry of purpose.” (2006 p.84)

I tell Gene Gendlin that beside the theoretical framework it provides, what sparks my interest in the model of improvisation is its ability to foster in us the sense of freedom and trust in implicit processes that it describes. It offers guidelines to help us to rely on our *inner* listening, and deep connectedness rather than on

being careful. All our skill and theory is there - in the “implicit relational knowing” we bring to the improvisational interaction.

Gendlin leans forward. “For me the important thing about improvisation is that it shows us how the implicit is always bigger. What we say from that place can be better, more precise. When we speak or act from there, we feel more truly ourselves. It shows that we are always living in that implicit, already interacting way.”

I begin to grasp that Gendlin isn’t interested in improvisation for its own sake or even for its clinical applications, but for what it demonstrates about implicit processes and how these processes relate to the experience of “true self.”

I show Gendlin Ringstrom’s description of what he calls “essential self moments” or “moments of truth.” He is writing about his own analysis with John Lindon.

“They are more like implicit `moments of truth` that remain unknown until I experience them with you.” “For this to happen,” I say, “I am learning that I have to `lean into the experience` as opposed to `leaning away` from it.” For instance, in leaning away, one tries to avoid, or, even worse, attempts to control, emergent experiences. In so doing, one is vulnerable to devolving into a state of anxiety,... If one “leans into one’s experience,” no matter how frightening, the specter of dread rapidly resolves. This, I underscore, is what consistently happens when I lean into our analysis... “There is a deep sense of relaxation and relief that I experience following leaning into the anxiety of the unknown.” “Indeed... “If I experience you leaning away, I will be all alone.” (2006 p. 88)

Gendlin embraces the evocative new term “leaning into.” We talk about this “leaning into” the unknown as a willingness to go to what Gendlin calls “the edge of awareness” and allow one’s deeper “implicit self” to emerge unchecked by preconceptions. Ringstrom talks about the feeling of anxiety he must endure before he leans into the “essential self moment.” Gendlin notes that we are often uncomfortable in these moments because “More of you is showing than you can see and this can bring a sense of exposure.” We are in these moments coming from this “more” – more than concepts or culture or language etc. Ringstrom describes “a deep sense of relaxation and relief that he senses following leaning into the anxiety of the unknown. He says that these moments capture something about “knowing when you’ve gotten it right; that is, when what you are saying corresponds to a deep sense of connection to yourself and perhaps to another...” I recognize this experience of “Knowing that you have gotten it right.”! There is a *ring of truth* in these moments - a special kind of knowing that entails a permeability between implicit and explicit. It emerges out of a fresh state of a kind of intriguing *confusion*, as if one can sense the quality of an iceberg, or perhaps a large living sea creature, just beneath the surface of what one is trying to say. It often comes with fresh language, images and metaphors. It is marked by a sense of opening, give, and movement.

This kind of knowing runs through Gendlin's work. He comments, "We know its rightness when it *carries forward* and when something carries forward one can always recognize that it does. People often ask me how I know the difference between the thoughts that carry forward and those that don't. A bodily shift distinguishes these moments. When this carrying forward experience visibly happens to these people (who are asking), I say 'there – there it is! I comment that when the therapist is sensitized to this shift of consciousness she is able to pick up on some of its telltale signs – and help to bring it over the horizon line of consciousness.

The relief that Ringstrom describes feeling following leaning into the anxiety of the unknown is akin to the sense of "give" or "release" that Gendlin talks about as an indication that the implicit intricacy of one's experience has been recognized and received. Ringstrom says that he needs John, his analyst, to also lean into his experience, and if he doesn't then he will be all alone.

3. Gendlin comments that our sense of the other informs the experience from before the session ever begins. A basic principle of his philosophy is what he calls "interaction first," by which he means that our experience comes out of interaction on every level of existence starting from the cellular level. Akin to my intersubjective systems perspective, Gendlin holds that there is no "inner" experience separate from the context in which it arises. For Gendlin, "The implicit living is always already interactional, and only within it can one distinguish one's own experience from that of the other person's." "Being is always 'interbeing'" I remark. Gendlin says, "In this view the implicit does not consist of discreet factors. It is a texture in which all factors have already affected all the others. From out of this we form discreet entities." I bring in the example of the popular book Blink, in which Malcolm Gladwell explores the amazing efficacy of instant 'intuitive' decisions and assessments such as the policeman instantly assessing the danger of a situation or the art dealer, contrary to evidence 'sniffing out a fraud.

Within these "hunches", many factors are instantly considered together. These factors are already comingling and affecting each other on a sub-symbolic level. This is what Gendlin calls *interaffecting*. On this implicit level, however, these multiple considerations are one alive texture. We live from this texture and the strands of this implicit knowing are only separated into entities as we explicate them. "Improvisation is our living directly from this implicit texture," Gendlin remarks. "This explains the "intuitions" of the people Gladwell studied."

4. Although Ringstrom tells us that John Lindon's responses were often, on the surface, within a somewhat conventional frame. (It seems that Phil was lying on the couch unfolding his experience in a reflective manner while his analyst listened attentively.) Yet Ringstrom calls his analytic experience with John, "living in the realm of the improvisation, not the realm of the scripted." How is this Improvisational? "It was

improvisational in its manner, not necessarily in its form. It was improvisational in its *leaning into* the next moment of emergence,” Gendlin remarks.

In his paper, Gendlin introduces the term “coming freshly from underneath.” He leads us into this concept by first describing the kind of experience that we associate with improvisation.

“...art involves a fresh formation of new sounds, images rhythms, movements and actions, exciting new sensations – we are surprised- we say `ah`...”

Then he takes us a step further.

“But what about performing a script or a score? That too is art, surely. Yet the sounds and visions are not new -- or are they? Certainly they are! We see that plays and scores are opportunities for -- fresh improvisation. When a score is provided, it is still the new improvisation that counts.

We don't go to see Hamlet just to have the play we have already heard and seen repeated. Rather, we hope that the play will livingly emerge. That will be quite new. Crease calls a successful performance "a phenomenon that appears." In acting a written script or in playing a score, it is the fresh formation which counts performance just runs on without bringing a unique new life to the score. . Will this production of Hamlet be a phenomenon?

He comes to his conclusion:

“So we see still another level of improvisation. The live coming from underneath is a separate variable, whether or not it creates a novel product just then. To be sure, new products and new ways of performing them do come from underneath. But then they can become repeatable and decided ways of performing. Then there is again the question: "Tonight, will it come from underneath?"

5. Gendlin proceeds to his next point. Improvisation is bodily, he asserts. “We cannot deliberately construct or will it. It belongs to the family of bodily comings like: sleep, appetite, orgasm, tears, love, anger, dreams, imagery, laughter, funny remarks, as well as the words for what we want to say, and the coming of new phrases and new steps in creating a work of art.” He says that emergence is always bodily despite the fact that only some of those on the list would usually be considered bodily. In saying this, the word “body” expands its usual meaning. “It is not only the one sitting in the chair, but also how one senses this body from inside, its sentient, wanting, demanding, prefiguring what I want to say and-after a moment-giving rise to the phrases to say it. It is the body which lets the next step of speech, action, or art formation come.”

Furthermore this bodily sense of leaning into what *wants to come* is a forward *movement*. Good art and good psychotherapy is going somewhere – it is a development, an unfolding. We can feel the momentum in good psychotherapy sessions. The articulation of each emergent thought that comes from implicit knowing is a step of development.

6. Gendlin asks me for a recent example. First I think of my seminar that morning in which we are reading Ringstrom's papers. One of the therapists in my group asks if the interaction she just had with her patient was an improvisational moment. Her patient is very anxious about driving to a new place in N.J. She is ashamed of being such a "baby" about it. The therapist, also a nervous driver, wants to shift the static self critical, repetitive tone of the session. The patient says: "Everybody does these things with equanimity, except for me." The therapist spontaneously puts her arms out with a big smile indicating all the people and says, "Yes, but where are all these people?" The patient brightening points to her chair saying, "Well they don't sit in places like this." The therapist laughs and points to her chair retorting, "Well, they aren't sitting here." The session proceeds in a lighter more flowing way.

Gendlin comments that we have known for years that people need to know they are not the only ones that have some human reaction. "What is improvisational here?" he asks. (Gendlin doesn't seem to notice that this is an instance of *his* coming from underneath) I reply that I think that what makes it improvisational is not the content, but the sense of freedom and spontaneity that the therapist introduces and invites. It is the *coming from underneath* and the *leaning into* that makes the playful quality with which she says "Yes" and with a big smile and hand movement "But where are all these people?" This slightly unexpected quip changes the tone of the session and allows the patient to be more creative and playful when she points to her chair and says "Well they don't sit in places like this either." Then the therapist continues the game in saying, "Well, they aren't sitting here either." Now Gendlin and I agree that rather than the content, it is a new living that the therapist introduces when she says: "Yes but, where are all these people?" We notice here that when the interaction is stuck it is often necessary for the therapist to "go first" in setting a tone of improvisation which brings the qualities of freedom and surprise that are characteristic of these moments. Improvisation requires a softening of the membrane between implicit and explicit modes. It produces a shifting of gears into what Donnel Stern calls *courting surprise*.

A few additional thoughts

Although therapeutic moments that are like a scripted play, and those that are like an impromptu theater performance can both "come from underneath" - and therefore can be improvisational in Gendlin's terms - these modes have different flavors and different rhythms. In moments that are like a scripted play I am carefully tracking the therapy process and sprinkling in my own thoughts and feelings like salt and pepper to bring out the flavor of the patient's main course that we are cooking together. We might call these interactions *improvisational* with a small (i). There is usually a slower, more leisurely pace in these moments with time to reflect and consider my responses and time to consciously check them against my patient's verbal and non

verbal reactions. There is a back and forth movement between sensing into the implicit and formulating and crafting explications of it.

In moments more like impromptu theater, I am working with the immediacy of spontaneous engagement with little time for conscious reflecting. The checking of my responses against my patient's reactions (and his against mine) is then simultaneous, and often out of my awareness – bottom up, without top down processing. My empathic attunement is expressed in the immediacy of unmediated responsiveness and not thought about until afterward. These moments we could call *Improvisational* with a capital (I). Both types of relational movement require skilled attentiveness and an alive link between implicit and explicit processing.

With "yes and" empathic attunement at its heart, Improvisation with a capital (I) offers relational self psychologists a lively, contactful, spontaneously expressive alternative to more confrontational models of intimate engagement. In the difficult moments in which we find ourselves "caught in the grip of the field," Improvisation suggests images and guidelines to free us from defensive reacting or becoming rote - trapped in an "empathic straight jacket."

Summary of Gendlin's Points.

- * Improvisation as a bodily attunement to oneself and the other – a sensing into the situation and acting from one's implicit knowing, gives us a window into the nature of implicit processes that make up our human living. These processes are always operative even when we don't tap into them as we do in improvisation.

- * The "coming from underneath," of improvisation, shows us a deeper more naked level of ourselves that has the qualities of freshness, aliveness, and feelingfulness – We see that this expression comes from something beneath the formation of thoughts.

- * When we are being improvisational, leaning into the emergent, we discover that we are a flow of living forward movement.

- * Improvisation reveals that the implicit level is a source of highly ordered, highly skilled coordination. It is far from –"wild analysis" or "flying by the seat of one's pants"

- * The essence of improvisation, its "playing off of" quality, is its very structure. It demonstrates that the implicit intricacy always includes a living in relation to, and toward, - coordinated with, the other on an organismic level.

Conclusion

The art of improvisation offers glowing possibilities for psychotherapy on both the clinical and theoretical levels. It not only inspires us, but gives us a structure to engage wholeheartedly, genuinely and creatively with our patients. It encourages us to enter the realm of image, metaphor and play where implicit and explicit meet, and to learn to relate from our deep sense of the patient, ourselves and the situation. It helps us to

develop the skills of coordinating our spontaneous self expressions with the sense of what is emergent in our patients and in the field we co-inhabit and co-create. Using the rules of improvisation, Ringstrom offers us a relational ethic - what he refers to as “yes and” rather than “yes but” responding. This ethic expands our concepts of empathic resonance. When we are caught in repetitious or volatile interactions it can help us to catch the spark of possibilities inherent in playful, imaginative therapeutic interplay, and invoke the ever present potential to break out of constrained patterns of relating and live them one step further.

Gendlin uses improvisation not for its clinical possibilities, but for its ability to demonstrate the nature of the implicit intricacy that we are always living from even when we are not attending to it as we do in improvisation. His philosophical framework provides us with a way of thinking about the nature of implicit experience. He deals with questions such as “Where does improvisation come from? How do we recognize that place, level, process? How do we receive it and carry it forward?” For Gendlin implicit processing is what human living *is*. What is expressed explicitly is only a small part of that. He looks at the process of emergence itself, through concepts such as “interaction first,” “coming from underneath” and “carrying forward.”

Rather than using improvisation to inform clinical practice, Gendlin looks into the experience of improvisational skilled spontaneity, finding in it instances of the “underneath” implicit living, that is always operating, even when we are not noticing it. He uses improvisation to say something like “look at this amazing, skilled complexity that we are! Look at what our actions and words come out of! Look at the movements that are inherent to human living.”

My intention is that this paper, representing a conversation between Gendlin, myself and Ringstrom’s ideas, will generate an improvisational dialogue between the language of philosophy and that of clinical practice.