Journal of Aesthetics and Phenomenology

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfap20

On Aristotle's Concept of Improvisation

Andrew Haas

a Higher School of Economics, Moscow

Published online: 30 Jul 2015.

To cite this article: Andrew Haas (2015) On Aristotle's Concept of Improvisation, Journal of Aesthetics and Phenomenology, 2:1, 113-121, DOI: 10.1080/20539320.2015.11428462

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/20539320.2015.11428462

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the “Content”) contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms
DISCUSSION

ON ARISTOTLE’S CONCEPT OF IMPROVISATION

Andrew Haas
Higher School of Economics, Moscow

Since to imitate is natural for us, as well as harmony and rhythm (for it is manifest that meters are proper parts of rhythms), from the beginning those most naturally inclined toward them, advancing little by little, generated \( \pi \text{\oe} \tau \text{\sigma} \nu \) out of improvisations.¹

THE ORIGIN OF ART FROM NIETZSCHE TO ARISTOTLE

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche is concerned, as the title of the first edition (*Out of the Spirit of Music*) suggests, with finding that out of which tragedy comes, its origin, the origin of tragic art, even of art itself:

We must now avail ourselves of all the principles of art considered so far, in order to find our way in the labyrinth of the origin of Greek tragedy, as we must call it. I do not think I am unreasonable in saying that the problem of this origin has as yet not even been seriously posed, to say nothing of solved, however often the ragged tatters of ancient tradition have been sewn together in various combinations and torn apart again.²

Perhaps Nietzsche had not been reading his Aristotle lately. For as *On Poetics* reminds us:

Once tragedy and comedy came to light side by side, each initiating a turn toward each sort of \( \pi \text{\oe} \tau \text{\sigma} \nu \) in conformity with their own nature, some became makers of comedy instead of iambs, and others became producers of tragedy instead of epics, because the latter forms were greater and more estimable than the former. Now, to go further in examining whether tragedy is or is not by now sufficient in respect to its kinds, in order to judge it both by itself in relation to

itself and in relation to the spectators, is another account. But regardless of that issue, it came to be from an improvisatory beginning ...³

Indeed, ποίησις is ἐκ τῶν αὐτοσχεδιασμάτων. But if ποίησις comes out of improvisations, it is because improvisation is the origin of any art whatsoever. Tragedy and comedy, dithyrambs, and phallic songs—all this is ἀρχὴς αὐτοσχεδιαστικῆς. So not only has the question of the origin of Greek tragedy been posed, it has been answered by improvisation.

But what of this answer? It seems to raise its own questions. For how can improvisation serve as the origin of tragedy and comedy? Or how can ποίησις come out of improvisation? What does it mean to think improvisation as the ἀρχή of any ποίησις whatsoever?

ON THE GENERAL AND SPECIAL THEORIES OF ΠΟΙΗΣΙΣ

περὶ ποιητικῆς αὐτῆς τε καὶ τῶν εἰδῶν αὐτῆς ... With these words, Aristotle begins his discourse on the origin of ποίησις, that is, not just poetry and its special forms—but also making and doing in general.

On Poetics, therefore, does not just deal with the making and doing of φύσις—this is discussed elsewhere, for example, in the Physics, as well as in On Generation and Corruption, History of Animals, On the Heavens, etc.—for it seeks the origin of both natural and cultural making and doing. Nor does it only examine the making and doing of human beings—that is considered in the Ethics and Politics. And it does not limit itself to the making and doing of the human ψυχή, which is the subject of On the Soul. Nor is it restricted to an investigation that seems to be the most general, the science of the first principles and causes of being, of that which is and how it is, of ontology and theology or onto-theology—these are addressed in the Metaphysics, and an investigation into the making and doing of the divine that has its τέλος in ἡ νόησις νοήσεως νόησις would be too limiting.

Rather On Poetics is rooted in the verb ποιεῖν: on the one hand (in general), making, producing, causing to occur, bringing about, rendering, but also placing and forming, making time and space, deeming, reckoning and counting; on the other hand, doing, acting (in general). This is why Aristotle writes: “And they [the Dorians] say they name doing [ποιεῖν] δρᾶν, but that the Athenians name it πράττειν.”⁴ In other words, ποιεῖν is another word for any action whatsoever.

By looking for the origin of a special kind of activity then (the act of making poetry, its particular forms, the poetic in poetry, the action of action in the seeking, in the investigations of all the arts and sciences, as well as the poetic of tragedy and comedy), it should also be possible to see the origin of action in general.⁵ Insofar as the Poetics is a general theory of action and activity, of change and becoming, concerned with the origin of making and doing in general, it can
also illuminate the origin of specifically poetic activity, the creation of comic and tragic words and things, art and architecture.

Much like Socrates’ search in the Republic for justice in the city, therefore, in order to find it in the soul, Aristotle does not directly seek the origin of acting in general; he begins by investigating the specific action of poetry, the poetic of poetry (whether the essence and nature of art is understood as a μίμησις of life, the action of representing the action of life as a whole, or in some other way; whether the poet is taken to be essentially a wordsmith or a former of matter, or something else), and thereby perhaps finds the origin of action itself—which allows him to consider the origin of the imitative action of tragedies, comedies, epics. Insofar as imitation is an action, the investigation into the origin of poetry (and not merely into its essence) presupposes the study of action as a whole, just as the special theory of poetics presupposes the general theory. Davis argues: if the unity of representation can be experienced in specific artistic imitations, poetry is ideal for investigating the unity of ποίησις in general as well; art allows us to know that which cannot be known, to see that which remains unseeable: the unity of acting and doing in life—for “without poetry there is virtually no possibility of seeing” and judging an action. But the experience—itself a fiction, whether a real fiction or not—of seeing the unity of human acting and doing in poetic representations, the work of art, is constitutive for action in general. In this way, the dialectic of presentation and representation, reality and imitation, fact and fiction, becomes the motor that constitutes experience. This is the περὶ around which περὶ ποιητικῆς turns—but at the center of this circle, the general and special theories of ποίησις converge on their origin. And if improvisation is that out of which ποίησις comes, making and doing (poetic or not), then the Poetics must be read not merely as an investigation into the nature and essence of poetry, but into its improvisational ἀρχή, and that of any action whatsoever.

ARISTOTLE’S CONCEPT OF IMPROVISATION

How then can improvisation serve as the origin of tragedy and comedy, the ἀρχή of ποίησις? How can we understand the phrase: γενομένη δ᾽ οὖν ἀπ᾽ ἀρχῆς ἀυτοσχεδιαστικῆς? Or how is the origin improvisational?

First, Aristotle’s use of the genetivus absolutus seems grammatically incorrect. For this reason, the tradition seeks to translate: “But now, from the beginning, tragedy was improvised.” Improvisation is taken as an adjective of the noun (tragedy) not the beginning—but this is misleading insofar as improvisation modifies the beginning (of tragedy), not tragedy itself (which is why the investigation attempts to primarily illuminate the origin of poetry, not its essence). Koller therefore argues that “purely grammatically,” the genitive αὐτοσχεδιαστικῆς should be understood as an adjective of ἀρχῆς, “but that seems to be incomprehensible, for what is an ἀρχὴ αὐτοσχεδιαστικῆ supposed to be?”
Indeed, this is the question of the *Poetics*—for the genitive marks Aristotle’s thought of the improvisational origin of art, the ἀρχὴ αὐτοσχεδιαστικὴ. But this origin is originally ambiguous: improvisational means both how the origin is an origin, and how it originates. The origin is adjectivally-adverbially improvisational: the beginning is improvised, and beginning is improvising—for improvisation belongs to beginning, to origin, as its principle and cause, as that which guides and preserves, rules and governs, the coming into being of art. The ἀρχὴ is improvisational because it improves as an improvisation: to begin is to improvise. Originating is improvising—just as being an improvisation, it originates. In this way, Aristotle responds to the question: Why is there something rather than nothing? Improvisation. What is change, μεταβολή, from something into something, or nothing into something, γένεσις? Improvisation. What is the being of becoming in general? Improvisation. And if the ἀρχὴ of ποιεῖν, making and doing (acting in art and politics, ethics and ἐπιστήμη, in the human soul and life itself), is improvisational, then it may be necessary to reread Aristotle’s entire corpus (his writing and thinking, teaching and living), both insofar as it illuminates ἀρχὴ as improvisational, and as an improvisation. The improvisational beginning is that out of which art comes—and this is improvisation itself: the ἀρχὴ αὐτοσχεδιαστικὴ is ἐκ τῶν αὐτοσχεδιασμάτων.

And what holds for ποιεῖν also holds for ποίησις. If art begins in improvisation, if tragedy comes out of improvisations, it is because the origin of doing and making art is improvisational. Indeed, art is originally improvisational because improvisation is the origin of art. And the general and special theories of ποίησις would mean: action in general (making and doing, speaking and acting, feeling and imagining and thinking, and so all the human and natural sciences, including philosophy) is improvisation—which is why specific artistic actions (tragedy and comedy, poetry and sculpture) are improvisational.

But what is the meaning of improvisation here? What does it mean to improvise? To improvise in general with respect to any action whatsoever, and specifically with respect to artistic activity? What does it mean to improvise from the beginning, at the beginning? To improvise a beginning? If improvising is the meaning of beginning, then what does it mean to be a beginning? To originate improvisationally?

ON THE ORIGINAL MEANING OF IMPROVISATION

The text of the *Poetics*, not surprisingly, does not address these questions—not because it cannot do so, but because it need not. The meaning of improvisation is implied by the Greek word itself: αὐτοσχεδίαζω comes from αὐτό + σχεδίαζω. And σχεδίαζω can mean: to do something off-hand, impromptu, ad hoc. But the root is σχείν, ἔχω, habitus—on the one hand: to have or hold or keep, to hold fast or hold onto, so too, to support or sustain, stand or bear,
preserve or maintain, guard and protect; but also to be able to, having the power or force to do or not do. On the other hand, to have or hold or keep oneself, here or there, in a place or to a task, but also to be engaged with or used for, to guide or direct, orient and steer a course, or to keep doing something, continually, with incomplete aspect, repeatedly in time.

This is why Homer sings of Odysseus’ raft, a σχέδια, a craft, a boat or bridge. As Zeus declares to his son Hermes:

> You are our messenger, Hermes, sent on all our missions. Announce to the nymph with lovely braids our fixed decree: Odysseus journeys home—the exile must return. But not in the convoy of the gods or mortal men. No, on a lashed, makeshift raft and rung with pains …

So before Aristotle thinks improvisation as the origin of art and science, making and doing in general, and even before Socrates looks like an amateur improviser in the *Phaedrus*, an improvisation is a raft—not because it is improvised, a bunch of sticks tied together, nor because it is planned out or composed of the right stuff, nor because it floats, carries and supports, has and holds, nor simply because it has been framed out in such a way as to form a structure that saves or permits crossing, and keeps Odysseus from drowning. For the question is not how can a raft be an improvisation, but rather how can improvisation be a raft? What is a raft such that it can serve as the origin of improvisation? Or what does the raft mean for improvisation, for art and science?

In fact, the original meaning of raft, σχέδια, is frame, σχῆμα. The raft frames Odysseus’ whole universe; it thereby can keep the oceans out and the man in, protect and support, grasp and hold. The raft improvises the god-forsaken exile’s return. So if the raft is an improvisation, it is not because it floats—rather if it floats, it is because it is a frame. Framing is making and doing; it is the origin of art and the arts, and the sciences, poetry and music, tragedy and comedy; it is that out of which improvisation and self-improvisation, come.

So what is improvising understood as framing? In fact, it is, first and foremost, a way of being (e.g. ἕξει, ὧν ἄνΩσας ἐχω, bene habet, male habet, recht haben; we have our health means that we are healthy). If improvising is having something, holding onto it, keeping it close, for or by oneself; it is because it is how something is, so that it can have and hold and keep close—for this makes the improvisation that which it is, and that which it continues to be. Thus I have the ability to act in a way that is *ad hoc* because I am an *ad hoc* actor; I can improvise because I am an improviser, and it is my way of being—“having” comes out of “being”; the σχῆμα is what has and holds because, in one way or another, it is.

But even further: improvisation is not simply σχεδιάζειν; it is αὐτοσχεδιάζειν, auto-improvisation. Improvising is always that which one does to and for oneself insofar as one does it to and for another, and vice versa. And if we improvise on something, it improvises on us: action upon the other is action of the other. Just
as if we hold onto something, we hold onto ourselves as holding it, and it holds itself in the holding, as being held; then having is self-having, holding self-holding. If we protect others, we protect ourselves, as protecting and protected, just as much as they protect themselves: protection is auto-protection. So being in a state of wonderment, in wonder at another, is also wonder at oneself, and the wonder of wonderment.

On the one hand then, the improvisations of art and science, acting and doing, improvise-on something or oneself, like a work of art, acting or doing to oneself, schematizing and framing that and how things are. If σχεδιάζειν already means to improvise, the αὐτό signifies that improvisation is not just something we do to another—but if we do it to some other, it also does it to us. In this way, we are not only implicated in what and how we improvise, in being an improviser of this or that, of one sort or another—for our improvisations are just as much implicated in us, so that improvising-on is being-improvised-on, having improvisational powers is being had.

On the other hand, acting and doing, art and science are originally improvisational—self-improvisation as the improvisation-of the self, auto-affecting, as the origin of self (αὐτός,ipse), self-originating, that is, a way of being out of which the self comes to be and is, continuously or not. In this way, we not only have ourselves as an object, do not simply make and remake ourselves in one image or another; rather improvisation as αὐτό-σχεδιάζειν is how we are the origin of ourselves, of ourselves as improvisers and improvisations. And we are implicated thereby, not only in our improvisations, but in improvising.

So with improvisation, we have found the origin of art and science, tragedy and comedy, acting and doing, of the self as improvising and improvised. But clearly we cannot use improvisation to explain improvisation. We cannot be satisfied with an argument that improvisation is, well, improvisational. Rather, if improvising-one’s-self, αὐτό-σχεδιάζειν, means being-one’s-self, the problem would be to think what it means to be oneself, to be a self in anyway whatsoever—and this would imply thinking about the being of a self that improvises, the being of an improvised self, as well as the being of improvisations and improvisation. In other words, the question of the meaning of improvisation implies the question of the meaning of being.

Obviously, what Aristotle means by being, by being qua being, and the being of a self-improvisational being, goes beyond the scope of this essay—so perhaps just a hint or suggestion from the *Metaphysics*:

Now, if being and unity are the same and are of one nature in the sense that they are implied by one another as principle and cause, but not in the sense that they have the same definition (though it makes no difference even if we suppose them to be like that—in fact this would even strengthen our case); for “one man” and “man” are the same thing, and so are “existent man” and “man” and the doubling of the words in “one man and one existent man” does not
express anything different (it is clear that the two things are not separated either in coming to be or in ceasing to be); and similarly “one existent man” adds nothing to “existent man,” so that it is obvious that the addition in these cases means the same thing, and unity is nothing apart from being; and if, further, the substance of each thing is one in no merely accidental way, and similarly is from its very nature something that is—all this being so, there must be exactly as many species of being as of unity.12

Indeed, the origin of making and doing, in the natural and human sciences, in poetry and art, is improvisation—understood as a self-schematizing way of being and being-one’s-self. But if being and unity are implied by one another, improvisation is our way of being one, at least insofar as our unity is self-schematizing, as much as our being; and being and unity would be the ways in which we schematize ourselves, as well as how we improvise.

But if we are improvisers, one of those things that improvises on itself and others, even improvises itself, then would being and unity not be originally implicated thereby as well? And if so, what would that mean for poetics (and for being and unity, that is, for metaphysics)? For if being and unity imply one another, if being and unity both are and are one—well then, what is implication? And is this not how making and doing, poetics and metaphysics, are one?

Andrew Haas is the author of Hegel and the Problem of Multiplicity (Northwestern, 2000) and The Irony of Heidegger (Continuum, 2007), as well as numerous articles in contemporary European philosophy. He is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at the HSE, Moscow. Haas’ latest work can be found at www.youtube.com/user/andrewhaasphilosophy and at www.hse.ru/en/org/persons/93664928. ahaas@hse.ru

Notes


2. “Alle die bisher erörterten Kunstprinzipien müssen wir jetzt zu Hülfe nehmen, um uns in dem Labyrinth zurecht zu finden, als welches wir den Ursprung der griechischen Tragödie bezeichnen müssen. Ich denke nichts Ungereimtes zu behaupten, wenn ich sage, dass das Problem dieses Ursprungs bis jetzt noch nicht einmal ernsthaft aufgestellt, geschweige denn gelöst ist, so oft auch die zerflatternden Fetzen der antiken Überlieferung schon combinatorisch an einander genährt und wieder aus einander gerissen sind” (Friedrich, Nietzsche, Die Geburt der Tragödie; Kritische Studienausgabe (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1967), §7; my translation).

3. παραφανείσης δὲ τῆς τραγῳδίας καὶ κωμῳδίας οἱ ἄρτι ἐκατέρταν τὴν ποίησιν ὄρμοντες κατὰ τὴν οἰκείαν φύσιν οἱ μὲν ἄντι τῶν ἰάμβων κωμῳδοποιοὶ ἐγένοντο, οἱ δὲ ἄντι τῶν ἐπῶν τραγῳδοδιδάσκαλοι, διὰ τὸ μείζω καὶ ἐντιμότερα τὰ σχῆματα
Aristotle's understanding of improvisation is obviously nothing like the modern concept of improvisation as “free play” (e.g. Gilbert Ryle, “Improvisation.” *Mind*, 85(337) (1976): 69–83).

4. καὶ τὸ ποιεῖν αὐτὸ μὲν δρᾶν, Ἀθηναῖοις δὲ πράττειν προσαγορεύειν (*Poetics*, 4.1448b1-2).


6. Ibid., xv.


8. “Rein grammatisch … das scheint aber nicht verständlich zu sein, den was sollte eine archē autoschediastikē sein?” (Koller, “Dithyrambos und Tragödie,” 184).


12. εἰ δὴ τὸ ὄν καὶ τὸ ἕν ταὐτὸν καὶ μία φύσις τῷ ἀκολουθεῖν ἄλληλοις ὡς ακρή καὶ αἴτιον, ἀλλ᾽ οὐχ ὡς ἐνί λόγῳ (δηλούμενα διαφέρει δε οὐθὲν οὐδ᾽ ἂν ὁμοίως ὑπολάβωμεν, ἀλλὰ καὶ πρὸ ἔργου μᾶλλον) ταῦτα γὰρ εἰς ἄνθρωπος καὶ ἄνθρωπος, καὶ ὡς ἄνθρωπος καὶ ἄνθρωπος, καὶ οὐ ἔτερον τί δηλοὶ κατὰ τὴν λέξιν ἐπαναδιπλούμενον τὸ εἰς ἄνθρωπος καὶ εἰς ἄνθρωπος (δῆλον δ᾽ ὅτι οὐ χωρίζεται οὔτ᾽ ἐπὶ γένεσις οὐτ᾽ ἐπὶ φύσει), ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ ἐπὶ τοῦ ἐνός, ὡςτε φανερὸν ὅτι ἡ πρόσθεσις ἐν τούτοις ταῦτα δηλοί, καὶ οὐδὲν ἔτερον τὸ ἐν παρά τὸ ὄν, ἐπ᾽ ὃ δ᾽ ἡ ἐκάστου οὐσία ἐν ἑνών οὐ κατὰ συμβεβηκός, ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ ὅπερ ἐν τι: ὡσθ᾽ ὡσα περ τοῦ ἐνός εἰδή, τοσαυτὰ καὶ τοῦ ὄντος (*Metaphysics*, 4.1003b22-34).

References


