



## On Spontaneity

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## **Abstract**

Although people often use it to describe an intuitive familiar experience, 'spontaneity' remains an ambiguous and theoretically ill-defined concept. The purpose of this paper is to clarify the ontological, epistemological and ethical status of spontaneity, and to relate it to theories of decision-making. We define spontaneity as *an emergent, psychological state of heightened attention to the environment combined with increased self-awareness of thought and feelings, during which people are ready to immediately decide to act (or not to act) responsibly*. From this definition we distinguish spontaneity from related ones (instinct, impulsivity, improvisation, and intuition) and briefly discuss its implications for decision-making theory. Finally, we draw a handful of conclusions about the nature of the concept of spontaneity as discussed in this paper.

Key words: Spontaneity, ontology, epistemology, ethics, decision-making, wisdom.

## Introduction

The term spontaneity is often used in relation to human imagination, inventiveness, versatility, curiosity, intuition, cunningness, alertness, creativity, improvisation, instinct, impulsivity and responsiveness, which seem opposite to routine, planning and tradition. In daily language spontaneity refers to when we, without much conscious reflection, seize a fleeting opportunity, respond immediately to a sudden change, or when we go beyond our specific task and carry out extra-role behaviours in the organization.<sup>1</sup> Spontaneity also seems to have something to do with 'hunches,' 'gut feelings'<sup>2</sup> and 'jumping to conclusions.'

With the aim to grasp the essence of spontaneity we have searched the literature in various fields more than a century back and found that a number of scholars have described the subject, but often only in terms of the spontaneous act, '*sua sponte*,' and often with imprecise definitions. For example, Meyer (1941: 151; 153) offered an elaborate discussion of society (democracy, law, education, science, and governance) and human nature. He claimed spontaneity is what makes us human: '*...the very condition and foundation of spirits, readiness and action...that which the person may be expected to rise to and to rise with on his own, 'sua sponte,' ...'an all important characteristic quality of a person.'* Many philosophers (e.g., existentialists) and psychologists (e.g., humanistic psychologists) seem

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<sup>1</sup> Katz (1964, George and Brief (1992) and George and Jones (1997) use the term 'organizational spontaneity' to mean extra-role behaviour that contribute to organizational effectiveness, e.g., (spontaneously) helping one another, protecting the company, making constructive suggestions, spreading goodwill and developing oneself. In this paper we will not use this term because it confuses individual and social level action.

<sup>2</sup> Such abdominal feelings are sometimes associated with great knowledge and even wisdom, as illustrated by the 2003 book title *Straight from the Gut* in which the former CEO of General Electric according to the jacket shares '*his greatest victories, his most valuable experiences, and even his most devastating failures in a passionate memoir that reveals his most important secrets to success.*'

satisfied to use spontaneity as a qualifying epithet to describe certain qualities of action, like speed and surprise and authenticity. Also, in the field of organization studies spontaneity is a frequently used, but rarely defined, concept.

Just like Weick (1998: 551) who warns us about the 'hodgepodge' resulting from mixing concepts like innovation, routine, improvisation and decision-making we are also concerned about the vagueness of spontaneity in the literature. Therefore, *the purpose of this paper is to clarify the ontological, epistemological and ethical status of spontaneity*. We hope this will stimulate further conceptual and empirical research in the field of management and organisation studies, for example, decision-making. Our method is one of describing and deliberating rather than analyzing and explaining. To this end we have studied how spontaneity has been discussed in selected academic literature featuring the term 'spontaneity,' primarily in the field of philosophy and psychology.<sup>3</sup>

## **What is spontaneity?**

### *The philosophical perspective*

Many philosophers have discussed spontaneity since the Enlightenment (and the Antiquity). The overall message is that only free people are spontaneous. Yet, the wealth of philosophical propositions produced has yet to produce a coherent definition of spontaneity in relation to adjacent concepts, including freedom of will, understanding, judgment and reason. McBay Merritt (1994: 96) summarized the difficulties to grasp one of

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<sup>3</sup> Our main source was the JSTOR database of academic publications ([www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org)).

the most important sources in philosophy for conceptualizing spontaneity: *'Although spontaneity is clearly the central concept of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason, Kant say relatively little about what exactly his appeal to spontaneity entails.'*<sup>4</sup> Others in the philosophy field see the same lack of clarity about spontaneity, for example Stevenson (2004).

The long philosophical debate between free will and its opposite, determinism, took off during the Enlightenment with contributions by for example Spinoza, Descartes, Hume and Kant, Hegel and Schopenhauer. Most philosophical literature addresses spontaneity only indirectly and in conjunction with how we reason, understand and make judgments since spontaneity concerns the extent we have voluntary control over our beliefs (to believe or not) and decisions (to act or not).

Philosophers note that peoples' natural inclination to act at the spur of the moment differed from their rational reasoning. In fact, because spontaneity challenges the very notion of cause and effect it strikes at the heart of philosophy, as exemplified by Kant's notion of 'unconditioned causality' (freedom). Bahm (1947: 633) summarized the challenge posed by spontaneity to four philosophical orientations:

*"Pluralists<sup>5</sup> are embarrassed by the problem of spontaneity both in explaining transition from cause to effect and in accounting for the whole series. Monists<sup>6</sup> attribute spontaneity to the system as a whole, but are bothered about giving a satisfactory account of causation of different particulars. Organicists<sup>7</sup> accept the fact of some spontaneity in*

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<sup>4</sup> However, we find that one of Kant's many insights relating to spontaneity is in making the human mind an active *participant* in what it knows.

<sup>5</sup> Pluralists believe that reality consists of a series of causal events, and that effects are different from their causes.

<sup>6</sup> Monists believe that there is only one, 'ultimate' cause of everything. Consequently, causes and effects are really identical.

<sup>7</sup> Organicists believe that there is a difference between causes and effects, but struggle with figuring out what is in an effect that is not already in its cause. This reasoning leads them to be open to notions of self-cause and un-caused.

*every effect, rather than attributing it to, and only to, the whole series or whole system.”*

A forth orientation more easily reconcile spontaneity with its basic understanding of the universe. *Emergentists*,<sup>8</sup> he argued, are comfortable with spontaneity because they focus on levels of scale. What may appear as spontaneous (a difference) on one level may be the normal situation (a stable identity) on another level. Our free will generates a near infinite range of possible behaviours, which emerge, from the interactions of a given set of rules and parameters. However, the ‘free will’ here is just a perception since the possible outcomes stem from a deterministic set of conditions. This orientation towards spontaneity is similar to the notion of ‘emergence’ in complex adaptive systems theory and its emphasis on ‘simple rules’ (e.g., Holland 1995).

Whereas Descartes, Spinoza<sup>9</sup>, Hegel, Hume and Schopenhauer seem to only indirectly discuss this topic, spontaneity is a central concept in Kant’s famous analyses, called ‘critiques.’<sup>10</sup> He argued that cognition, whether in judgment or perception, always involves spontaneity. Specifically, spontaneity (*Spontanität*) is an inner, self-determined activity whereby a thought (concept), understanding and judgment (*vermögen zu urteilen*) are possible. This makes spontaneity distinct from the receptivity (*Rezeptivität*) whereby perception is possible. Hence, his central distinction is here between

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<sup>8</sup> Emergentists believe a system’s property is emergent if it is irreducible and/or if it is impossible to predict its instantiation before its first appearance.

<sup>9</sup>After the Antiquity, 17<sup>th</sup> century Spinoza made one of the earliest conceptualizations of spontaneity. Absolute freedom, he argued, was the spontaneity of God and this spontaneity was by definition inexplicable. Yet, he also claimed that spontaneous actions are explicable on a conceptual level: “...its explanation lies within the meaning (not within the body) of the agent” (quoted in Singer 1925: 428). Still, although the spontaneous act, *sua sponte*, is explicable it is still unpredictable.

<sup>10</sup> For our purposes Kant’s *First Critique* and *Second Critique* discuss the spontaneity of our understanding and of our free will, respectively, and the *Third Critique* demonstrates how both stem from our faculty of reason (McBay Merritt 1994).

*spontaneity from within* and receptivity from the outside. According to Kant, spontaneity is a natural capacity to reflectively control judgment by rational evaluation of sensory inputs, existing knowledge and beliefs of the situation at hand (Longuenesse 2000). Kant's view that spontaneity is reflective and happened during a rational process contrasts with a more unconscious process of unreflective judgments.

For our purposes Kant's conceptualizations of spontaneity as a rational and conscious process describe how people supposedly arrive at (theoretical) judgment. However, his work does not add much insight to the *practical problem* of making decisions at the spur of the moment. Moreover, his contrast between the 'intelligible' world and the 'sensible' world makes the epistemological status of *Spontanität* unclear (Stevenson 2004).

Merrill (1919: 161) helps us understand why spontaneity (seen as an act) can only be described and explained *a posteriori*. He defined spontaneity as "*an act, all of the causes of which do not come into existence until the very instant of the act...which is caused by the whole of our experience up to the instance of the act.*" Such acts cannot be predicted since we would have to wait to the moment of action and, thus, could only describe it immediately afterwards.

Inspired by Kant, Singer (1925) was preoccupied with the distinction between sensibility and spontaneity (as action). Whereas sensibility and spontaneity formed an inseparable behavioural pair of knowing and willing, like the Kantian *Rezeptivität*, sensibility is a passive, receptive and 'simple' way of knowing. In contrast, he argued, spontaneity is the "*purest expression*

*of willing, of activity, or productivity!* (p. 422).” This conceptualization suggests spontaneity is a positive manifestation of every person.

The philosophical movement called ‘existentialism’ personified by Kirkegaard, Heidegger and Sartre claims that human beings can be understood only ‘from the inside’ and in terms of their experienced reality. Because it rejects reality as rational consciousness this philosophy helps describe spontaneity as emerging *from within* each one of us as a natural part of ‘being in the world.’ Existentialism suggests that it is a psychological phenomenon and, as such, existentialism bridges the philosophical and psychological perspectives of spontaneity.

#### *The psychological perspective*

Researchers in psychology have linked spontaneity with creativity, learning and mental health, but only few have defined and let alone studied spontaneity systematically. In the 1940s, psychologist Meyer (1941: 160) concluded: *‘We have to go seriously and actively into the business of learning to know, and to guide, and to provide for, our human spontaneities.’* This lack of clarity (and of empirical studies) about spontaneity seems to remain even today, as concluded by Kipper (2000: 34): *‘It is somewhat of a mystery why the confusion concerning spontaneity has persisted unchallenged for so long.’* Yet, much has been written about spontaneity.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the field of psychology perhaps Jacob Levy Moreno has contributed most to theorize about spontaneity as well as put it into practice. He was a physician in the early 1900s Vienna who liked theatre but was also inspired by many other sources, for example children’s

spontaneity in play, existentialism in general and his collaboration with its proponent Martin Buber in particular. Moreno discussed spontaneity in context of (interpersonal) role relations (e.g., Moreno 1941). From his experimental theatre of spontaneity '*Das Stegreiftheater*' (Moreno 1923; 1947) he developed his axis spontaneity – creativity on which he based most of his practical work. He also studied how pattern of attraction (association) and repulsion (disassociation) between role relationships framed spontaneity.

On the individual level, Moreno and Moreno (1944) also discussed spontaneity in child development, which they argued illustrated how fundamental spontaneity is. By carefully observing their own son's development, they came to see spontaneity as the response of an individual to a novel situation *and* the new response to an old situation. They noted '*...a minimum of spontaneity is already required in his first day of life*' (p. 92) to deal positively, or 'adequately' with a totally strange set of relationships without having a model of how to act. Thus, spontaneity is not a chance response, or an automatic, instinctive reflex, nor is it a disorderly, emotional, uncontrolled or impulsive activity. Instead, it is '*a readiness of the subject to respond as required*' (Moreno 1946: 111). *Newness and adequacy* (of action) becomes Moreno's criteria for 'genuine' spontaneous.<sup>11</sup>

Behind his considerable verbiage about his clinical 'psychodrama,' on a higher level of analysis Moreno defines spontaneity as a psychological state of readiness to respond as required (newness and adequacy), which means to act creatively. This mental state is a form of an intrinsic motivation, a form

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<sup>11</sup> In his writing, which we often find difficult to understand, he frequently oscillates between the individual level and social level. For example, in Moreno (1941: 16) he concluded that it is the spontaneity of all individuals that makes society more than a collection of passive agents carried by fate

of 'energy' that 'propels' the person to respond positively in the face of the unexpected (Moreno 1953), which by definition precedes the process of acting (see Kipper 2000; Kipper 2005).

Others reacted against the restricted definition of spontaneity proposed by Moreno, who was a strong believer in *action* as the primary mode of expression. For instance, Sorokin (1949) argued that 'doing nothing' may be equally 'adequate,' and performing a well-known response may be better than a 'new' one. He concludes that adequacy and novelty are not only insufficiently for framing spontaneity, but also that Moreno's conceptualization is bias in favour of '*an energetic, rapid, impulsive, overt activity on the spur of the moment, and it penalizes a slow, quiet, meditatively creative search for the adequate solution*' (p. 219).

Humanistic psychology, expressed for example by one of its founders Maslow, (1962: 197), suggests spontaneity as one of a dozen attributes of self-actualized people<sup>12</sup> and, as such, supports Moreno's ideas of spontaneity leading to a creative, authentic and healthy life. One of the drivers to move up Maslow's famous hierarchies of needs is a drive that comes from being spontaneous: '*Pure spontaneity consists of free, uninhibited, uncontrolled, trusting, unpremeditated expression of the self, i.e., of the psychic forces, with minimal interference by consciousness.*' What can (re)connect us with our natural spontaneity, he argues, is neither rational thinking nor planning, but a 'healthy irrationality' that sharpen our awareness of the limitations of purely abstract, verbal and analytical thinking. More than this (spontaneous) self-

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or circumstances: '*In human interrelations and in human society, the spontaneity of the individual is the alfa and the omega, the crux, of every social situation...*'

actualized people do not only feel good about themselves they positively influence their social settings and organizations.

### *The ethical dimension*

Regardless of the extent to which Moreno's definition is restrictive, his idea about 'adequacy' suggests an inherent ethical dimension of spontaneity. To be spontaneous is good whereas lack of spontaneity suggest *inadequate* behaviour. Thus, impulsivity is amoral. Meyer (1941: 159) too implied such an ethical dimension of spontaneity. He argued that spontaneity is more than instinctive reflex because it requires '*...a certain morale and stability and continuity*' without which spontaneity will 'miscarry.' To him spontaneity is context-dependent, it "*...requires proportion and plasticity and security of background and perspective of possibilities.*' This requirement of balance underlies Meyer's distinction between harmonious and constructive 'balanced spontaneity' and the less constructive 'undisciplined spontaneity,' which correspond to (good) evolution and (bad) revolution.

Recall Moreno's fundamental and strong belief in the (good) 'spontaneous man,' which came from psychodramatic role-play with children, including his own son, and with people with mental disorders: '*Children and lunatics are two outstanding classes of spontaneous people. All that they are internally is transparent on the surface. Their emotions and in their actions and their actions are the core of their existence*' (Moreno et al. 1955: 177). Based on thousands of clinical studies Moreno found that when people are thrown rapidly into a novel situation few are capable of making rapid

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<sup>12</sup> These include: Realism, acceptance, spontaneity, problem cantering, different perceptions of means and ends, need for privacy, autonomy, social interest, profound social relationships, resistance to adopt

adjustments in general and an adequate one in particular.<sup>13</sup> Yet, he concluded that psychologically healthy people act adequately in the face of unexpected change. He also found that with intentional training it was possible to reach higher levels of spontaneity, which suggest that it is possible to increase the potential to, with split-second swiftness, make ‘the right’ decisions.

The ethical dimension of spontaneity surfaces in situations of extreme unexpected change, such as crises. During crises more than ever leaders make sense, make decision and make meaning with raised stakes (Boin *et al.* 2004). More than this, they have to make split-second, ‘executive’ decisions with potential life-and-death consequences. These decisions resemble the ‘*sua sponte*’ type of actions discussed above, but now with responsibility included as captured in the question ‘Who should we saved first?’

As the need for preparedness stretches the limits of what is thinkable and possible for organizations (e.g., what to do in the face of ‘asymmetric’ terrorist threat), it highlights the importance of value judgments. Values about rightness and wrongness, virtue and vice and even aesthetics ultimately form the basis for decisions to act (or not to act) on the spur of the moment. The problem is generic of course, but crisis situations force us to consider ‘acceptable risks’ of threat levels and resources. Preparedness to decide to act (or not to act) always involves value judgments in the face of overwhelming hypothetical need and a range of objectives (Statler and Roos

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any cultural system without reflection, continued freshness of appreciation, and peak experiences.

<sup>13</sup> As a practitioner Moreno was primary interested in creating the conditions during which people acted spontaneously. Those conditions he found and staged in psychodramatic role-play during what he called psychodrama: “*Playing a role is the personification of other forms of existence through the medium of play*” (Moreno *et al.* 1955: 160). It is through role-play (techniques like role reversal, doubling etc.) people can explore and expand their social situations and in doing so they can kick start the creative circulation of spontaneity – creativity – conserve, and so on.

2006; Statler *et al.* 2006). Just like the problem of preparedness is an ethical one, spontaneity too has an inherent ethical dimension.

The concept of practical wisdom helps us reflect over this additional aspect of spontaneity. Between the tension between rational efficiency and practical expediency, Aristotle (1962) identifies *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, as what makes us capable to, in the face of ambiguous or uncertain circumstances, make decisions that will be *good* not only ourselves, but also for the necessary others. The concept of *phronesis* helps us frame spontaneity in ethical terms, because it deals with the unpredictable, dynamic aspects of social life, while also considering practical expediency. Practically wise people go beyond self-interest and cunning, to *habitually* make judgments (decisions) to take actions that are *good* for stakeholders who sustain their organizations.<sup>14</sup> Using Moreno's distinction between spontaneity and impulsivity, practically wise people are spontaneous rather than impulsive.

### **Defining spontaneity**

This brief review confirms that spontaneity is essential to the human condition. Yet, it is a rarely defined concept and used in the literature primarily as an amoral epithet to assign a sense of irrational immediacy to actions. Few have discussed the inherent ethical dimension of spontaneity. The prominent exception is Moreno, who offers a wealth of practice-oriented text about

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<sup>14</sup> Durand and Calori (2006) suggested that practically wise leaders' conduct of change is likely to be fluid rather than brusque. They are prone to deliberate (through dialogue), which makes it possible to hold them accountable and be responsible, and this process sensitizes them to others' feelings and arguments.

spontaneity and fragments of what could be the basis of a moral theory of spontaneity.

The literature reviewed enable us to define this elusive concept in a precise way: *Spontaneity is an emergent, psychological state of heightened attention to the environment combined with increased self-awareness of thought and feelings, during which people are ready to immediately decide to act (or not to act) responsibly.* Specifically:

- ‘Emergent’ means without reference to a preceding event, i.e., what Kant called ‘unconditioned causality’, as well as both sudden and fleeting in a temporal sense.
- ‘Psychological state’ means a state of mind.
- ‘Attention’ means receptivity of signals from the senses in the Kantian sense of *Receptivität*.
- ‘Self-awareness’ means attention directed to the self (thought and feelings) and an active participation in what is going on.
- ‘Ready’ means having the free will to decide (to act or not to act).
- ‘Responsibly’ means ethically in the sense of Aristotelian *phronesis*.

Based on this definition we see spontaneity as a human ‘*Ur-state*,’ during which our thoughts and feelings freely emerge ‘from within’ and our decisions to act (or not to act) are consciously and unconsciously framed by our value judgments. When people reach a state of spontaneity they have the potential to make decisions to act (or not to act) that others may judge as wise.

### *Distinguishing spontaneity*

Our definition helps us distinguish spontaneity from related concept, in particular, instinct, impulsivity, improvisation and intuition. From our definition it is clear that spontaneity differs from instinct. When our lives are threatened our nerve cells fire up and the sympathetic nervous system discharges adrenaline, cortisol and other chemicals into our bloodstream -- without conscious reflection and will. When the situation is life threatening this response causes our body to undergo a series of very dramatic changes to become prepared—physically and psychologically—for fight or flight. By its very nature, the fight or flight system bypasses our reflective thinking so that, whether we like it or not, act without conscious thinking. Thus, whereas instinct is a primordial state during which we automatically disconnect our thoughts and feelings, spontaneity is a state during which we freely and willingly reach into the depth of our internal cognitive and affective resources while we are attentive about what's going on around us.

Spontaneity also differs from impulsivity. As discussed above, in Moreno's world spontaneity is the positive end of a scale where the other is behaving in a 'robotic' automatic way (1947), which is the meaning of compliance. Moreno distinguished another opposite of spontaneity, 'pathological spontaneity,' which in his descriptions resembles what psychologists label impulsivity, defined as reacting immediately to various stimuli. In other words, impulsivity means to take action without careful consideration. For instance, consumer research has demonstrated how we suddenly develop a powerful and persistent urge to immediately buy

something, i.e., the 'buying impulse' (Rook 1987).<sup>15</sup> Because impulses may involve expected pleasurable experiences we have difficulties resisting them and that can be problematic, even from an ethical standpoint. Not surprisingly, self-control over impulses was a central theme in Freud's work.<sup>16</sup>

Kipper (2000) and Kipper and Hundal (2005) challenged Moreno's view that the absence of spontaneity is pathology. They proposed that spontaneity is an entirely positive quality, i.e., one can only be spontaneous to various degrees. The absence of spontaneity does not signify the presence of pathology. The implication is that decision-making as routine might be appropriate when making decisions in familiar, routine-like situations, or when to comply without questions. Furthermore, decision-making as impulsivity may be appropriate when we equate impulsivity with instinct. Non-spontaneity represents something else, for instance, characteristics associated with routine behaviour:

*"...the phrase the spontaneous man or woman does not describe a personality dimension of an individual who is always spontaneous. Rather, it characterizes a person who is able to become spontaneous often, whenever appropriate, but who, in many situations, may act non-spontaneously"* (Kipper 2005: 127).

Spontaneity is also distinct from improvisation. Crossan (1998: 598) built her entire conceptualization of improvisation on spontaneity and intuition and concluded that *'the value of improvisation is in the potential it holds to enhance the quality of spontaneous action,'* but what is spontaneity and what

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<sup>15</sup> Sociologists have found similar patterns and related the ability to delay gratification to a range of demographic and social variables (see Walls and Smith 1970; Whyte 1943).

<sup>16</sup> Freud argued that impulses came out of two competing forces: the pleasure principle and the reality principle. The former encourages immediate gratification whereas the latter encourages rational thinking. People who do not have sufficient control over impulses, like being able to delay gratification, have problems.

are its qualities are unclear from her text.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, without defining spontaneity, Weick (1998: 551) suggest that *'improvisation is a mixture of the precomposed with the spontaneous, just as organizational action mixes together some portion of control with innovation, exploitation with exploration, routine with nonroutine, automatic with controlled.'*<sup>18</sup>

Whereas improvisation is an act, an event, spontaneity is a psychological state. Thus, we suggest that improvisation (a type of action) result from spontaneity (a particular state). To relate the two concepts, we need to talk about spontaneous *actions*. As actions, both come with a short time span between events leading up to the decision to act (or not to act) and the very decision, which how Moorman and Miner (1998: 702) defined improvisation as the time gap between *'...composing and performing, designing and producing, or conceptualizing and implementing.'*

Furthermore, recall from our definition that the readiness of spontaneity refers to free will, which in combination with (Kantian) unconditioned causality, means that the potential action is unlimited. Therefore, improvised actions are constrained in ways spontaneous actions are not. This is also in line with the main metaphor used to make sense of improvisation in organizational studies, namely jazz music. As creative, innovative and stretching it may be, jazz improvisation is not without boundaries (see Barret 1998). In fact, improvisation may be more of collective 'rehearsed spontaneity' and 'planned serendipity' (Mirvis 1998). From our definition (the state of) spontaneity

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<sup>17</sup> For instance, *'Everything happens in real-time and is totally spontaneous,'* p. 594; *'...stung together in a very spontaneous and intuitive fashion,'* p. 594; *'...respond in the moment to stimuli provided by either the audience or fellow actors,'* p. 595; *'...having the capacity to respond in a spontaneous fashion is critical,'* p. 595.

<sup>18</sup> Moorman and Miner (1998) identified similar cases in the vast literature on improvisation, but they defined it (as a temporal difference between design and execution) without reference to spontaneity as such.

creates the context for improvisation, which may involve the qualities discussed above, but that is another question.

Spontaneity is also distinct from intuition. An intriguing concept about how we come to know without conscious awareness or rational deliberation the vast literature remains unclear about how intuition is different from thought and experience in the first place.<sup>19</sup> For instance, for Kant every individual perception is an intuition (*Anschauung*), which seems to be a higher-level construct of all perceptions (sensibilities), imaginations and consciousness in a particular space-time combination.<sup>20</sup> In his erudite review of the philosophical and linguistic roots of the term more than a century ago, Davidson (1882) concluded that only *immediacy* distinguishes intuition from thought and action and even that criterion does not distinguish it from instinct or habit.<sup>21</sup>

This lack of clarity has not prevented organizational scholars from fully endorsing intuition as a valuable concept, often mixed with the term spontaneity. For instance, some observers see intuition in the innovations of so-called creative people, e.g., Bergson (1946) and Koestler (1949). Others, like Isaack (1978), see intuition in early management literature, e.g., Barnard (1938) and in testimonies about management practice. Although they work in tandem, as many philosophers have suggested, Isaack mirrors earlier debates in philosophy to contrast intuition with 'intellect.' Moreover, in situations where we cannot reason rationally he baldly considers '*terms like*

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<sup>19</sup> For a review of how the philosophical literature treat intuition, see (in temporal order) Davidson (1882), Merrill (1918), Cunningham (1924), Anderson (1926), Stallknecht (1941) Simmons (1965), Cummings (1968), Wilson (1975), Gram (1981), and Fricker (1995).

<sup>20</sup> See Gram (1981) for a detailed critique of Kant's ideas about intuition, especially 'intellectual intuition.'

<sup>21</sup> Davidson (1882) found that intuition literally means visual perception, and that its *intueor* form suggests a certain intentness of observation while its *intuitus* form suggest a certain immediate presence of the object seen.

*'hunch,' 'guess' and 'feel' to be synonymous with intuition...'* (Isaack 1978: 919).

Other contemporary writers of intuition do not necessarily treat it as a state of mind. For example, humanistic psychologist Maslow (1962) viewed intuition as a form of cognition along with concrete experience and aesthetic cognition, which characterize self-actualized individuals.<sup>22</sup> Another example is Kuhn (1970) who viewed intuition as a mode of hypothesis formation, where a hypothesis can be seen as an 'intuition' as such. As such, intuition is a capacity to (unconsciously) generate hypotheses. In organization theory, Crossan (1998: 593) exemplified intuition-as-action when she defines it as *'rapid processing of experienced information.'* Overall, whereas spontaneity is a mental state, we see intuition as an amoral mental process (activity). Hence, ontologically intuition falls in the same category as instinct and improvisation.

Our list of concepts is small, perhaps too small. Spontaneity seems to be related to a wealth of additional concepts including reflection, thought, experience, learning, will, feeling, mind, conception, judgment, reasoning (inference, deduction, induction), perception, conception, meaning, imagination, belief, knowledge, faith, common sense, and flow. To weave a theoretically solid nomological net requires researchers to be more precise about what they mean when using such concepts. Our brief review of instinct, impulsivity, improvisation and intuition in light of spontaneity is, thus, just a small step in this direction.

## Spontaneity and Decision Making Theory

Although it clearly has something to do with how we on short notice decide to act (or not to act) spontaneity does not seem to be an integrated part of decision-making theory. For example, in the classical theory of utility or profit maximization, with its assumptions of complete knowledge and rational computation of consequences (cite), spontaneity appears to be a non-issue. Nor in the behavioural theory of the firm which assumes imperfect knowledge and limited computational power (Simon, 1947; Cyert and March 1963), is spontaneity discussed and it doesn't seem to be part of the many causes of 'bounded rationality' (like failure to know all alternatives, uncertainty about exogenous events, and inability to calculate consequences). Spontaneity does not seem to be directly incorporated into the adjacent theories of 'search' and 'satisficing' (fluctuating aspirations) either. Furthermore, the assumptions about decision-makers knowing probability distributions of relevant variables in statistical decision theory and game theory (von Neuman and Morgenstein 1944) do not seem to allow anything resembling spontaneity into their equations more than as a residual. Perhaps the theory that comes closest to consider spontaneity, at least indirectly is the idea that people behave *as if* they carry out rational calculations, but in practice use imperfect 'rules of thumbs,' or heuristics (Khaneman and Tversky 1973). However, the link is not clear.

It is possible that existing decision-making theories can be patched up sufficiently to account for what is implied with spontaneity. However, when we examine situations involving decision-making not only under uncertainty and

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<sup>22</sup> Specifically: *'If our hope is to describe the world fully, a place is necessary for preverbal, ineffable, metaphorical, primary process, concrete-experience, intuitive and aesthetic types of cognition, for there*

ambiguity, but also with a need to act with split-second swiftness, our hunch is that spontaneity as defined above help describe and perhaps even explain what is going on. Specifically, our definition of spontaneity suggests two tentative propositions about how it relates to decision-making.

*First*, the emergent nature of spontaneity clearly disturbs the very notion of computational decision-making. Thus, many decision-making theories are unable to account for spontaneity unless it is directly incorporated as an independent variable into mathematical models, or treated as an error term. Although we have seen an example of how to mathematically model intuition (see Blattberg and Hoch 1990), we have yet to see a similar example of converting spontaneity into an algorithm. With certain assumptions of positivism it is, of course, possible to do this.

*Second*, the ethical nature of spontaneity too disturbs existing, amoral decision-making theories. This is a greater problem since it not about methodology, but is about philosophical underpinnings of the theory. To incorporate (moral) spontaneity into (amoral) decision-making theories we have to either de-moralize spontaneity or make decision-making theories moral too. The latter strike us as a vast task, but in light of Goshal's (2005) harsh critique of the management field perhaps a necessary one. He suggested amoral theories might cause immoral behaviour, as evidenced by corporate scandals:

*'Combine agency theory with transaction costs economics, add standard versions of game theory and negotiation analysis, and the picture of the manager that emerges is one that is now very familiar in practice: the ruthlessly hard-driving, strictly top-down, command-and-control focused, shareholder-value-obsessed, win-at-any-cost business leader' (ibid.: 85).*

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are certain aspects of reality which can be considered in no other way' (Maslow 1962: 208).

Having said this we still think the concept of spontaneity connects with and can contribute to the literature on how individuals and groups in organizations make decisions. In particular, we feel attracted to the more psychology-oriented literature that assumes that we make decisions based on ‘top-down’, theory-driven cognitive filters or ‘knowledge structures’ (Nisbett and Ross 1980).<sup>23</sup> While the literature on knowledge structures has generated many theoretical insights much is based on studies conducted under artificially controlled environments rather than making-decisions in real organizations (Walsh 1995). Fewer, as far as we know, bring spontaneity into the picture. However, studies of how decision-makers act in the face of the unexpected may shed some light on this matter.

Oliver and Roos (2003; 2005), for instance, found a virtuous circle of three factors that helped leadership teams act spontaneously to deal positively with emergent change: (i) increased physical presence, which enabled the team to (ii) reinforce its sense of identity that, in turn, enabled the group to (iii) bring forth and articulate shared, emotional-laden narratives (‘simple guiding principles’). The latter seek to capture the space of possible actions, collectively seen as ‘right’ and ‘good’ by the team. These studies do not only highlight the affective basis of spontaneous action, but also the

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<sup>23</sup> Within the overall label knowledge structures the notion of cognitive schemata has contributed to the development of the cognitive school of psychology, which subsequently inspired the extensive literature on managerial cognition. Schemata are cognitive structures that represent one’s general knowledge about a given concept or stimulus domain, including its attributes and the relations among those attributes (Fiske and Taylor 1991). Causal schemata provide general conceptions of how certain kinds of causes can produce certain kinds of effects while scripts provide a coherent sequence of events expected by the individual (Abelson 1976). The study of schemata may be particularly relevant in dynamic environments, as individuals rely more on schemata than on additional data gathering as time pressures increase (Fiske and Taylor 1991). On a social level, individual cognitive schemata can combine to form an overall interpretive scheme mapping relevant aspects of how an organization’s experience of its world is to be understood (Ranson et al. 1980), and embedding fundamental assumptions about why events happen as they do and how people are to act (Bartunek 1984).

sensitive process required to reach (a state of) spontaneity during which people (individually and in groups) are ready to immediately decide to act (or not to act) responsibly. The physical presence identified by Oliver and Roos, for example, was key to reinforce the sense of group identity as means to create such a state.

Their findings are in line with Moreno's claim that spontaneity is "*...the factor which prepares and supports by positive or negative incidents, then stimulates and motivates the getting ready for the act (of creativity)*" (1955: 136). He concluded that the spontaneity and creativity are distinct and must not be merged into an all-containing notion of either one. He framed the inseparability of spontaneity and creativity as 'creative circulation,' which describes how (the state of) spontaneity results in creativity (adequate novelty), which, in turn, generated tangible outcome, like a painting, book, or as in Oliver and Roos, simple guiding principles (i.e., what Moreno famously called 'cultural conserves').<sup>24</sup> He used this idea to describe what he saw as a fundamental balance between the fluid spontaneity (leading to creativity) and the more solid outcome, i.e., the tangible, conserved result of creativity.<sup>25</sup>

## **Conclusion**

From our deliberations we conclude the following: Ontologically, spontaneity is a fleeting *state* of mind, which means that decisions and action labelled 'spontaneous' stem from a spontaneous state. Epistemologically, spontaneity enables action and, thus, knowing. Ethically, because of the

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Interpretive schemes may build on 'shared mental models' or organized bodies of knowledge that team members have in common (Kim 1997).

<sup>24</sup> This circulation can be reversed in that such an outcome inspire creativity and, in turn, spontaneity.

attention and awareness involved, spontaneity cultivates responsible decisions to act (or not to act) in the Aristotelian sense of *phronesis*. Yet, not all 'spontaneous' decisions are wise and not all wise decisions are spontaneous.

Spontaneity is an individual level concept, which can be used as a metaphor on the social level. Thus, individuals are spontaneous and groups can metaphorically be seen to be spontaneous, just like Weick and Roberts (1993) did with 'collective mind.'<sup>26</sup>

Spontaneity is a uniquely positive quality. We can be more or less spontaneous, but there is no such thing as negative spontaneity. Lack of spontaneity is a different thing. Spontaneity is related to, but distinct from instinct, impulsivity, improvisation, and intuition.

Because of its ontological, epistemological and ethical status spontaneity appears incompatible with computational decision-making theory. However, it may be used to further develop psychology-oriented theories about how people make decisions.

Our proposals and conclusions have several implications for the philosophical and practical problem of spontaneity: *It forces us to analytically separate between the state (of spontaneity) and the quality of the decision (to act or not to act) made during this state.* The 'spontaneous' quality of these decisions and actions, for instance, to what extent these are new or adequate in the Morenian sense, is simply a different matter. This has implications for

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<sup>25</sup> 'Spontaneity is the principle of 'unconservability' and 'unpredictability.' Conserve is the principle of 'conservability,' 'constancy,' and 'predictability.' Creativity can remain unfrozen and linked to spontaneity, or it can freeze and be linked to conserves' (Moreno 1955: 132).

<sup>26</sup> In practice, and as demonstrated by Moreno, spontaneity can be boosted by group interactions.

what literature to stand on and how to piece literatures together into a coherent whole without too much retrofitting on the level of assumptions.

Although Moreno and others have demonstrated how we can create more or less favourable conditions for spontaneity to emerge, in principle, (the state of) spontaneity can neither be planned nor predicted as such. This makes it a tricky, but fascinating phenomenon for continued theoretical and empirical explorations.

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