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## CHAPTER 29

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**SPIRITUAL EXERCISES,  
IMPROVISATION, AND  
MORAL PERFECTIONISM**

*With Special Reference to Sonny Rollins*

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ARNOLD I. DAVIDSON

(Translated from the French by Anton Vishio. Revised by the author.)

The great Irishman Edmund Burke once said: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." We must accept our destiny, the destiny to struggle for the unattainable, because there is nothing absolute, nothing definite, and it is only in struggling for the unattainable that we can conquer evil. I have often wished that the fathers of the American Constitution had affirmed "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of the unattainable."<sup>1</sup>

I simply want to play and speak the truth. Every time I sit down at the drums, I have enough ego to say that what I played last night was good. But not good enough for tonight. I don't play as well as I would like. . . . I have never attained the level of total satisfaction. It is truly impossible. . . . You demand more and still more from yourself. Self-satisfaction is your enemy. It's over for you as an artist if you think "Well, I am so good that I don't need to try anything more difficult." Art Tatum didn't play as well as he wished.<sup>2</sup>

In this essay I would like to study a model of improvisation that links the practice of spiritual exercises to moral perfectionism and precisely to that perfectionism that aims at the perpetual surpassing of oneself—at an overcoming always renewed, never definitive.<sup>3</sup> This perfectionism is at the heart of recent work by Stanley Cavell: in speaking of it, he often uses the expression "Emersonian perfectionism," since Emerson is the starting point for his elaboration of moral perfectionism.<sup>4</sup> We will see that in ancient philosophy, the idea of wisdom, or better the figure of the sage, could be interpreted as the historico-philosophical origin of this ideal. But we must begin with the practice of spiritual

exercises. Regarding the notion of a “spiritual exercise,” at the beginning of his book *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, Pierre Hadot writes:

By this term, I mean practices which could be physical, as in dietary regimes, or discursive, as in dialogue and meditation, or intuitive, as in contemplation, but which were all intended to effect a modification and a transformation in the subject who practiced them. The philosophy teachers’ discourse could also assume the form of a spiritual exercise, if the discourse were presented in such a way that the disciple, as auditor, reader, or interlocutor, could make spiritual progress and transform himself within.<sup>5</sup>

In short, as Hadot said in our book of conversations, a spiritual exercise is “a voluntary, personal practice intended to bring about a transformation of the individual, a transformation of the self;” and among the significant examples of such a practice he cites a certain practice of Beethoven, precisely because Beethoven “referred to the exercises of musical composition that he required of his students, and that were meant to allow them to attain a form of wisdom—one that might be called aesthetic—as spiritual exercises.”<sup>6</sup>

According to Hadot, in antiquity, philosophy is “that activity by means of which philosophers train themselves for wisdom”; here one must underline the expression “train for wisdom,” because wisdom itself is a “transcendent norm.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, “philosophy, for mankind, consists of efforts toward wisdom which always remain unfinished.”<sup>8</sup> Describing in detail the figure of the sage in ancient philosophy, and especially in the Stoic school, Hadot writes:

Foremost, for the Stoics, the sage is an exceptional being; there are very few, perhaps one, even none at all. The figure of the sage is thus for them an almost unattainable idea, more a transcendent norm than a concrete figure. . . . The Stoic philosopher knows that he can never realize this ideal figure of the sage, but it exercises on him its attraction, provokes in him enthusiasm and love, allows him to hear a call to live better, to become aware of the perfection which he strives to attain. . . . The philosopher who trains for wisdom will try to form a nucleus of inexpugnable inner freedom via spiritual exercises.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, it could be concluded, I believe, that philosophy as a spiritual exercise toward wisdom is a form of moral perfectionism and therefore a particular way of life.

Now, I can easily imagine your perplexity: spiritual exercises, moral perfectionism, wisdom, what does all of this have to do with the improvisations of the saxophonist Sonny Rollins? From my point of view, philosophy is not primarily a doctrine or a theory, but rather an activity and an attitude. This is why nothing prohibits the attitude that is expressed in certain acts of improvisation from being named, without hesitation or equivocation, “philosophical.”<sup>10</sup> The activity of improvisation becomes a philosophical activity when one deploys a practice of spiritual exercises that aims at perfecting oneself. From this perspective, Rollins is a perfect example of a model of moral perfectionism sustained by spiritual exercises.

In a 2006 interview, Rollins said, “I’m dissatisfied and I’m always striving. . . . A lot of guys have learned their craft and they get to a place, and they are satisfied, and the stuff they do is great. . . . In my case, my thing is constantly looking for something else. I’m not satisfied yet. I know there is more there.”<sup>11</sup>

Rollins’s dissatisfaction is certainly an aesthetic disposition, but it is also and above all an ethical attitude: Rollins is always searching for his “next self”—something beyond himself, a spiritual place never completely reached. In discussing his concerts, famous for their extreme ardor and energy, Rollins affirms:

There are certain concerts that I play, performances when I do feel that I have reached the higher level. When that happens as a normality rather than rarely, then I will feel that I am there. Then there will probably be something else I need to do, but I do feel that I am getting closer to more of a complete expression. It’s a reachable goal, it is not something which is never going to happen, but that doesn’t mean that will be the end. There will always be something else to do. I think I can get to a better place.<sup>12</sup>

Here we can glimpse the possibility of a progress that is, so to speak, spiritual (“the higher level,” “I am getting closer to a more complete expression”), but, at the same time, the feeling that a definitive end is impossible (“then there will probably be something else I need to do”). Moreover, Rollins makes use of an explicitly ethical vocabulary to characterize his attitude (“I think I can get to a better place”).

In another interview, from 2008, Rollins clearly articulates the paradox represented by the duty to attain an end that is indeed impossible to attain—a paradox typical of moral perfectionism: “What I’m looking for perhaps is unattainable. I know that. But I certainly have a right to try to achieve it. It’s my duty to achieve it.”<sup>13</sup>

This duty of reaching an inaccessible place is no metaphysical abstraction: it is rather a duty that is made concrete in the necessity of exercising oneself. In effect, this existential obligation, with its highly particular structure, is elaborated in various traditions of thought and of practice. Cavell has often insisted on the fact that moral perfectionism is not another moral theory, but rather an attitude, a perspective, a vision of the world that traverses the history of thought and of life. To cite a single unexpected example of this perfectionist dimension: in a system of practices as remote as possible from those of Rollins, namely Orthodox Judaism, one finds, according to Yeshayahou Leibowitz, the idea of a “reality always beyond that which is, that one can never attain, but which, nevertheless, one must ceaselessly strive to attain.” What is such a reality called? According to Jewish tradition, its name is precisely “redemption,” a redemption therefore that is always still to come.<sup>14</sup> In my opinion, as we will see, in his own tradition Rollins himself is a figure of this redemption, that is to say of this infinite exercise of ourselves.

Rollins is renowned for the periods during which he did nothing other than practice, up to 15 hours per day. That which Rollins dubbed his “relentless practicing” is a way of manifesting his ethical attitude:

I've taken several sabbaticals from performing and recording. I have a certain ideal when I play, and this ideal has changed over the years. I've taken breaks because I've been frustrated with a performance or I just wanted to go to the woodshed and experiment. I always become frustrated when I'm not reaching what I hear for myself. . . . I never viewed practicing as a chore. I always saw it as a necessity to improve.<sup>15</sup>

The interminable exercises of Rollins also highlight the priority of a certain relationship with oneself and, in the case of Rollins, the necessity of forming oneself in such a way that improvisation can become unlimited. This improvisation, infinite in a certain sense, presupposes, according to Rollins, a very particular relationship with oneself—strong but at the same time mobile. It is just such a relationship with oneself that occupies the center of Rollins's existential attitude: "This is the struggle of life, to be better people. That's how I figured out what life is all about. This is what I am trying to do. Life is an opportunity, but the hardest battle is with ourselves. That is what I realize, and that's what I am doing. . . . What matters is you winning the battle with yourself."<sup>16</sup>

This attitude is the foundation, the core of Rollins's judgment: "As far as I am concerned, a good band starts with yourself. It starts with me getting my stuff together."<sup>17</sup> And "getting your stuff together" is a task that one is never finished with.

Let us take the example of the relationship with oneself expressed by Rollins in the music he created in the 1950s. In this music, one finds what I will call a "horizontal inexhaustibility" within a form of the self. Let me explain: Rollins created a form of himself that allowed him never to exhaust an improvisation, to always invent new possibilities, as if the improvisation was, literally, an infinite creation without determinate limits. The form of Rollins's self at the end of the 1950s is a form never filled in, one that precedes all substance, a form without weight, always in movement, vital, a form, one might say, whose dimensions are limitless. It is a form that responds precisely to Rollins's incessant exercises. Consider "I'm an Old Cowhand" from the recording *Way Out West* (1957; see Figure 29.1).<sup>18</sup> Rollins's solo is magnificent; one perceives in it, at the same time, both imagination and organization, yet it is a solo that is in a clear sense unfinished. However, its felt incompleteness is of a very particular kind; it concerns the inexhaustibility of the improvisation, an inexhaustibility achieved thanks to a certain practice, a certain form of the self. In listening to the alternate take of "I'm an Old Cowhand," nearly twice as long as the first version, one understands immediately that Rollins is capable of continuing *ad infinitum*, until the end of the world, without repeating himself. The fadeout of this alternative take is a sign of the interminable activity of his improvisation, a symbol of his capacity to never fill in his own form of the self; rather, he is always ready to dilate himself and to prolong himself, to go forward. Without any doubt, in these years, there was a sound, a clear style, that is to say a distinctive form called *Rollins*, precisely that form which, within a piece, authorized a beyond, always elsewhere, further on, which knew no permanent pause, no definitive conclusion, no resting in peace.

Often it is Rollins's cadences that demonstrate in the most unforgettable manner this horizontal inexhaustibility; these are very evident moments of his infinite creativity. The

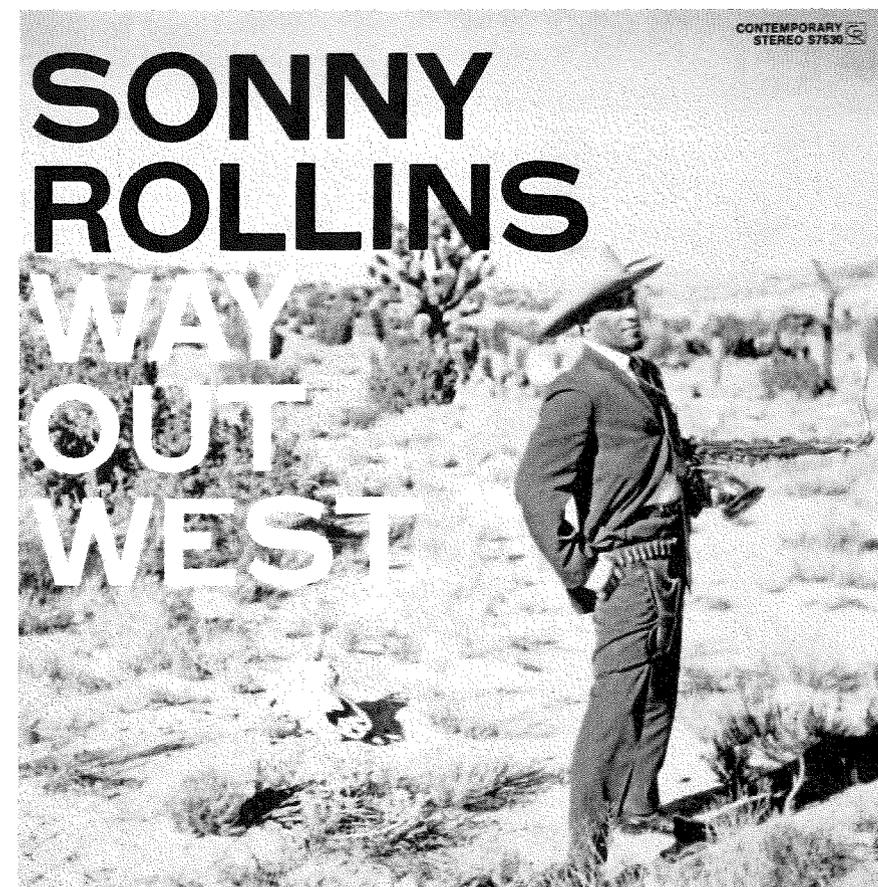


FIGURE 29.1 Sonny Rollins ([1957] 2010).

form that Rollins gives to these cadences expresses, moreover, a musical version of the cosmic consciousness described by Hadot. Among the aspects of this cosmic consciousness that Hadot emphasized, there is the exercise of dilation, of the expansion of the self into the cosmos, that is, the exercise "of becoming aware of his being within the All, as a minuscule point of brief duration, but capable of dilating into the immense field of infinite space and of seizing the whole of reality in a single intuition."<sup>19</sup> At the same time that he describes the ideal of stoic wisdom, Hadot speaks of cosmic consciousness, evoking a connection between each instant and the entire universe:

By becoming conscious of one single instant of our lives, one single beat of our hearts, we can feel ourselves linked to the entire immensity of the cosmos, and to the wondrous fact of the world's existence. The whole universe is present in each part of reality. For the Stoics, this experience of the instant corresponds to their theory of the mutual interpenetration of the parts of the universe. Such an experience, however, is not necessarily linked to any theory. For example, we find it

expressed in the following verses by Blake: To see a World in a Grain of Sand / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower, / Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand / And Eternity in an hour.<sup>20</sup>

The intuitions, the pulsations of Sonny Rollins unveil the entire musical universe, infinity heard in the mouthpiece of a saxophone. Rollins's breathing is metamorphosed into a short melody of several notes that leads us on to a second melody, and then to yet another, etc.—melodies between which we discover a reciprocal compenetration never imagined. Or else a melody transforms itself into an extended improvisation that links, in a spontaneous and natural manner, “high” music with “popular” music, jazz and classical music, all the different moments of the history of jazz, and so on. All things considered, it seems that a single note of Rollins encompasses, from the outset, all musical worlds, as if his improvisation unravels the cosmos itself. And one can understand that the consciousness of Rollins “is plunged, like Seneca, into the totality of the cosmos: *toti se inserens mundo*.”<sup>21</sup>

The greatness of Rollins, however, does not stop here, since there remains another modality of “transcendence,” perhaps rarer than that which I have just described, and which I will call the “vertical displacement” of the form of the self: the hard, unexpected and shattering process of *surpassing* oneself. One surpasses not simply a particular content of the self, but even its established structure. This is the invention of a new form of oneself, a transfiguration of one's own identity, of the “ontological” form, so to speak, of the self: it is a self-transcendence in which one goes beyond the sound, the expression, the style, that is to say the form of the self already realized—it is the occasion in which one becomes another. At stake is no longer a horizon that extends without end; instead, the fundamental configuration of the self is transformed. The experience is that of the birth of a new self, lived as an elevation to a new plane of possibility—hence a vertical surpassing, rather than a horizontal dilation (see Figure 29.2).<sup>22</sup>

This arduous, disturbing change is often provoked by an encounter with another, not with just any other but with an exemplary figure, in which is revealed the possibility and necessity of a vertical surpassing of the self. In the case of Rollins, one could interpret in this way his encounter with Coleman Hawkins, on the 1963 album *Sonny Meets Hawk* (see Figure 29.3).<sup>23</sup> In general, Rollins makes a distinction between “copying from” and “learning from”: “I didn't try to copy others. I just tried to learn from them.” And he continues: “If you have enough talent and you're committed, working with people who are superior to you always will improve your playing.”<sup>24</sup> In the specific relationship that interests us here, we must take account of a remarkable letter, written to Hawkins in 1962 after having heard one of his recent concerts, where Rollins expresses his esteem for him utilizing the vocabulary of moral perfectionism: “Such tested and tried musical achievement denotes and is subsidiary to personal character and integrity of being.”<sup>25</sup> And then, just after this, Rollins writes a remarkable sentence on the exemplarity of Hawkins, a sentence worthy of Nietzsche in *Schopenhauer as Educator*: “For you have ‘lit the flame’ of aspiration within so many of us and you have epitomized the superiority of

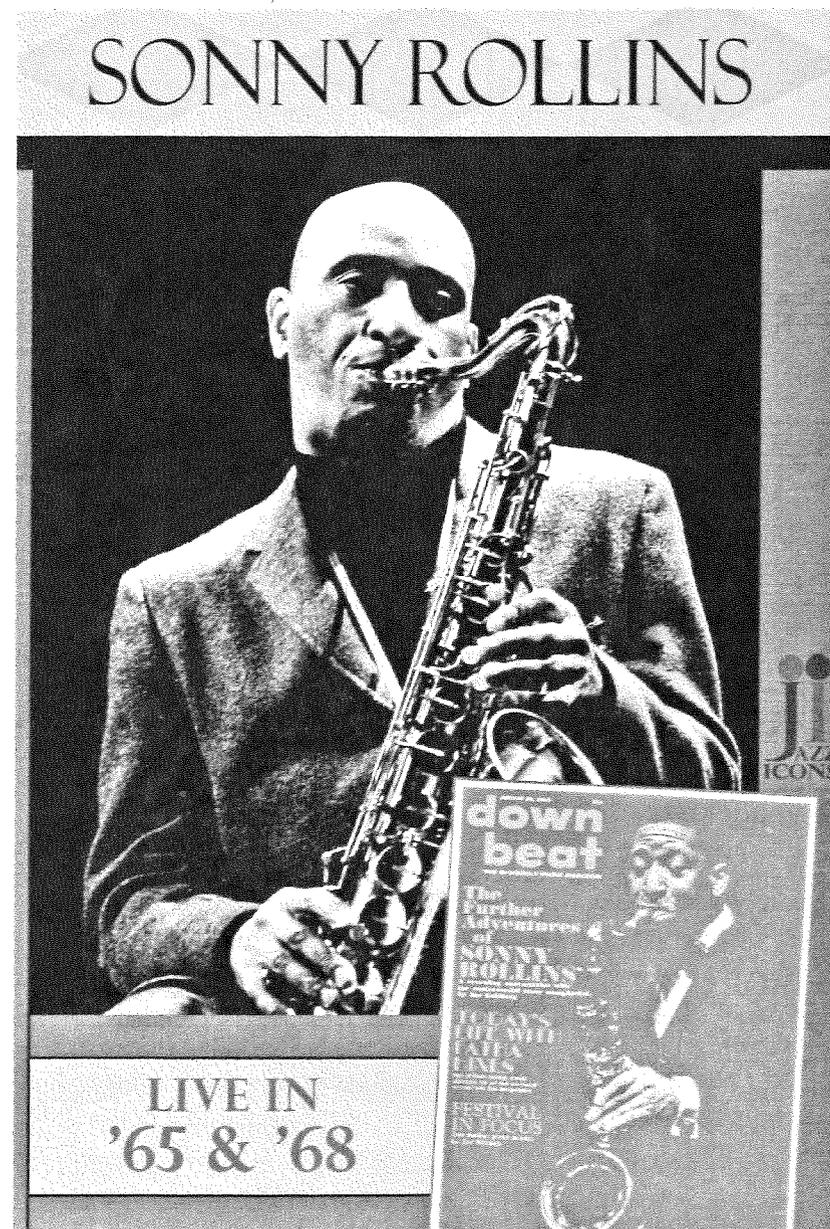


FIGURE 29.2 Sonny Rollins ([1965, 1968] 2008); hear, in particular, “Darn that Dream” to “Three Little Words” (47:15–49:10).

‘excellence of endeavor’ and you stand today as a clear living picture and example for us to learn from.”<sup>26</sup>

In my view, Hawkins's response to Rollins is found on *Sonny Meets Hawk*. This very same Hawkins indubitably shows here his own capacity to learn, and, more precisely, he makes us hear the lessons that he has learned from Rollins. At this moment,

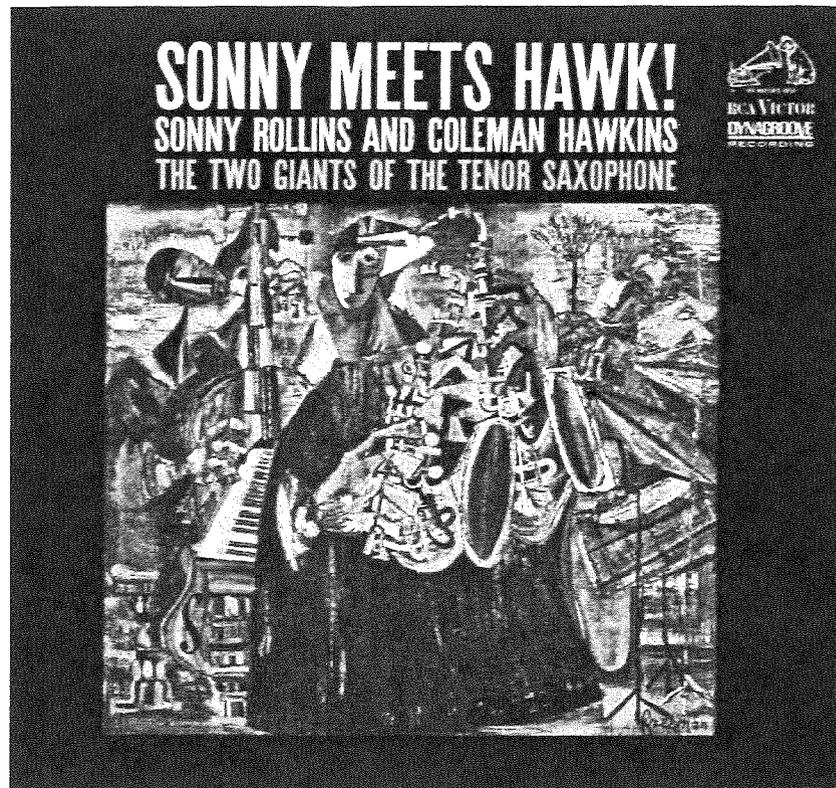


FIGURE 29.3 Coleman Hawkins and Sonny Rollins, ([1963] 2003).

Hawkins transcends the magnificent Hawkins of “Body and Soul” of 1939; this transcendence is also a praise of Rollins’s sound (see Figure 29.4). Instead of remaining within his own style, Hawkins demonstrates his force, at one and the same time aesthetic and ethical, through the creation of a new form of himself.<sup>27</sup> This is a Hawkins who, in a dazzling manner, comes *after* Rollins, a Hawkins reformed, renewed, thanks to the practice of Rollins. Hawkins’s phrasing, his rhythm, his attitude, are fully modern. In this context, the term *modern* has the sense that Foucault brought to the fore:

I wonder whether we may not envisage modernity rather as an attitude than as a period of history. And by “attitude,” I mean a mode of relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people; in the end, a way of thinking and feeling; a way, too, of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task.<sup>28</sup>

In *Sonny Meets Hawk*, Hawkins shows his capacity to put himself into relation with the contemporary, that is with Rollins, given that in 1963 the contemporary tenor saxophone was represented precisely by Sonny Rollins, or, more exactly, Rollins was one of the two

2CDSET

J a z z B a l l a d s 6

C . H a w k i n s

*Body And Soul*  
*I'm In The Mood For Love*  
*If I Could Be With You One Hour Tonight*  
*April In Paris*  
*And many others*



24 BIT 96 KHZ  
 HIGH-END MASTERING

FIGURE 29.4 Coleman Hawkins (2004).

reference points of the contemporary tenor saxophone, the other of course being John Coltrane. Hawkins thus manifests a voluntary choice in the new mode of playing that he adopts; in short, he exhibits a manner of thinking and of feeling, of acting and of conducting himself that marks his belonging to what is happening now, and at the same time presents a task to accomplish. If we take the piece “*Lover Man*,” for example, we can see, and the effect is unforgettable, this modern attitude of Hawkins.<sup>29</sup> It is as if Hawkins had said to Rollins, “Thanks to your example, I too have learned to surpass myself, to play beyond my usual style, that style which is the basis for my immense reputation.” It is an understatement to say that this ethics of vertical displacement is a risky task. And with his customary light-handedness of expression, Rollins recognizes the success of Hawkins: “Hawkins is timeless and what he plays is beyond style and category. In fact, it’s a shame that people tend to categorize music. A fine musician can play with anyone, just as a fine person can get along with anyone.”<sup>30</sup>

In reality, very few musicians are “beyond category,” in such a way that they can play with “anyone.” This is another way of measuring the exemplarity manifested by Hawkins.

This musical response of Hawkins to Rollins finds a disconcerting reaction in the new mode of playing of Rollins himself. In "Lover Man," the enigma is that Rollins no longer plays like the young, and already celebrated, Rollins. He does not compete with Hawkins; on the contrary, he turns away from the new style of Hawkins, that is to say that very Hawkins reformed by the imprint of Rollins himself. Rollins creates here a new form of himself, not only by a phrasing and a rhythm far from that of the 1950s, but by an innovative, unprecedented sonority and tonality. We hear Rollins in the very process that consists of "detaching himself from himself." This radical change could provoke a misunderstanding, as if Rollins had not respected the victory (over himself) of Hawkins. In effect, this is the judgment of Lee Konitz:

It bothered me what he [Sonny Rollins] did on the recording with Coleman Hawkins and Paul Bley. I thought that he was being disrespectful. Maybe it was necessary for him, to separate himself from Hawk as a father figure. But if he'd played inspired, the way he can, it would have been a great tribute to Hawk, and it wouldn't have sounded like Hawk at all. . . . He just played very out. But I think Paul Bley [the pianist on the date] can do that for you, by playing a cluster or two—I've had that experience with him of just wanting to go out. But why do it when Pappa [Hawkins] is there playing beautifully? Sonny could play beautifully too.<sup>31</sup>

I don't hear Rollins's playing as answering to a psychological necessity, that is, as anxious to "separate himself from Hawk"; on the contrary, I see this recording as a true homage to Hawkins, inspired by the new sound of Hawk—no doubt, it is a very singular homage, an homage rendered to an exemplary creativity, the homage of moral perfectionism. Typically, when the term *beautiful* is pronounced in a judgment directed against someone, it is a question of trying to narrow the possibilities of being creative. We already know the sound of the beautiful; and it is certain that in 1963 it was not the sound of Rollins on *Sonny Meets Hawk*. Rollins wanted to go beyond the "beautiful," beyond his beauty, and create an alternative acoustic space, inventing a form that puts to the test the beauty expected by those who have heard *his recordings*; that is to say he wanted to render less stable and less evident that modern beauty represented on this recording not by Rollins, but by the "post-Rollins" sound of Hawkins. Let us hope that jazz will always remain a privileged site of such creativity, such newness. As Rollins said, "The essence of jazz you know, it's improvisational; you know you do like the creator, there is always something creative, every raindrop is different, so there is always something to do that has not been done in a way that's creative so there is no end to creativity."<sup>32</sup> The practice of jazz as creative improvisation without fixed limits is not in the least banal, but here we must distinguish several levels of improvisation. It may well be that the level of creativity that is the most unusual and the most disquieting is that which gives rise to a new form of oneself, and in this recording it is precisely this level that is attained twice, in two different ways, by Hawkins and then by Rollins.

In my view, the manner in which Rollins responded to the exemplarity of Hawkins manifested the most profound respect. It is as if Rollins had said to Hawkins: "In light

of the way in which you have surpassed yourself, I see myself obliged to create new relations with myself, I acknowledge my own incompleteness," and then Rollins creates an unanticipated form. It is precisely in playing with Hawkins that Rollins gives a new and intensified ethical-political attention to *his modernity*, a modernity that, in the terms of Foucault, is at once a limit attitude and an experimental attitude. Rollins's playing poses the central question of the limit-attitude: "In what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by what is singular, contingent, and due to arbitrary constraints?"<sup>33</sup> The "performance" of Rollins is in effect a philosophical critique, not a Kantian critique exercised "in the form of necessary limitation," but a practical critique brought about "in the form of a possible overcoming."<sup>34</sup> Every form of ourselves that is sedimented in history, that has become rigidified, seems to us to be a natural, inevitable form, and consequently overcoming, considered as "unnatural," never gives rise to the reassuring feelings of beauty and of harmony. The attempt at overcoming is necessarily linked to an experimental attitude: "But if we are not to settle for the affirmation or the empty dream of freedom, it seems to me that this historico-critical attitude must also be an experimental one," that is to say an attitude that must "put itself to the test of reality, of contemporary reality, both to grasp the points where change is possible and desirable and to determine the precise form this change should take."<sup>35</sup> And it is up to Rollins, through his vertical displacement, to give a precise form to the musical transformation. In order to specify Rollins's ethos, it does not seem to me exaggerated to use the description given by Foucault: "I shall thus characterize the philosophical ethos appropriate to the critical ontology of ourselves as a historico-practical test of the limits that we may go beyond, and thus as work carried out by ourselves upon ourselves as free beings."<sup>36</sup>

This putting to the test of oneself as a free being is found again during the performance with Ornette Coleman that took place at the concert for Rollins's 80th birthday. The piece "Sonny Moon For Two," played by Rollins who knows how many times, begins in a very typical manner: after the entry of Coleman and the "freer" sound for which he is known, Rollins begins to detach himself from the melodic and rhythmic contours of the piece, and in the end Rollins attains a level of freedom which magnificently demonstrates the value of his practice of spiritual exercises and his commitment, even at 80 years old, not to rigidify himself, not to let himself become petrified, to be always animated and courageous (see Figure 29.5).<sup>37</sup> Here again one can link Sonny Rollins and Foucault in the precise sense that Rollins is "never completely at ease with his own self-evidences"; he is always looking for the "indispensable mobility."<sup>38</sup> Sonny Rollins is the living image of moral perfectionism.

Let us now return to the work on oneself and to Rollins's spiritual exercises. In a 2005 conversation, Rollins claims, "I'm always trying to prove myself and improve myself. . . . I'm never satisfied with my playing and that's led me into experimenting with lots of different kinds of things."<sup>39</sup>

The availability, the receptivity, the agility of Rollins allow us to see an attitude of experimental freedom, prepared by a constant practice of exercises, exercises that involve the entire spirit. Thanks to these spiritual exercises it is possible to prepare oneself, to make one's spirit open and lively; yet these spiritual exercises in themselves are

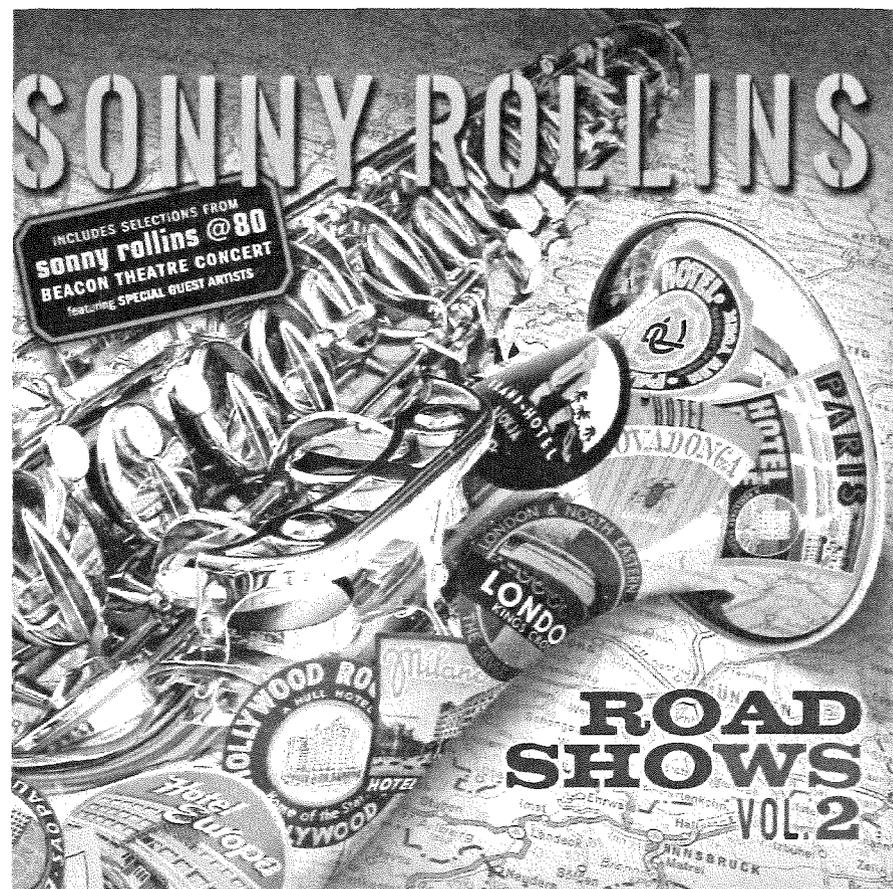


FIGURE 29.5 Sonny Rollins (2011).

not the guarantee of a striking, brilliant, truly creative result. They are, one might say, a condition, a crucial discipline, even if not sufficient, for reaching the summit of improvisation in jazz. Moreover, it is exactly at the moment when one glimpses the possibility of the vertical surpassing of oneself that the fields of uncertainty and risk widen; thus, it is also the moment in which the support and orientation furnished by an exemplary personality provide courage and the strength to put oneself to the test. Nevertheless, we never find ourselves faced with an ineluctable necessity to recognize and accept the exemplarity of someone; at most we perceive the attraction of the exemplary figure, we feel a provocation that provides us more energy: a new *élan*. Without the challenge of exemplarity, our exercises remain static; without the work of spiritual exercises, exemplarity is a nebulous ideal. In the end, it is up to each of us, as individuals, to go forward or to remain in place, that is to say to construct a certain relationship to ourselves. In moral perfectionism, there is no ethical inevitability.

In an interview given in 2007, Sonny Rollins weaves together creativity, the perspective of transcendence, and exercise. I conclude, therefore, with his philosophical

intuition, as an emblem of moral perfectionism: "Music itself has no end, there's always more to learn. I know I want to be able to reach a way of playing that transcends everything. I've not done that yet, that's why I keep practicing."<sup>40</sup>

## POSTSCRIPT

In this essay I have emphasized the relation between Sonny Rollins's improvisations and certain Stoic spiritual exercises.<sup>41</sup> Other modes of improvisation can be linked to the spiritual exercises of other schools of ancient thought. Elsewhere I have argued that Steve Lacy's last recorded solo concert, *Reflections*, manifests a form of Plotinian spiritual exercise,<sup>42</sup> and I have claimed that the posthumously released duo between Charlie Haden and Jim Hall exhibits a form of epicurean improvisation.<sup>43</sup> I would also not hesitate to say that John Coltrane's *Ascension* exemplifies the existential attitude and spiritual exercises of ancient cynicism.<sup>44</sup> The diversity of kinds of improvisation can be related to the multiplicity of spiritual exercises. All of them, however, aim at self-transformation, which always also has a social dimension. The problem for all of us, as Haden so clearly and compellingly put it in 2014, is that "when I put down my instrument, that's when the challenge starts, because to learn how to be that kind of human being at that level that you are when you're playing—that's the key, that's the hard part."<sup>45</sup> In other words, as I might put it, the spiritual exercises of improvisation must become a way of life.

## NOTES

1. Yehudi Menuhin, *Musica e vita interiore* (Palermo: Edizioni rueBallu, 2010), 78.
2. Buddy Rich, quoted in Georges Paczynski, *Une histoire de la batterie de jazz*, (Paris: Outre Mesure, 1997), 1: 276.
3. I would like to insist on the fact that to *understand* the meaning of my text, one absolutely must *listen* to the indicated tracks of music and video.
4. See, for example, Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).
5. Pierre Hadot, translated by Michael Chase, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 6.
6. Pierre Hadot, translated by Marc Djaballah and Michael Chase, *The Present Alone Is Our Happiness: Conversations with Jeannie Carlier and Arnold I. Davidson* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, [2001] 2011), 87, 92. In this connection, Hadot cites a book by Elizabeth Brisson, *Le sacre de musicien: La référence à l'Antiquité chez Beethoven* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2000).
7. Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 220.
8. Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 265–266.
9. Pierre Hadot, "La figure du sage dans l'Antiquité gréco-latine," in *Études de philosophie ancienne* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1998), 242, 245, 248.

10. Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Ogden (Mineola, NY: Dover, [1922] 1999), 4, 112, "Philosophy is not a theory but an activity"; and Michel Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?," in *The Foucault Reader*, trans. Catherine Porter, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).
11. Sonny Rollins, "Interview," *Academy of Achievement: A Museum of Living History*, <http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/roloint-4> (2006), accessed March 15, 2015.
12. Rollins, "Interview."
13. Sonny Rollins, with Marc Myers, "Interview: Sonny Rollins, Part 3," *Jazz Wax*, <http://www.jazzwax.com/2008/02/sonny-rollins-2.html> (February 21, 2008), accessed March 15, 2015.
14. Yeshayahou Leibowitz, *Les fêtes juives. Réflexions sur les solennités du judaïsme* (Paris: Cert, 2008), 112.
15. Rollins, "Interview: Sonny Rollins, Part 3." Also see "Interview: Sonny Rollins, Part 1," *Jazz Wax*, <http://www.jazzwax.com/2008/02/sonny-rollins-p.html> (February 21, 2008), accessed March 15, 2015.
16. Rollins, "Interview."
17. Franck Médioni, "Sonny Rollins and David S. Ware: Sonny Meets David," *All About Jazz*, <http://www.allaboutjazz.com/sonny-rollins-and-david-s-ware-sonny-meets-david-by-franck-medioni.php?&pg=5>, (October 21, 2005), accessed March 15, 2015.
18. The alternate take of "I'm an Old Cowhand" is on Sonny Rollins, *Way Out West (with bonus tracks)*, Original Jazz Classics 7231993, [1957] 2010, compact disc.
19. Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 205.
20. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. Michael Chase (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 260.
21. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 252.
22. Watch Rollins's performance from "Darn that Dream" to "Three Little Words" (47:15–49:10) on Sonny Rollins, *Sonny Rollins Live in '65 & '68*, Jazz Icons 2119011, [1965, 1968] 2008, DVD-video disc.
23. Coleman Hawkins and Sonny Rollins, *Sonny Meets Hawk*, BMG 37349, [1963] 2003, compact disc.
24. Rollins, "Interview: Sonny Rollins, Part 1." Also see "Interview: Sonny Rollins, Part 2," *Jazz Wax*, <http://www.jazzwax.com/2008/02/sonny-rollins-1.html> (February 21, 2008), accessed March 15, 2015.
25. Rollins, "You Have Lit the Flame of Aspiration Within So Many of Us (letter to Coleman Hawkins)," *Letters of Note*, <http://www.lettersofnote.com/2010/10/you-have-lit-flame-of-aspiration-within.html> (October 13, 1962), accessed March 15, 2015.
26. Sonny Rollins, "You Have Lit the Flame of Aspiration."
27. The classic performance of "Body and Soul" is on Coleman Hawkins, *Jazz Ballads 6*, Membran 222536, 2004, compact disc.
28. Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?," 39.
29. The performance of "Lover Man" is on Hawkins, *Sonny Meets Hawk*.
30. Hawkins, *Sonny Meets Hawk*, liner notes.
31. Andy Hamilton, *Lee Konitz: Conversations on the Improviser's Art* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 83.
32. Médioni, "Sonny Rollins and David S. Ware: Sonny Meets David."
33. Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?," 45.
34. Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?," 45.

35. Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?," 46.
36. Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?," 47.
37. Sonny Rollins, *Road Shows, Vol. 2*, Doxy Records/Emarcy 0015949-02, 2011, compact disc.
38. Michel Foucault, "For an Ethic of Discomfort," in *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, vol. 3, *Power*, trans. Robert Hurley and others, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 2000), 448.
39. Hamilton, *Lee Konitz*, 58.
40. Sonny Rollins, "In My Mind, I Haven't Reached My Vision," Inter Press Service, <http://www.ipsnews.net/2007/11/qa-39in-my-mind-i-haven39t-reached-my-vision39/> (November 1, 2007), accessed March 15, 2015.
41. In revising this translation, I have sometimes modified published translations of other French texts. My primary concern has been to preserve philosophical precision, even if occasionally at the cost of literary elegance. The author and the editors would like to thank Diane Brentari and Souleymane Bachir Diagne for additional close reading of the text.
42. Arnold I. Davidson, "L'improvvisazione matura," *Il Sole24 Ore Domenica*, <http://www.banchedati.ilssole24ore.com/doc.get?uid=domenica-DO20141228032AAA> (December 28, 2014), accessed March 15, 2015.
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## CHAPTER 30

# IMPROVISATION AND ECCLESIAL ETHICS

SAMUEL WELLS

IMPROVISATION in the theater is a practice through which actors seek to develop trust in themselves and one another in order that they may conduct unscripted dramas without fear. In my own work I have sought to describe how the Christian church may become a community of trust in order that it may faithfully encounter the unknown of the future without fear. This involves a treatment of how the story and practices of the church shape and empower Christians with the uninhibited freedom sometimes experienced by theatrical improvisers. What is involved is a renarration of Christian ethics, not as the art of performing the Scriptures, but as faithfully improvising on the Christian tradition. To understand that renarration requires a journey through the contemporary field of Christian ethics, an identification of the most fertile territory for Christians seeking to be faithful in challenging times. It then involves a brief outline of what is at stake in improvisatory ethics, and some examples of its promise and challenges in a contemporary context.

## CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN ETHICS

*Universal Ethics*. Ethics is conventionally taught as a face-off between two rival conceptions of how to pursue the good. One approach, known as deontological ethics, is based around an absolute sense of right and wrong. Precisely where those qualities of right and wrong are located is understood differently by various proponents. Most obviously, those who follow divine command ethics locate them within God's revealed word—explicitly, the Ten Commandments and other scriptural passages that leave little apparent room for ambiguity. Meanwhile, those who advocate natural law ethics locate right and wrong in the discernment of the precepts, limits, and purposes written into human existence. Then there are those who follow Immanuel Kant, for whom right is equivalent