Chapter 8

Improvisation in the Theatre as a Model for Christian Ethics

Samuel Wells

There are three broad strands in contemporary writing on Christian ethics. One, which we might call 'universal', works with the conventional deontological and consequential categories and seeks to find common ground with non-religious approaches for the treatment and resolution of issues of public concern. It is generally guided by the modern need to make Christianity reasonable and useful, as a discipline that seeks understanding that suits all people in all situations. A second, which we might call 'subversive', draws attention to the way the 'mainstream' account suppresses alternative voices, excluded for reasons of gender, race, or other social or environmental location, and seeks to make those voices heard, thereby questioning the apparent consensus. It often appeals to a new quasi-church of marginalized values. A third, which we might call 'ecclesial', seeks to articulate a distinctive theological ethic based on the traditions and practices of the Church and the character and acts of God. The first kind does not do justice to the particularity of the Christian tradition. The second kind is stronger on particularity, but has an anthropology that still tends to be wedded to individual autonomy or self-expression. This study pursues the third approach.

1. Faithfulness without a Script

Many theologians have explored the Christian life as the performance of the Christian story.[1] But the notion of performing a script has drawbacks. The script does not provide all the answers. Life throws up circumstances that the gospel seems not to cover. The script is unfinished. There is more to the Christian story than the pages of the Bible disclose. The notion of script can militate against genuine engagement with the world. The idea of a script can suggest the recreation of a golden era – emphasising the replication of past acts, rather than the discovery of new wonders.

1 Among many authors, see Nicholas Lash, 'Performing the Scriptures', in *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM, 1986), 37–46; Frances Young, *The Art of Performance* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990); Walter Brueggemann, *The Bible and the Postmodern Imagination: Texts Under Negotiation* (London: SCM, 1993), 64–70; Stephen Barton, 'New Testament Interpretation as Performance', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 52:2, 179–208.

These drawbacks can encourage the Church to follow predictable courses. Sometimes it lives in the past, aspiring to a world of scriptural purity. Sometimes it dismisses the script, as the fruit of a bygone era, or a curtailment of freedom. Sometimes it seeks to translate the script into contemporary motifs. The confluence of these approaches can lead to considerable bewilderment. The Church feels alone on a rough sea, with no anchor and no stars to steer by.

What is required is a way of being faithful without the reassurance of a script. This is the purpose of improvisation.[2] When improvisers are trained to work in the theatre, they are schooled in a tradition so thoroughly that they learn to act from instinct in ways appropriate to the circumstance. To recognise the significance of improvisation, a number of positive and negative assertions must be appreciated. Improvisation is inevitable: it is the only way to cherish a tradition without being locked in the past. Improvisation is scriptural – it is true to the earliest traditions of the Church: when the disciples met at the Council of Jerusalem, they had to find a way of maintaining the particularity of God's call to Israel in the new context of the Gentile mission.[3] Improvisation is ecclesial – it incorporates key practices of the Church: it is a form of hermeneutics, it is concerned with discernment, it is corporate, it is concerned with engaging with the world. On the negative side, several misapprehensions should be dispelled. Improvisation is not about being original, but about learning and daring to be obvious when all are paralysed. Improvisation is not about being clever or witty, but about allowing oneself to relax, the important work having already been done. Improvisation is not about being demonic, but about trusting the unconscious and conforming it to the service of God.

My understanding of theatrical improvisation is drawn from the tradition of practitioners such as Keith Johnstone, Viola Spolin, Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow.[4] Others have written on the tradition of musical improvisation, and this is a

---

2 Gerard Loughlin explains concisely what this means: 'When a person enters the scriptural story he or she does so by entering the Church's performance of that story: he or she is baptised into a biblical and ecclesial drama. It is not so much being written into a book as taking part in a play, a play that has to be improvised on the spot. As Rowan Williams puts it, people are 'invited to "create" themselves in finding a place within this drama – an improvisation in the theatre workshop, but one that purports to be about a comprehensive truth affecting one's identity and future.' *Telling God's Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 20, quoting Rowan Williams, 'Postmodern Theology and the Judgement of the World', in Frederic B. Burnham (ed.), *Postmodern Theology: Christian Faith in a Pluralist World* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), 97.

3 Jeremy Begbie in *Theology, Music and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), describes the whole of the *Acts of the Apostles* as 'a stream of new, unpredictable, improvisations' (222–23).

4 Keith Johnstone, *Impro: Improvisation in the Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1981) and *Impro for Storytellers* (London: Faber, 1999); Ronald James and Peter Williams, *A Guide to Improvisation: A Handbook for Teachers* (Kemble Press: Banbury, 1980); Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theatre: A Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques* (London:

highly promising line of enquiry, but it is not my concern here.[5] It is not necessary to be too precise about defining the stage, players, and audience. Both the tradition of improvisation and the Christian story are as interested in disrupting any static notions of this kind as they are in upholding them. For example God, Church and world may respectively each be seen as any of the three (stage, players, and audience), or all, at different times. My treatment will, however, remain true to three features characteristic of most theatrical improvisation: the use of games, the prevalence of humour, and the sense of an implicit but always surprising narrative. My proposal comes in six parts. But I begin with a story.

2. A Story

The story of Harry was related to me by a friend called Robin.[6] While studying for the Lutheran ministry, Robin was placed in a parish in Akron, Ohio. Harry was a member of Robin's placement parish. The pastoral staff of the parish went to see him at home once a week. They generally brought a tape of the Sunday service, a pew slip, and the sacrament. It tended to be the last role handed out at the staff meeting. The time came for Robin to take her turn on the visiting rota, and discover why.

When Robin first called on Harry, she got a shock. Harry lived in a run-down white clapboard house. He was a big person, sitting in an over-stuffed armchair with an oxygen tank beside it. His legs were virtually useless. The house was pervaded by a smell of must, urine, and dirt. It was repulsive. Nonetheless, Robin went a second time, and gradually Harry came to trust that she would return regularly. As he realised he was not going to be rejected by her, he began to talk more about himself and the way he saw things. Yet he seldom said much about his debilitating physical condition, or the squalor in which he was living.

One day Harry said to Robin, 'It's time for you to have a look in the cellar.' Reluctantly, and somewhat uneasily, Robin walked to the cellar door. She carefully opened it, and looked into the darkness. 'Go down the steps!' Harry insisted, realising her hesitancy. To Robin's astonishment, she saw a large and imposing weaver's loom set up in the basement. There were piles of old clothes and torn strips of cloth. Robin stared in amazement. After trying for some time without success to relate the creativity of what she saw to the dirt and smell of the man she knew, she came back up the stairs, totally bemused.

Harry instructed Robin to bring him a pile of rugs from the kitchen. He took them from her and put them down in front of him, and began to tell the story of his life. He explained that he took in any old clothes that nobody wanted, and scraps of

---

Pitman, 1973); Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow, *Improvisation in Drama* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990).

5 Especially Jeremy Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*, 179–270; and Frances Young, *The Art of Performance.*

6 I have previously related this story in 'Harry's Story: A Story of God's Power and Ours', *Christian*, 99, 3 (Autumn 1999), 10.

cloth from the rubbish heap. He then wove them into something new. The something new was the pile of rag rugs she had found stacked in his kitchen. He then gave what he had made to people who needed a rug. Why did he do it? Because, he said, he felt he was like the old clothes and the waste cloth. He was on the rubbish heap of life – alienated from his friends and his family, unable to work, unable even to breathe properly. He gave Robin his finest rug. Some weeks later, she conducted his funeral.

The time came for her to return to her seminary and complete her studies. At one tutorial she shared Harry's story with a group of her colleagues. After the session, a fellow student touched Robin's arm, took her to one side, and said 'Harry was my uncle.' The student was in tears, for she realised that she had lost her chance of reconciliation with him. She had thought of Harry as a pariah but she could now see he was a saint. Robin retrieved her precious rug, which Harry had given her and gave it to her fellow student. Even after his death, Harry's ministry was transforming the lives of people whom he touched. As Robin told me the story she added, finally, 'I am still moved by his witness.'

I shall now explore improvisation in six stages.

3. Forming Habits

'The battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton.' The Duke of Wellington's famous reflection on the climax of the Napoleonic wars was not a statement of personal modesty. It was a recognition that success in battle depends on the character of one's soldiers. It was an observation that Britain had institutions that formed people with the kind of virtues that could survive and even thrive in the demanding circumstances of war. The Duke's claim is that one cannot understand Waterloo without understanding Eton. In fact, what went on in places like Eton was more important than what went on at Waterloo. At Eton, people were trained to shoulder the kind of responsibility they were later to encounter at Waterloo. The real decisions that took place at Waterloo, decisions that shaped the future of European history, had been taken many years earlier. The Duke is saying that ethics is about people, not about actions. The heart of ethics lies in the formation of character. Once out in the 'battlefield', it is too late.

The Duke's claim sits well with the revival in contemporary moral theology of an ethic of virtue. An ethic of virtue says morality is not just about doing the right thing in a crisis, but being a good person all the time. It is therefore not about isolated actions but about agents. It is not about moments of decision but about formation. It is not about universal quandaries but about personal qualities. It is not about what it is right for all to do, but about what it is good for some to be. It is about character.

The Duke's words incline us to focus on the significance of training in moral habit. This is what the Duke called 'Eton'. Training requires commitment, discipline,

faithfulness, study, apprenticeship, practice, cooperation, observation, reflection.[7] The point of this formation is to form skills and habits – habits that mean people take the right things for granted and skills that give them ability to do the things they take for granted. When Waterloo comes, it separates those whose character has been appropriately formed from those whose has not. Just as children cannot become adults in an instant, so in every moral 'situation', the real decisions are ones that have been taken some time before. This is what the foolish bridesmaids discovered when their lamp oil ran out in the parable of judgement in Matthew 25. To live well requires both effort and habit. There is a place for both. But great ingenuity or effort at the moment of decision will seldom make up for effort neglected in the time of formation.

The practice of theatrical improvisation is perceived to be about spontaneity, the moment – but it, too, is in fact about years of experiments. Like Wellington's Eton it is also about long preparation before following instinct. Likewise it is about being ready to face the unknown. This state of readiness, the alertness that comes from years of disciplined preparation, is the condition to which improvisers aspire. Jacques Lecoq, one of the leading practitioners in using improvisation as a way of preparing a script for performance, uses the term *la disponibilité*.[8] *La disponibilité* is a condition of relaxed awareness. In this state of awareness the actor senses no need to impose an order on the outside world or on the imagination; there is openness to both receiving and giving. The actor is at one with the whole context: self, other actors, audience, theatre space. It is like the condition of athletes at the height of their form and fitness: but added to that is an awareness of others and an openness to the unknown. The improviser in this state of readiness has to hand all the skills of the trade that I shall explore. There is trust and respect for oneself and the other actors. There is alertness and attention. There is fitness and engagement. There is an understanding of narrative – of what is an end and what is a beginning of a scene or story. There is an ability to keep the narrative going and to explore a situation. There is a willingness to reintroduce discarded material. There is an aptitude for altering and playing with status roles, for relating to others, remembering, sustaining and developing character, and sensing the shape of a story.

A person with skills of this kind has gained them through years of training. Such a player will not strive too hard to be original. The prison of originality arises from a misunderstanding of the nature of spontaneity, rather as the prison of quandary ethics arises from a misconception of the moral life. The great French improviser Jacques Copeau noted that 'Improvisation is an art that has to be learned. … The art of improvising is not just a gift. It is acquired and perfected by study.'[9]

---

7 On formation see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, Tradition* (London: Duckworth, 1990), 58–68; and Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom: How the Church is to Behave if Freedom, Justice and a Christian Nation are Bad Ideas* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 93–111.

8 Frost and Yarrow, *Improvisation in Drama*, 151–55.

9 Quoted in Frost and Yarrow, *Improvisation in Drama*, 25.

Perhaps the most widely respected writer on theatrical improvisation, Keith Johnstone, speaks of spontaneity in words that are equally relevant to ethics: 'The improviser has to realise that the more obvious he is, the more original he appears. ... People trying to be original always arrive at the same boring old answers. Ask people to give you an original idea and see the chaos it throws them into. If they said the first thing that came into their head, there'd be no problem. An artist who is inspired is being *obvious*. He's not making any decisions; he's not weighing up one idea against another. ... How else could Dostoyevsky have dictated one novel in the morning and one in the afternoon for three weeks in order to fulfil his contracts?'[10]

Experienced improvisers know that if they have attained a state of relaxed awareness, they can trust themselves to be obvious. It is not too difficult to draw an analogy between this state of relaxed awareness and the Christian experience of contemplative prayer. In the popular imagination, prayer is something one resorts to in a time of crisis. To the Christian disciple, by contrast, prayer can either be moral training in the disciplines of listening to God, or it can be an experience of the grace of 'being obvious' in God's presence. The former is the prayer of effort, the latter the prayer of habit. The aim of the former is to make the latter a matter of instinct – an unselfconscious activity that becomes 'second nature'. The practices and disciplines of Christian discipleship aim to give Christians this state of relaxed awareness, so that they have the freedom – indeed, the skill – to 'be obvious' in what might otherwise seem an anxious crisis.

Wellington's aristocracy prepared for Waterloo on the playing fields. Likewise improvisers train by playing games. Games are a very helpful form of training. A game lasts for a short time. It is understood to be a suspension of conventional rules. It is a project, rather than a life's endeavour. It is thus relatively safe. Because it is safe, one has the freedom to experiment, make mistakes, and discover hidden gifts and talents. By playing a game over and over again one may develop habits and establish skills. One may also perceive analogies with situations in conventional life to which those skills and talents may be transferred and applied. One may quickly see that games are a well-attested method of training for all kinds of practices, and that worship is a game, that trains us for heaven.

Theatrical improvisation is all about games.[11] Games are both training and performance – both preparation and 'situation'. Improvisation thus inspires us to see the whole of life as a game and – far from that being trivial – to imagine the whole of life as worship. Worship, in this sense, is a game that intensifies everyday life, and trains Christians in virtue. Training for worship, training for discipleship is vital – in many ways it *is* worship, it *is* discipleship. Training in improvisation is an analogy for worship and discipleship – an analogy at times so close it becomes the

10 Johnstone, *Impro*, 87–88. Virtuous people, such as Thomas More in Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, seldom consider themselves to have had a choice.

11 For an extensive list of games and a thorough examination of their political implications, see Augusto Boal, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, translated by Adrian Jackson (London: Routledge, 1992).

real thing. Improvisation games are best played by actors with *la disponibilité* – by people of alertness, ready to play. In just the same way, worship is best enjoyed by a community of character – by disciples of holiness, ready to pray.

4. Assessing Status

The great cry of liberation theology is a cry for theology to take seriously its context. This turn towards context is a significant step in uniting ethics and theology. But the insight that comes from theatrical improvisation takes us a step further. It points out that context is an issue not just when there is a notable difference in wealth, education, class, privilege, working pattern or living conditions. Context is an issue in any and every interaction between two or more people. And this is not a static context of environmental situation or conventional social role. It is not something that people accept because they *are*. It is something that people choose in the way they *do* – the way they relate to a given other. Do they act and speak in a way that assumes superiority or inferiority, dominance or submission? This is the choice that improvisers call status. Status informs every single interaction between people – no casual movement or gesture is without significance. There are no innocent remarks or meaningless pauses.[12] Part of the force of the story of Harry and Robin is the slippery status of Robin, a trainee who does the job her seniors avoid, becomes the student of the remarkable outcast Harry, and then a teacher of his niece.

Compare three teachers. One was well liked, but could not keep control of the class. She frequently touched her face, often blinked, tended to twitch and laugh nervously. She invariably arrived breathless and late for class and apologised for doing so, and regularly started sentences with a short 'er' as if she was interrupting the pupils' concentration. A second teacher was widely disliked, but had no trouble keeping discipline, and had no need to resort to punishments or threats. He sat nervelessly still. He paused before each reply or pronouncement, and sometimes interjected a long 'err' before he spoke. His head remained still while he spoke, and he never touched his face. He often used pupils' names when he spoke to them. A third teacher was genuinely loved. She seldom punished, but still kept the attention and interest of the class. She smiled easily, walked tall, but was always relaxed. The atmosphere in the class could be lively and humorous – but then suddenly calm and thoughtful. The first teacher was a low-status player. The second, a compulsive high-status player. The third was a status expert who could raise and lower her own status at will.

At first acquaintance, it is common to assume that high status is much more powerful than low status. But this is far from the case. A crucial breakthrough comes when actors realise that high and low status are simply alternative methods for getting one's way. The next stage is to introduce a conventional relationship, and to witness the difference between the status people are and the status they play. This is

12 I owe my understanding of status to Keith Johnstone, *Impro*, 33–74, and *Impro for Storytellers*, 219–31 and 352–53.

the most fascinating dynamic in status interactions. It is generally known as Master-Servant. A common experience of this kind of status transaction is that of customer-shop assistant. The expectation is that the customer calls the tune and the assistant plays it. But the servant often knows best. I once joined a friend who was going into a superior high street outfitter. 'Do you sell those little pieces of plastic you insert into a shirt to stiffen the collar?' my friend asked. The assistant proffered a handful, and said, 'We don't sell them, sir, we give them away.' The servile language masks a high-status response, and prevents it from seeming aggressive. These details provide the fascination in such interplays. The most famous master-servant relations are ones where the servant has all the power, but will lose it the very moment that either party acknowledges it is so – thus Sir Humphrey and Prime Minister James Hacker, Jeeves and Wooster, or perhaps Tony Blair and George W. Bush. The see-sawing and constant reversals of status provide the dynamism.

The first stage in understanding status is to recognise that status transactions are inherent in every relationship. The second is to see that people make choices in their use of language and gesture about whether to play high or low status. The third is to appreciate that 'high' and 'low' are not moral designations, or even measurements of relative power: they are simply alternative strategies for getting one's way. The fourth is to begin to enjoy the dynamics of status interactions displayed in the affirmation and subversion of a conventional relationship. The fifth and last dimension to perceive is the significance of the use of space. These five dimensions of status each have significant implications for the Church and its understanding of its ethical task and its relationship with wider society.

The politics of local church life is, like the life of any organisation, filled with status interactions. Consider the moment at which a date for a future meeting is arranged. One person gets out a tiny diary. Another gets out an enormous diary. Another gets out an electronic diary, which takes some while to warm up. A fourth does not carry a diary, but makes all arrangements through a personal secretary at the office. A fifth does not have a diary, because they consider that they can remember such special events as would break their routine. A sixth has left their diary at home, forgetful as ever. Then dates are suggested. One person explains their unavailability in terms of all their upcoming dental appointments and driving lessons. Another is out of the country for the next month. A third says they will need to consult their partner. A fourth says they could make the suggested time, so long as people understand that means they would be an hour late. A fifth says they could make any time, they are completely flexible. A sixth says they must be getting away, but not to worry, just go ahead and they will try to fit in and let the others know. And then the moment comes when a date is set. Whose absence is insignificant, and whose is decisive?

Status interactions are ubiquitous in the relationship of the local church corporately to the community it serves. How do the size, age, and design of the church building compare to other buildings in the community? Are the doors open, closed or locked? Is the faith and activity of the church broadcast by noticeboard or kept a secret? What is the principal way in which the church encounters local people – through knocking on doors or written leaflets (the salesperson or mail-order company), pre-

arranged meetings between representatives of organisations with common interests (the business person), or the availability of a designated representative at advertised hours for particular services (the professional person)? Does the local church believe it speaks for 'all people of good will' in the community, or does it assume that its voice will probably be a minority view on most issues? Does it expect to lead, join or follow? Does it call its leader pastor, minister or priest, and what social standing does it expect its leader to have in the community? These are all questions of status.

Similar questions arise when the corporate context changes from local to national. Does the Church consider itself to speak for Truth, which needs no defence, or for a group of beleaguered believers, whose interests need upholding? Does the Church consider itself part of Government, concerned with the balance of power and the benefit of all? Or does it presume that it will always be with the marginalized and oppressed, and therefore never at the castle, always at the gate? Where does the Church locate its national centre of operations, and in what kind of premises? How does it institute and regard its leaders? How does it hope or assume non-Christians will regard these leaders? Will that esteem be earned, and if so, how – or can it be taken for granted? These are all questions of status.

5. Accepting and Blocking

'There are people who prefer to say "Yes", and there are people who prefer to say "No". Those who say "Yes" are rewarded by the adventures they have, and those who say "No" are rewarded by the safety they attain.'[13] Improvisation begins when a community of people resolve to find ways of 'saying "Yes"'. Communities generally find several reasons why they prefer instead to 'say "No"'. They tend to see 'saying "Yes"' as impossible, improper, or dangerous.

A simple game, called 'Word at a Time', illustrates what is at stake in saying 'Yes'. The game begins with the actors sitting in a circle. One actor says a single word. This becomes the first word of a story. The actor next in the circle follows immediately with a second word, the next actor says a third, and so on, as quickly as possible, until the story is considered complete. Adverbs are disallowed in order to keep up the pace and avoid delaying tactics. Inexperienced actors invariably try to control the story. But this only succeeds in ruining it. Every person who adds a word has an incipient story in mind, and thus an idea of what word might follow. But each time they must instantly wipe that idea out of their mind – or else they will be paralysed. If the players relax, cease to worry about being 'obvious', remain highly attentive, and simply say whatever comes to mind, they will find the story seems to take on a life of its own, guided by some outside force.[14]

The reason improvisation seems impossible to inexperienced players is that instinctively they spend most of their time trying to avoid being dangerous. The story constantly threatens to become obscene, psychotic, or unoriginal. These all

13 Johnstone, *Impro*, 92.

14 Ibid., 131.

represent danger. Thus there is a constant, irresistible, temptation to 'kill' the story. This can be done passively by saying 'Stop' or remaining silent; or actively by trying to control its future, insisting on being clever or original, or closing it without regard to its foregoing content whenever its direction threatens danger.

The breakthrough in improvisation training comes when actors realise that their performance is not a linear method of getting as efficiently as possible from point A to point B. On the contrary, detours are most of the fun. This changes the whole notion of what constitutes a mistake. As one experienced director puts it, 'Mistakes are re-evaluated as possibilities of new directions. … Rightness is more a question of *attitude*, not of what you do but of how you do it, whether you are prepared to play with what comes along.'[15] Rather like the comedian Ronnie Corbett telling a story, the experienced improviser knows that the simplest narrative interlaced with teasing detours often makes the best drama. This is illustrated by a game called Lantern Lecture.[16] Actor 1 is an explorer showing slides to select friends. Actor 2 is the slides. Actor 1 describes the first slide – 'This is me climbing the Andes'. Actor 2 mimes the slide, then changes position and mimes a second slide. Actor 1 must describe the slide the Actor 2 has adopted – 'This is me being lifted up by a South American condor' – whereupon Actor 1 then continues by describing the next slide, and so on.

Three technical terms may assist in exploring what it means to 'say "Yes"'. The first is the term 'offer'. Anything an actor does may be regarded as an offer. An offer may be a speech, a facial expression or gesture, or an action – even an attempt to remain silent or still. Any of these things may be treated as an invitation to respond, and thus be treated as an offer. Thus in the game 'Word at a Time', each word is both a response to an offer and immediately an offer in itself. Offers are not to be regarded as good or bad in themselves: the key is, what you do with them.

The second term is 'accept'. An actor accepts an offer by any response that maintains the premise of the action that constituted that offer. Imagine a child in the playground puts two fingers together and points them towards another child, and then clicks another finger and says 'Bang! You're dead'. This is an offer. The second child then has the opportunity to respond to that offer. If the child is prepared to accept the offer, they will conventionally do so by yelping a strangled cry and falling over in a crumpled heap, for this maintains the premise of the first child's offer. To do this requires the same skills of the second child that are required to play the game 'Word at a Time'. The second child must be willing and able to wipe from their mind any thoughts they themselves had of actively controlling the outcome of the narrative, and resist the inclination to a passive refusal, such as 'I'm not playing any more.'

The third term is 'block'. Imagine once again that the first child acts a shot and says 'Bang! You're dead.' If the second child were actively to refuse to accept the offer and fall down, but were instead to remain standing and say 'Bang! *You're* dead,

15 Frost and Yarrow, *Improvisation in Drama*, 59.

16 See James and Williams, *A Guide to Improvisation*, 49.

not me' then this would be a 'block'. Blocking prevents the action from developing. It undermines one's partner's premise. It may be amusing to watch, but it kills the story. It turns a partnership into a confrontation. It happens when one actor is overwhelmed by the danger or difficulty of keeping the story going. Accepting sees the future as an opportunity – blocking sees the future as a problem. All sorts of possibilities are ruled out by blocking. Imagine once again that the first child shoots and says 'Bang! You're dead.' This time the second child accepts the offer. Now the second child may begin to explore the after-life of the dead soldier, and perhaps reappear to the first soldier as a ghost or angel. But this only becomes possible if the original death, the first offer, is accepted. Now the story can really develop, as the first child may be introduced to other angels, fall in love with one of them, have to choose whether to die in order to be united with their beloved, and so on.

One author lists 17 ways in which inexperienced improvisers can kill a story.[17] Besides blocking, there is wimping (in Word at a Time this would mean postponing the noun with endless adjectives), gossiping (avoiding interaction by discussing things that are happening elsewhere), joining (having the same reaction as your partner), being original (a form of sidetracking that in fact avoids interaction with disturbing material), and gagging (getting a laugh by resisting the story). The director overcomes these destructive tactics through intervening immediately when an actor begins to block, however subtle the block may be.[18]

What would it be like to be committed never to block, always to accept? What would it be like to be surrounded by people who are committed to the practice of accepting all offers? The interactions in such a community seem telepathic. It looks like everything has already been arranged. There is no such thing as an accident or an interruption. Everything becomes an offer that can be accepted. 'The actor who will accept anything that happens seems supernatural; it's the most marvellous thing about improvisation: you are suddenly in contact with people who are unbounded, whose imagination seems to function without limit. … People with dull lives often think that their lives are dull by chance. In reality everyone chooses more or less what kind of events will happen to them by their conscious patterns of blocking and yielding.'[19] One author goes even further on this point: 'Improvisation is not exchange of information between players: it is communion.'[20]

Blocking appears to some as faithful resilience. But in that it buries its talent in the hillside it may anticipate the punishment handed out to the third slave; and in that it sets its stall against the inevitable tide of time, it may anticipate the heritage of King Canute. I argue that for the Church to block is not desirable, necessary or possible.

---

17 Johnstone, *Impro for Storytellers*, 101–29.

18 Ibid., 145–48. In a game called 'Help him Boris', an interrogator inflicts immediate and merciless punishment (usually with a balloon) if the victim blocks unacceptably.

19 Johnstone, *Impro*, 99–100.

20 Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theatre*, 45.

But is accepting the only alternative? It is certainly essential to learn how to accept, and to learn why and how to avoid blocking. But accepting is not the only alternative. I suggest an approach that requires the skills learned through accepting, but does not stop there. Just because the Church does not take up arms against evil, it does not mean that it simply capitulates to it. The Church does not simply accept the story of evil. It has a story of its own. The Church's story begins before evil began and ends after evil has ended. This story does not accept evil – it over-accepts it.

6. Questioning Givens

Christian ethics is often treated as the negotiation of the rival claims of competing 'givens'. There is, for example, the limitation of time, and the given of death. There is the limitation of knowledge and the human mind, and thus the given of ignorance. There is the limitation of space and the human body, and thus of freedom. And there is the limitation of goodness and the given of sin and evil. The sum of these givens is sometimes understood as Natural Law. Tragedy is generally the story of those who have tried hubristically to ignore such givens, and have consequently met their fate.

It is helpful at this point to make a distinction between 'givens' and 'gifts'.[21] It is the task of the imagination to change or challenge the presumed 'necessities' of the world, to resist the implication that what the Christian community receives are 'givens' rather than 'gifts'. In this sense, 'givens' are things that are simply there and the community must simply adapt to, if it is to remain in the 'real' world, whereas 'gifts' are largely what we make of them. For 'Christian realists', the task of Christian ethics is to adapt to such 'givens' as prevail in the contemporary world - the objective material causes of life. Ethics becomes a process of adjudicating between competing 'givens'.[22] Since the emphasis of givenness is on the giver, ethics is primarily seen from the point of view of those who are in the best position to control the majority of the giving – that is, the powerful. It is thus supposed that if Christians put themselves in positions of power they will influence the 'givens' in a positive way.

For the nonviolent Christian community, by contrast, the only 'given' is the Church's narrative: all else is potentially 'gift'. It is not therefore a question of

---

21 From the considerable literature on the notion of gift, see especially Jacques Derrida, *Given Time I: Counterfeit Money*, translated by Peggy Kamuf (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, translated by W. D. Halls (London: Routledge, 1990); Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being: Hors Texte*, translated by Thomas A. Carlson with a Foreword by David Tracy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); John Milbank, 'Can a Gift Be Given? Prolegomena to a Future Trinitarian Metaphysic', *Modern Theology* 11, 1995, 119–61; Loughlin, *Telling God's Story*, 223–45; Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*, 246-70.

22 'We are not to accept the world with its hates and resentments as a given, but to recognise that we live in a new age which makes possible a new way of life.' Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 85.

putting oneself in a position of power. Ethics is not principally about how to do the giving. God is the only true giver. His story of how he deals with his people is the definitive 'given'. Ethics is done by people who are on the *receiving* end, working out how to accept things that present themselves as 'givens' but cannot be since there is only one 'given' – the narrative of scripture and the Church's tradition. Moreover discernment concerns the reception of God's abundant gifts, rather than the distribution of the world's limited givens.[23] Harry's niece had only ever seen her uncle as a given. Through Robin's tutorial, she came for the first time to see him, his condition and his faith as a gift. The process of transforming fate into destiny can be seen as a threefold process: first recognising that much of what seems 'given' is in fact 'gift'; second realising that the key to a 'gift' is not its intrinsic nature or purpose but in how we respond and accept it; and third, receiving the gift in such a way that it becomes part of the continuing story of the way God deals with his people. Thus is fate (a 'given') transformed into destiny (a 'gift'). The key to receiving is to place the apparent 'given' within a larger story and thus render it a 'gift'. That process, as I shall now describe, is called overaccepting.

7. Incorporating Gifts

This brings us to a simple, but immensely significant, game, which demonstrates the suggestive power of improvisation for Christian ethics. The game is called Presents.[24] It is played in pairs. A thinks of a present they would like to give to B, and then mimes giving it to them. B has to guess what it is, and use it accordingly. The players then swap roles, and B passes a mimed present to person A, and so on.

The trouble with this game is, of course, that it can be difficult to identify what the gift is; the players can get frustrated with each other, as each mimes more and more outlandish gifts, leaving the other more and more bewildered. Each actor seems in competition, and feels it. How can this change? The secret to making the game a success is, not to think of interesting things to give, but to concentrate on making the thing one is *given* as interesting as possible. If A simply holds out two hands, as if proffering something in a box, B may be delighted to receive an array of possible gifts: 'Everything you are given delights you. Maybe you wind it up and let it walk about the floor, or you sit it on your arm and let it fly off after a small bird, or maybe you put it on and turn into a gorilla.'[25] If the game is played this way, the stifling sense of competition disappears, and great joy and energy are released.

The change to the game might be simple, but the change in thinking is enormous. All offers are now potential gifts. When the burden of the game lies with the giver, the giver requires the kind of imagination that determines the future. Great frustration

23 For more on the distinction between scarcity and abundance, see John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology*, *Language*, *Culture* (Oxford and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell), especially 219–32.

24 Keith Johnstone**,** *Impro*, 100–101.

25 Ibid., 101.

arises if the gift is misinterpreted. When, by contrast, the emphasis lies with the receiver, the imagination co-operates, adapts, and develops.

I want to suggest that what the gift game pictures is a revolution in thinking about Christian ethics. Ethics as it is generally described is invariably perceived as a matter of choosing when to say yes and when to say no. But the 'Presents' game shows that in fact Person B has three options when offered a present by person A. B can say, first, no, I am not going to receive this gift. Saying no appears, in the short term, to maintain one's own security. This is the approach associated with the Essene sect of first-century Palestine.[26] Throughout Christian history there have always been groups that said no to some or all 'gifts' that came their way from wider society. The Strict Brethren might be said to represent this position today. It is the position H.R. Niebuhr described as 'Christ against Culture'.[27] There are many things to which it is often said the wider church should say no. The lists sometimes include slavery and murder, often nuclear weapons and embryo research, perhaps abortion and euthanasia, sometimes betting slips, tobacco, and alcohol. Most churches have recognised that one cannot say no to one's culture wholesale. To do so is to deny the goodness of God's creation, and to declare war on society.

So, what else can B do? B can say, second, what *is* this gift? What is it *for*? What am I *supposed* to do with it? This is the way the game is usually played, as I have described above. It is also the way the game is usually played in Christian ethics. B accepts the gift, but does not know what the gift is. The dilemma of B as to the nature of the gift corresponds to the moment of decision that is the focus of quandary ethics. For just as the present is given by A in the game, so are circumstances 'given' at moments of decision, and the decision-maker must adjudicate between them. And just as the game is frustrating when played this way, so is decision-making, and ethics that concentrates on decisions, often immensely trying. The assumption is often made that there *is* a right thing to do in each circumstance. Such reasoning is often based on natural law. Natural law arguments tend to assume that everything was created for a purpose, and that when it is employed about its correct purpose all is well. This is the position of B: desperately wondering what this gift is *for*.

There is a third option. Person B can say, third, how do I want to *receive* this gift? This is the transition that I have described in the way the gift game is played above. It is not a question of what the gift is *supposed* to be: it is a question of what the gift *can* be. One does not say 'What is this gift *for*?' – and even less 'Is this a good gift?'; one says 'How can this gift be understood or used in a faithful way?', 'What does the way we accept this gift say about the kind of people we are and want to be?', 'What can (or has) this gift become in the kingdom of God?' The ethical issues are less about the gift itself than about where it is perceived to fit into the story of the way God deals with his people and how that fitting-in takes place.

---

26 For an interesting application of this kind of thinking to the context of first-century Palestine, see John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Behold the Man! Our Victorious Lamb* (Second Edition, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 96–97.

27 H.R. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951), 45–82.

This is called 'overaccepting'.[28] Overaccepting is accepting in the light of a larger story. The fear about accepting is that one will be determined by the gift, and thus lose one's integrity and identity. The fear about blocking is that one will seal oneself off from the world, and thus lose one's relevance and humanity. Overaccepting is an active way of receiving that enables one to retain both identity and relevance. It is a way of accepting without losing the initiative. This often involves a change of status. Diana, Princess of Wales was asked in a television interview whether she thought she would ever be Queen. She famously replied 'I will be Queen of people's hearts', thus not blocking the awkwardness of her predicament, but overaccepting the sadness of losing her throne, and placing herself in what she saw as a far more significant narrative. The steel workers of the film *The Full Monty* had been stripped of their dignity by the experience of unemployment. They overaccepted their condition by developing a thriving male-stripper routine. Robin's friend Harry did not block the squalor of his ill health and living conditions, but overaccepted them by converting rubbish into items of usefulness and beauty.

Overaccepting imitates the manner of God's reign. For God does not block his creation: he does not toss away his original material. Since Noah, he has refused to destroy what he has made. But neither does he accept creation on its own terms. Instead, he 'overaccepts' his creation. He sees what it can be, and by the way he incorporates it into his kingdom, through election, incarnation, passion, resurrection, and the sending of the Spirit, he demonstrates his character, the kind of God he is. Christians imitate the character of God to the extent that they overaccept the gifts of creation and culture in the same way God does.[29]

It may be helpful to illustrate the tactic of overaccepting from human experience. The story is told of a concert pianist who was on the point of beginning a performance when there was a scream from the audience. A child had left her seat beside her parent and was running around the auditorium. The concert pianist stepped away from his instrument in order to maintain concentration. The child ran up the steps onto the stage, sat herself down on the stool and began to play discordant notes at random as she pleased. The hushed audience gasped in horror and embarrassment. The pianist walked towards the child and stood behind her as she played. The pianist leant over her and, without disturbing her, placed right and left hands outside her two small hands on the keyboard. The pianist then began to play, in response to her notes, weaving their discordant sounds into an improvised melody. To have thrown the child out would have been to block: to have let her play on would have been to accept; to weave a wonderful melody around her was to receive her as a gift, to overaccept. A similar practice is common among instrumental performers when they

28 Johnstone, *Impro*, 102.

29 The best studies of the political dimensions of this claim in New Testament perspective are David Toole, *Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo: Theological Reflections on Nihilism*, *Tragedy and Apocalypse* (Boulder: Westview, 1997 and London: SCM, 2001), 232–48; and James C. Scott, *Domination and the Art of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

make mistakes in their play, incorporating what they call passing notes into their performance rather than calling a halt.

8. Reincorporating the Lost

Two questions persistently present themselves. The first question is, on what resources does the Church draw in order to overaccept? In other words, how does the sense of being part of a greater story translate into overaccepting in Christian practice? The second question is, how does the Church address evil, both in the contemporary world and in the Church's own history? In other words, how does the Church accept particularly sinister offers, and how does it accept the fact that in the past it has often blocked that which was good, and accepted that which was evil?

My answer to these questions begins with the building of a road. Imagine Church history as a road, stretching from the past into the future. It is in the character of roads to dig and cleave and thrust their way through the countryside, leaving considerable quantities of debris to either side. This is in some ways an ugly process, as environmental campaigners have insisted in recent years. To take another, less linear analogy, one may compare Church history to a sculpture, at which the sculptor continually chips away, and in so doing creates a great mound of discarded plaster or marble. What has happened in the liberation movement both outside and inside the Church in recent generations has been the cry of the discarded marble, the searing pain of the displaced earth. For the Church has come to realise that history is written by the winners, whereas the faith of Mary's Magnificat proclaims the God who is on the side of the losers. And the losers in Church history have tended to be the same people who have been the losers in society as a whole.

The revelation brought by the liberation movement in the Church in the last thirty years is that the earth cast aside in making the road is at least as much a part of the story as the road itself; that the marble discarded by the sculptor is at least as much a part of the display as the sculpture. It is now much easier to see, for poor and rich alike, that the losers, whose voice has not been heard, are at least as much a part of Church history as those winners who have written it. The Church has got to get used to the face of the poor, because it will see them on thrones in the final act of the drama. That final act is when the promises of Hannah's song and Mary's Magnificat are realised, when the sorrow of this world is turned to dancing. If the Church wants to be a part of that final act, it has to be shaped and formed by its chief characters as they appear in the current act. By working with and being with and in some circumstances being the poor, the excluded, the Church faithfully follows its Lord and anticipates his coming again. The closer the Church is to the poor in this act of the drama, the more prepared it will be to come face to face with God in the final act.

Those who have told stories to children will have experienced that vacant, wandering expression that children sometimes have, which masks a razor-sharp allegiance to the conventions of story telling. Should one try to miss out chunks

of the plot, or finish before the end of the story, one suffers the accusing wrath of the deeply wronged. This is the case even if one is making up the story as one is going along. How do children know whether one has or has not reached the end of the story? The key to improvising children's stories is not in thinking up clever or original characters or contexts, but in remembering what has been discarded and reintroducing it at the appropriate moment. Likewise the key to improvising on the Christian story is not in being clever or original, but in being so steeped in the discarded elements of the story that one can draw on them when the vital moment comes.

This brings us to the final practice within the discipline of theatrical improvisation: the practice known as 'reincorporation'. A story is not simply a series of events happening one after another. Such sequences have no reason for stopping in any one place rather than any other. It is not simply a matter of free association: a story requires 'reincorporation'.[30] Reincorporation is what marks the end of the story. When elements found earlier in the story begin to be reincorporated, then some pattern emerges and a sense of completion is possible. Christian ethics seen from an eschatological perspective is always profoundly aware of the end of the story, and of the way this end reincorporates earlier (perhaps all earlier) parts of the narrative. It is reincorporation that distinguishes the end from just another event in the narrative. Reincorporation brings together notions of the end of the story as *telos* or purpose and the end of the story as conclusion.

The key factor in reincorporation is memory. Memory is much more significant than originality. The improviser does not set out to create the future, but responds to the past, reincorporating to form a story. This can be illustrated by a game in which actor A provides free-associated disconnected material, while actor B somehow tries to connect it:

> A: It was a cold winter's night. The wolves howled in the trees. The concert pianist adjusted his sleeves and began to play. An old lady was shovelling snow from her door...
>
> B: ... When she heard the piano the little old lady began shovelling at a fantastic speed. When she reached the concert hall she cried, 'That pianist is my son!' Wolves appeared at all the windows, and the pianist sprang onto the piano, thick fur growing visibly from under his clothes.[31]

The Christian community is in a position much more similar to actor B than to actor A. The community is not able to determine the 'gifts' it is given: it is obliged to use the skill of its convictions to transform the 'fate' (or givenness) of the disconnected gifts into the destiny of a story consonant with the one given story. It does not do this by changing the subject, or by refusing to continue; both of these would do violence to the emerging narrative. This perspective sees all events in creation as offering possibilities for narrative, needing skills nurtured by the gospel to be reincorporated. The key to successful improvisation is not originality but memory. The more

30 Ibid., 112.

31 Ibid., 116–17.

easily forgotten an element is, the more satisfying its reincorporation. Likewise, the deeper the exclusion of a person from the Church's story, the more significant their reincorporation in the story. As was pointed out to Simon the Pharisee, the repentance of the woman who washed Jesus' feet with her hair was more significant than Simon's own repentance.

In a highly suggestive phrase one author on theatrical improvisation emphasises that the skills required for improvisation are not primarily those that come in moments of inspiration (or decision). Instead, the future is formed out of the past. 'The improviser has to be *like a man walking backwards*. He sees where he has been, but he pays no attention to the future. His story can take him anywhere, but he must still "balance" it, and give it shape, by remembering incidents that have been shelved and reincorporating them.'[32] Likewise Robin's friend Harry reincorporated that which others had discarded in his rag rugs. By so doing, he reincorporated broken relationships and over-accepted blocked fellowship, thus embodying the kingdom.

It is time to return the two questions raised at the outset of this section. The first question concerned the resources for improvisation in the Church. The answer is that the Church has ample resources for every eventuality it faces and it finds those resources among the discarded elements of earlier parts of its story. Church history is theology teaching by examples – good examples like St Laurence and St Francis, bad examples like the Inquisition, the Crusades and the Holocaust. In order to gain access to these resources, the Church needs to maintain a lively memory, in which it recalls tales of the good and the bad, and especially of those who have not written their own history – the losers. The greatest improvisers, such as Laurence, did nothing more than reincorporate discarded elements of the story. To do this, one has to be part of a community that knows and lives the story. Remembering the sins of the past is as significant as remembering the saints.

The second question concerned evil. For the Church to think it can simply block evil is contrary to the example of Christ, has no guarantee of success, bypasses the imagination, and tends to ally the Church with powerful forces it may have no place beside. The challenge of evil may be the threat of a rival story, or it may be the denial that there is any story at all. For example Hitler talked of a thousand-year Reich (a rival story), while less exalted Nazis tormented Jews by arguing that if any survivor tried to recall the atrocities of the period, no one would ever believe them (the denial of story). The Church's response to both kinds of unpalatable offer is to tell a much larger story, and to stretch its imagination to the full dimensions and cosmic scope of the Christian story.

9. A Story

My final story happened nine years ago and concerns Bill. Bill left school in a town where one went down the mine, constructed aircraft turbines, or learned to build

32 Ibid., 116; my italics.

warships. So he did an apprenticeship in the shipyard, and looked forward to a lifetime of employment. He progressed well, moving upstairs to the office, where he ordered parts for future ships. He married, had two children, got a car and a mortgage. All was well. Then one day, along with almost everyone else at the company, he lost his job. His wife worked part-time at the Post Office, and was a highly capable person. She took on a full-time post, and Bill set to cooking and cleaning. It wasn't enough. They realised they would have to sell the house. Bill set about decorating the house to make it attractive to a buyer. His efforts were lamentable. He lived in fear of his highly competent wife, and her withering criticism, sharpened by her exhaustion. The two daughters of the house witnessed daily-increasing tension. Determined to maintain their Easter observance, the family faithfully shared in the witness of Holy Week, its commemoration of the Passion being borne out in their thinly veiled torture.

Finally, on Holy Saturday, the explosion came. Bill's wife returned after work, desperate to grab some tea and get out to the Easter Vigil, but was stopped in her tracks by the smell of paint. Bill was on the stairs, his ladder through an involuntary hole in the ceiling, and the contents of an upset paint-pot trickling down the stair carpet. She shrieked: 'What's the use of you? You can't get a job, you can't cook, can't keep the house tidy – and put a paintbrush in your hand and you wreck the whole house! You're useless, pointless, hopeless.' The silence was louder than the shouting that preceded it, as Bill accepted each word. But his daughter, a precocious eleven-year-old, intervened. She looked up the stairs at her father, and back down to her mother. 'He's a good dad,' she said, simply. In five words she had taken the right things for granted, recognised as a child it was not her responsibility to make everything come out right, blocked nothing of what her mother had said, questioned the givens her mother had been assuming, over-accepted her mother's words, and reincorporated the forgotten part of the story, the part that genuinely belonged in the final act of God's drama. All six stages of improvisation in five words. Her simple words brought her mother to humble repentance. The mother tearfully related the story to me later the same day.