The Practice of Improvisation as Elucidated in the Work of Kant and Butler

The practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint is a very important concept for the works of Judith Butler and Immanuel Kant. While Judith Butler in her 2004 work *Undoing Gender* outlines this concept in terms of the changeability of gender roles within the rigid confines of social norms, Kant rather categorizes ‘improvisation’ more broadly, proposing that one must gather knowledge, and become enlightened, though still obeying and respecting the rules and foundations of society. Though both philosophers differ in their approach to this concept, it is clear both believed that within an established system there must be opportunity for growth, creativeness, and self-invention.

Focusing on the notion of sexuality being something that is performed, without one being necessarily conscious of it, Judith Butler posits that the idea of this performativity is not “automatic or mechanical” (Butler, 2004) but rather improvised. Butler suggests that the “I” simultaneously is shaped by societal norms and also positioned at a critical distance away from them. Sexuality, as well, is outside of oneself, “beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author” (Butler, 2004). Butler proposes that “sexuality… is not found to be in those constraints… it is extinguished by constraints, but also mobilized and incited by constraints” (Butler, 2004), and that, in effect, “to a certain extent sexuality establishes us as outside of ourselves; we are motivated by an elsewhere whose full meaning and purpose we cannot definitively establish” (Butler, 2004). Butler gives the example of “genuine” female clothing, and the vague notion of preference; we are told that towels and aprons represent long hair, and through substituting one thing for another there is an act of improvisation. Thus, gender is rather manipulated an authored from outside sources and confined to norms, and yet within this there is a certain amount of unconscious improvisation that allows one to manage themselves in a world of props.

Kant, in his 1874 essay *What is Enlightenment?*, outlines improvisation in modern society without precisely identifying it as “improvisation”. Knowledge to Kant, like gender to Butler, had become a certain unconscious activity, fed to one through societal norms. Kant describes the difficulty of relieving oneself from the authorship from outside oneself:

“Thus it is very difficult for the individual to work himself out of the nonage which has
become almost second nature to him. He has even grown to like it, and is at first really incapable of using his own understanding because he has never been permitted to try it. Dogmas and formulas, these mechanical tools designed for reasonable use—or rather abuse—of his natural gifts, are the fetters of an everlasting nonage” (Kant, 1874).

Yet Kant, too, knew the importance of improvisation. Though in a society where you must “obey”, you can “argue as much as you like” (Kant, 1874), and much in accordance with Butler’s critical approach to societal norms, each citizen, “while this provisional order continues, (above all, each pastor acting as a scholar) should be left free to publish his criticisms of the faults of existing institutions” (Kant, 1874). Kant, though writing in the beginning of the Enlightenment, was facing a similar problem as Butler’s contemporary struggle: how to maintain creative self-control within societal constraints?

In conclusion, though both philosophers were reaching toward very different paradigms of thought, each had an idea of improvisation that existed unconsciously, that acted either in accordance or in reaction to the generally accepted information and societal norms, and that produced some degree of freedom for the individual within that seemingly automatic process of input and output. Ultimately, both philosophers acknowledged the acceptance of dogmas and formulas, and yet the ability of the individual to improvise within those constraints, to challenge them in order to have more possibilities of living.