

# Creativity, Spontaneity, and Merit

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Early on in Sally Rooney's coming-of-age novel *Conversations With Friends*, the protagonist Frances, a university student who performs poetry with a friend, engages in flirtatious e-mail correspondence with a handsome but married actor. She praises his performance in a play, and he returns the favour by saying nice things about one of her poems. Reflecting on the difference between performing a play and writing words on the screen, Frances tries to understand what she's being praised for:

At a certain level of abstraction, anyone could have written the poem, but that didn't feel true either. It seemed as though what he was really saying was: there's something beautiful about the way you think and feel, or the way that you experience the world is beautiful in some way. (Rooney 2017, 36)

I'm going to argue that Frances gets something important right here about the grounds of aesthetic and more broadly creative merit. Aesthetically valuable poems or paintings can amount to achievements that are to the artist's credit and as such may make admiration and other positive attitudes towards them fitting. Yet it is puzzling in the light of standard theories of achievement, responsibility, and merit just why this is the case. Such theories have typically been developed in the context of moral praise or blame for voluntary action, and emphasize notions like effort, control, expressing the agent's values, or responsiveness to reasons. But, as I'll argue, creative achievements don't necessarily involve any of these – they

can be effortless, out of voluntary or rational control, and independent of the agent's values and reasoning.

This suggests that the grounds of ethical praiseworthiness, on the one hand, and aesthetic (and more generally creative) praiseworthiness, on the other, are deeply different. I'll argue that artistic merit is grounded at least in part on an exercise of spontaneous agency that is ultimately neither a matter of the will or values. Briefly, I argue that what is distinctive of aesthetic (or quasi-aesthetic) creative processes are directed by what I call *aspirational* aims, which are formulated in evaluative terms, like creating a beautiful painting, an insightful poem, or (in a quasi-aesthetic case) a nifty workaround. Anyone can have such aims, since it is possible to set oneself such a target without knowing what would constitute its realization in descriptive terms. (They differ from what I call *guiding* aims, which include a kind of blueprint for what constitutes their realization.) What ultimately sets successful creators apart from others is not that they make more of an effort to realize such aims or that they have somehow better values or character, but that they successfully *perceive* (or *conceive* of) novel affordances or solicitations that are appealing in the light of their aspirational aim, and respond to them in way that realizes the aim to a sufficient degree. For example, a praiseworthy painter sees – perhaps after many rounds of trial and error – that adding such-and-such strokes of paint would render a smile enigmatic, and that this would serve the purpose of the work. This can be an exercise of a kind of perceptual skill – but importantly, need not be. Nor is it necessarily effortful.

My claim, then, is that it is the non-volitional spontaneity exercised in such successful acts of *active perception* that fundamentally grounds artistic and more broadly creative merit in virtue of manifesting an easily ignored aspect or layer of the active self. I suggest that this involves spontaneously extending emotionally resonant patterns in a way that enriches the content of our perceptions or conceptions so that we find ways of furthering and

refining our aspirations. The reason why creative achievements are difficult is therefore different from many other kinds of achievement: it's not that it takes a lot of effort or skill to create something new and valuable, but that no amount of effort or skill will suffice to bring about the moment of insight, an exercise of spontaneous agency that is our own doing but not up to us in the ordinary way. It is no wonder that they often teach us something about ourselves we wouldn't otherwise have known.

## 1. The Puzzle of Artistic Achievement

Before turning to merit, let's start with what makes something an artistic or creative achievement. Strictly speaking, achievements are *performances* that are in some way successful. So while we might loosely say that a book is an achievement, it is really the *writing* of a great book that constitutes the achievement. I say 'a great book', because what is of interest here are not just any old successes, like peeling a banana or coming to know that it's sunny today, but the kind of success in realizing one's aims that may suffice to give direction and purpose to one's life – 'capital-A achievements', as Gwen Bradford (2015) puts it. The standard line on what makes something a capital-A achievement that is to the credit of the achiever, most influentially articulated by Bradford, is that realizing one's aim must be *difficult* (for the achiever) and its success *competently caused* rather than just lucky.<sup>1</sup> I'll focus first on the difficulty condition, and how it should be understood in light of creative achievements.

What, then, makes something difficult? Bradford observes that it's not complexity or skill, since not all complex performances, such as speaking one's native language, are difficult, unless there's some special obstacle to overcome (2015, 34). Instead, she holds that

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<sup>1</sup> It is a further question whether the achievement is *good* or *good for* the achiever, and whether its value requires the product to be valuable. I'll set these questions aside here, assuming only that producing something that is valuable (e.g. by luck) doesn't suffice for achievement.

what makes something difficult is that it requires *effort*. Let's call this type of view *effortism*. One important question for it concerns the nature of effort. Bradford treats it as a primitive notion she does not attempt to define (2015, 39). However, as her discussion of the value of achievement makes clear, she takes effort to be a matter of the *will* – perhaps something like the exercise of willpower. As she says in an earlier piece, “I take effort here as something quite familiar – exertion of will.” (2013, 219) Effort, thus understood, always has a certain level of intensity and duration. For Bradford, the total amount of effort relevant to difficulty isn't a simple function of intensity and duration, however, since otherwise an activity that required only very low intensity effort but lasted a long enough time would be more difficult than an activity that required very intense effort for a shorter period. So she holds instead that only effort that is above a threshold of minimum intensity, which may vary by activity, counts for difficulty (2015, 49). Thus, her final view is that something is difficult for an agent when it requires a sufficient degree of *total intense effort* from her.

So, for Bradford, all achievements are difficult, and difficulty is analysed in terms of intense effort. Some achievements are greater than others, and this, again, is in part a function of difficulty and effort for Bradford: “It seems plausible that achievements that are very difficult are greater than those that, other things being equal, are less difficult.” (2015, 63) (The other things here include competent causation and possibly the value of the product of the agent's performance.) Bradford acknowledges that there seem to be effortless achievements, such as a virtuoso performance of a complex piece of music. To address this, she distinguishes between being difficult *for* someone and being difficult, period. Something is difficult, period, when it is or would be difficult for most contextually relevant agents, say most people who attempt to play a Paganini piece on the violin (2015, 62). For them, it does or would take a lot of effort to do so successfully. However, while it's true that performing



the piece is difficult, it's not difficult for the virtuoso. The virtuoso's capital-A achievement is thus not playing the piece but rather acquiring the level of skill needed to do so effortlessly.

There are many cases for which Bradford's account of difficulty seems plausible. But what about creative achievements? Let's take a couple of examples. Here's the first work I want to talk about:



That is of course Marcel Duchamp's famous Fountain, which was, among other things, voted the most influential artwork of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in a poll of art professionals. There's little doubt that creating it – at least in the sense of turning it into an artwork that raised questions about the very notion of art while retaining a kind of aesthetic beauty and generating a rich web of resonant associations – was an artistic achievement. What was involved in the process, however? Well, in the background was the idea of 'readymade' art, which Duchamp had had for a while, possibly as a result of setting up a bicycle wheel in his studio for his amusement, and subsequently realizing it might be thought of as a work of art. In one version of the story, Duchamp walked around New York City in April 1917 with this idea in mind with two artist friends, Walter Arensberg and Joseph Stella. They eventually arrived at a plumbing specialist. Here's how Will Gompertz describes the scene:

Inside, Arensberg and Stella stifle giggles while their companion ferrets around among the bathrooms and door-handles that are on display. After a few minutes he calls the store assistant over and points to an unexceptional, flat-backed, white porcelain urinal. ... After buying the urinal Duchamp takes it to his studio. He lays the heavy porcelain object on its back and turns it around, so it appears to be upside down. He then signs and dates it in black paint on the left-hand side of its outer rim, with the pseudonym “R. Mutt 1917.” His work is nearly done. There is only one more job remaining: he needs to give his urinal a name. He chooses Fountain.

(Gompertz 2012, 3–4)

I’ll come back to the nature of this process later. But next, here’s another example of artistic achievement:



That is Picasso’s popular take on Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, originally published in a French literary magazine in 1955. I haven’t found any description of how Picasso painted this

particular picture, but I've seen documentary footage of him painting, and I think it is safe to say that he didn't break a sweat sketching this image that nonetheless captures something essential about the characters and their environment. Indeed, the apparent spontaneity and confidence is an important part of its charm.

So, here we have two instances of apparent creative achievement. How do they fit with Bradford's influential view? Not very well at all. We have no evidence of intense effort or the use of willpower in either case – and indeed, we don't seem to *need* to know anything about the level of effort that the artists made to recognize that what they did was difficult. To be sure, there's effort involved in the trivial sense in which any intentional action takes some effort – it doesn't happen by itself, or it wouldn't be an *intentional* action. But that doesn't suffice for a capital-A achievement on any account. Nor is it necessary that a large share of the artists' internal resources is used, to take Hasko von Kriegstein's (2017) alternative account of effort – we've no need to know what internal resources Duchamp or Picasso had and how much of them they used to recognize their achievements.

Could effortists respond with the move that Bradford makes in the virtuoso case – by saying that while creating great art is difficult for us ordinary folk, it's not that hard for the master artist? There's two reasons why this model doesn't extend to the kind of artistic and creative achievements I'm focusing on. First, such achievements *are* difficult for people like Picasso as well. He created a lot, and not all of it was really worth it, presumably not because he didn't try, but because he didn't always (or even most of the time) succeed, as he would have, had it been easy for him. And achievements were difficult for him, even if success didn't take much of an exercise of the will (I'll explain below how that is possible). It's just not the way to accomplish these things – and indeed, as we'll see, that's a big part of the story why they're so difficult to do. Second, while major creative achievements are indeed difficult for ordinary folk, it's not because of the *effort* they require. Indeed, in some cases, intense

effort would arguably undermine the status of the performance as an achievement. Imagine Picasso had slaved away at his *Don Quixote* for three years day and night, and come away with just the same result. That would seem like *less* of an achievement to me.

So, in short, it looks like the standard story of achievement is ill-equipped to make sense of creative achievements and the difficulty involved in them. Somehow, we need to broaden it.

## 2. The Puzzle of Artistic Merit

It's not only what makes something an achievement in the creative case that is hard to explain on standard views, but also the sense in which creative achievements are to the *credit* of the artist. As Susan Wolf (2016) has recently emphasized, we have potentially fitting pro-attitudes ranging from admiration to affection and even love toward artists on account of their work. But on what grounds are aesthetic achievements attributable to artists in the sense that is linked to credit?

Let's start with the notion of attributability I'm using here. Gary Watson (1996) distinguishes between what he calls the 'two faces' of responsibility. The more familiar face is *accountability*. By accountability Watson means susceptibility to praise and, above all, blame. Blame, for Watson, consists in attitudes that involve a readiness for adverse or unwelcome treatment of the target. These attitudes encompass what Peter Strawson (1962) famously labeled reactive attitudes, such as resentment, indignation, and gratitude, which are responses to the quality of will manifest by the agent. For Watson, holding people accountable for their misdeeds by expressing such attitudes is constitutive of treating them as moral equals, and it serves an important social function of enforcing mutually respectful conduct.

Accountability is commonly linked to control – as the thought goes, it couldn't be appropriate to blame me for something that is not *up to me*. The most familiar kind of control is the sort of *direct voluntary control* we typically have over our intentional actions, but many have tried to articulate different kinds of control to account for responsibility for states like belief that are plausibly independent of our will. For example, Conor McHugh (2013; 2017) argues that responsibility for beliefs requires *attitudinal control*, which we have, roughly, when the actual mechanism we use to form the belief (such as visual perception) is responsive to epistemic reasons, so that even if we get it wrong, we would have gotten it right in a suitable range of counterfactual cases by using the same mechanism. This is a form of guidance control (Fischer and Ravizza 1998), which breaks down to reasons-receptivity (recognizing at least some of the pertinent reasons) and reasons-reactivity (responding to the recognition of sufficient reasons by forming the attitude). In this sense, our attitudes are in our control to the extent we can form or at least revise them by *reasoning* (McHugh 2017, 2757). Attitudinal or 'rational' control (Hieronimi 2008) might then suffice for accountability.

Attributability, in turn, constitutes what Watson calls the "aretaic face of responsibility". Beyond holding people accountable, we need to distinguish between the actions and attitudes that genuinely reflect who someone is and that therefore are to their credit or discredit from those that don't. It is common to focus here on people's *values* one way or another. On Watson's own view, actions and attitudes are attributable to an agent when they issue from her values and aims. In the same vein, David Shoemaker holds that an attitude is attributable to an agent "just in case it expresses the agent's deep self, that is, just in case it is causally dependent on, and its content is harmonious with, at least one of the agent's cares, commitments, or care-commitment clusters" (2015, 59). Similarly, Thomas Scanlon (1998) and Angela Smith (2008) hold that attributability requires that the attitude in question is rationally related to the agent's evaluative judgments. Importantly, attributability-

responsibility does *not* require control or avoidability – even if you couldn’t have done otherwise, an act can reveal who you are in the sense of manifesting your values, commitments, or evaluative judgments.

As a kind of responsibility, attributability involves more than grounding an evaluation of the agent as good or bad in some way. One way to cash this out is in terms of appropriateness of attitudes like esteem, veneration, awe, contempt, and revulsion, as David Shoemaker (2015) does. I’ve argued that such attitudes guide us in aspiring to improve ourselves (Kauppinen 2019). Alternatively, Scanlon and Smith hold that attributability as manifestation of evaluative judgment suffices to make it appropriate to demand the agent to *justify* her attitude (and the resulting action) by giving her reasons for it. This sort of *answerability* for attitudes that are attributable to us is one way in which they plausibly differ from good or bad attitudes we’re not responsible for, or brute reactions like nausea.<sup>2</sup>

We can sum up the distinction between accountability and attributability as follows:

<b>Mode of responsibility</b>	<i>Link between action and self</i>	<i>Response to the agent</i>	<i>Underlying concern</i>
Accountability	Action in the agent’s control/avoidable, agent has normative competence?	Reactive attitude/adverse treatment	Social regulation, achievement of justice
Attributability	Action expresses the agent’s deep self/the ends adopted by the agent/the agent’s cares and commitments	Appraisal of moral capacities, judgment of virtue/vice, esteem/contempt, demand for justification	Living a good human life, models and ideals, justifiability to each other

Accounts of credit- and blameworthiness have been developed largely in the moral context.

How should we understand artistic credit on this model? When we appreciate what an artist has done or criticize their unsuccessful works, we’re not holding them accountable – though

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that Smith (2008, 377ff.) explicitly denies that a distinction between accountability and attributability is needed, since she believes that the notion of answerability suffices to make sense of our moral responsibility practices.

of course, we can hold artists accountable by way of reactive attitudes as a result of subjecting their work to *moral* evaluation. It is not the quality of their will that we're responding to. This is not surprising, given the absence of direct voluntary control. Nor does attitudinal control of the sort that may be involved in belief and intention seem to fit the bill – an artist need not be able to *reason* to the conclusion that such-and-such stroke or tint is the right one.

In any case, it is certainly clear that we can and do give artists credit by way of adopting attitudes that show we *attribute* their achievements to them in Watson's sense. This is a plausible model also given the rationale for attribution in terms of reflecting or disclosing who the agent is. Works of art do show us something about the artist. But when we come to explaining *why* creative achievements are attributable to artists, the standard model gives out. After all, on the picture that focuses on moral responsibility, the self is defined in terms of values, commitments, and cares. And if we admire, say, Picasso's performance, it's not because we see it as reflecting somehow peculiarly excellent values or character. (He was an egoistic prick, after all.) Nor does it seem to be the case that we expect artists to be able to justify their choices in terms of rational relation to their evaluative judgments, which may after all not differ so much from the rest of us. So what, then could serve as the basis for giving credit and not merely evaluating someone's artistic performance as good? I think Wolf points in the right direction when she says of Henry James and James Joyce that "It is for their brilliance, their insight, their originality, and so on, as realized in their extraordinary novels that they deserve credit" (2016, 7). In the next section, I'll develop an idea in this ballpark.

### **3. Creativity and Active Perception**

So far, I've argued that standard accounts of achievement and credit don't seem to apply to creative work. In this section, I'll begin to articulate an alternative account of each. What I'll

propose is that artistic and more broadly creative achievements disclose a different aspect of the self than valuing or caring, namely, the self as an active perceiver. I'll start by discussing what's involved in creativity.

In the literature, creativity is sometimes defined in terms of characteristics of creative products – for example, Margaret Boden defines it as the “ability to come up with ideas or artefacts that are new, surprising and valuable” (2004, 1). But as Berys Gaut, among others, has pointed out, one might come up with new, surprising, and valuable artefacts in a non-creative way, for example a brute search that goes through every available option, as Charles Goodyear is said to have done when he came up with vulcanized rubber (Gaut 2009, 85). So I think it's more fruitful to focus on creative processes rather than products. Most agree that such processes can't be mechanistic, routine, rule-guided, or derivative. Nor will arriving at something new and valuable by sheer luck count as being creative – but as we'll see, we have to be careful here with the notion of luck.

When it comes to positively defining what makes a process creative, two broad families of views emerge. I'll label them *exceptionalist* and *assimilationist*. According to exceptionalists, at least artistic creativity involves something fundamentally different from ordinary thinking, such as inspiration from the Gods, or Freudian unconscious associations, or something akin to madness. According to assimilationists, in contrast, creativity is a special case of everyday problem-solving, and involves basically the same kind of processes and abilities.<sup>3</sup> For example, one might creatively solve a problem by considering an analogical situation in another domain. The view I want to defend is going to be mildly exceptionalist, but in a way that hopefully accommodates the data speaking in favour of assimilationism (for which see especially Weisberg 2006).

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<sup>3</sup> I'll focus throughout on psychological creativity (P-creativity) rather than historical creativity (H-creativity), where the latter involves psychological creativity that produces something novel in history (Boden 2004).



Let's begin with a paradigm case that easily lends itself to verbal discussion, namely poetic innovation. I'm going to make use of the same example as Margaret Boden (this volume), one of Marvell's couplets about our finitude in 'To His Coy Mistress'. The speaker, pleading his case for urgent tenderness, professes that did we not have such a limited time to live, "My vegetable love should grow/Vaster than empires and more slow", but as it is, it's time to get on with the business. Suppose that at some point during the composition of the poem, Marvell was faced with the problem of how to fill in the line "My \_\_\_\_ love should grow". (For my purposes, it's neither here nor there whether he as a matter of conceived of the entire line at once.) The English language offers many possible ways to fill in the gap – you could say "burning love" or "considerable love", for example. The vast majority of these possibilities are lousy in terms of poetic effect, of course, or either nonsensical or trite, and as such the opposite of creative.

What is involved in creative choice, then? I think everyone has to agree that we can analytically distinguish at least two elements: *production* and *selection* of novel ideas, as well as their *realization* in a medium (which may be simultaneous when the medium is language). Somehow Marvell had to think of "vegetable" (whether straight away or after considering alternatives), which he found at least good enough for his purposes. For this process to be creative, it clearly couldn't be an application of a rule or routine he had learned or established from past experience, as Maria Kronfeldner (2009) emphasizes. Nor could the production of the idea be random. After all, imagine that the process was carried out by two people, Anna and Belle, responsible for production and selection of ideas, respectively. If Anna randomly proposes words (say, without knowing the purpose of the exercise), and Belle either accepts or rejects them based on her evaluation of whether they fit, it seems to me that neither one of them is creative (nor is the system comprised of both). One doesn't know what she's doing, and the other is no more creative than a listener who recognizes a good riff without ever

having come up with one. Some Darwinian theories of creativity do talk about “blind variation and selective retention” (Simonton 2009, 65), but even on such views variation isn’t random, but rather depends on association of relevant ideas.

Production, selection, and realization of novel ideas is an intentional activity, or at least occurs in the course of an intentional activity. When they’re at work, artists try to come up with something new and valuable. Yet there’s an old puzzle about the teleological character of creativity, as exceptionalists emphasize: unlike in the case of non-creative activity, say trying to construct an Ikea shelf, the artist does not and cannot know in advance precisely what it is that she is aiming at, or should would have already had to finish the real creative work (e.g. Tomas 1958). When Marvell was composing his poem, he was trying to find the right word, but at the outset of the process, he didn’t know that the right word would be “vegetable” – he could only come to know what constituted the realization of his aim when he actually realized it by coming up with the right word (or *a* right word). How did he then know that it *was* the right word when he came up with it? Tomasi’s suggestion is that although the artist “cannot say precisely where he is going while he is still on the way”, “he can say that certain directions are not right” – he can exercise critical judgment that tells him whether a word or line is correct, and so remain in control of the process (1958, 13).

According to Berys Gaut, however, this ‘propulsive’ model of the creative process can’t be correct, because it “leaves it utterly mysterious how the artist knows that he is on the wrong track. For unless he has some conception of his goal in mind, how can he know that he is going astray?” (Gaut 2009, 89) So Gaut believes that the artist must have a goal already in mind to make the necessary judgment, and that artistic ‘flair’ consists in a skill of realizing such aims.

I think this apparent conflict between non-teleological and teleological views of the creative process can be resolved in the good old-fashioned way, by making a distinction

between two kinds of aim, which I'll call a *guiding aim* and an *aspirational aim*. A guiding aim is the kind of aim we have when we try to make one chair the same color as another, for example. At each step of the process, we can compare, if only mentally, the stage we're at with the end-state, and adjust our work accordingly. We know what constitutes realizing the aim: the chair we're painting is the same colour as the model. An ordinary skill is a matter of having dispositions that allow us to realize a guiding aim reliably, efficiently, economically, and so on.

An aspirational aim, in contrast, is something that motivates us but cannot itself provide guidance. Why? I'll stipulate that an aspirational aim's content includes an evaluative predicate – for example, you aim to design a *beautiful* house, or *effectively* portray the horror of war. The function of such predicates is not just to describe things. It's always an open question whether they apply to an object that has some particular attitude-independent features – they are, as it's often put, essentially contestable. For example, if you're only told that *Guernica* effectively portrays the horrors of war in a visual medium, you simply don't know what it looks like. Plausibly, Picasso's aim when he started painting it was to create something along those lines. To begin with, he didn't know either what a painting that effectively portrays the horrors of war looked like, so the aim couldn't directly guide his drawing and painting, in the way that the aim of connecting the dots in a paint-by-numbers picture could have. But the aspiration was there, motivating the search and somehow helped settle what the right creative choices were. But how? Recall Anna and Belle. Tomasi's proposal sounds uncomfortably like the picture on which Anna somehow comes up with random suggestions, and Belle then exercises critical judgment to select some. Nor is Gaus's criticism without force: while it's readily intelligible how a guiding aim allows judgment of right direction, it's not clear how an aspirational aim could do so. So here we have yet another

puzzle: how does a merely aspirational aim play a role in a creative process without serving as a blueprint for it?

Here's what I think: a key element in creativity is broadly speaking *perceptual*, and aspirational aims play their role by influencing perception, perhaps by way of directing attention, in addition to their more mundane role in motivating bringing about suitable circumstances for creative achievement (such as acquiring the necessary materials, tools, space etc.). This idea should be plausible on the face of it. After all, we often reach for visual or tactile metaphors when we try to describe the process of creating something – we say someone *saw* or *grasped* something or had a *vision* or was *struck* by something. My conjecture is that creativity involves the perception or conception of certain sort of *possibilities* in a raw material.

I'll grant straight away that when I talk about 'perception' here, I'm using the term in a very broad sense. However, it has become increasingly popular in the philosophy of perception to hold that we can perceive non-actual possibilities. For example, as I look around while writing this, I can see that I can touch the wall if I reach that way, or that the table could have been painted differently (cf. Strohminger 2015). Using a term introduced by the psychologist J.J. Gibson (1979), Susanna Siegel (2014, 54–55) argues that we experience *affordances*, that is, possibilities for action, and that some of these positively *solicit* specific action – for example, I may experience raspberry and white chocolate ice cream in a tub as inviting me to take a spoonful. To be sure, if I didn't like ice cream, my experience would be different. But, Siegel observes, the perception of affordance isn't just a matter of adding feeling to neutral perception: for example, without feeling any inclination to dance, you might hear a song as calling for you to dance, or as being designed to move people to dance (ibid.,

55).<sup>4</sup> Note also that such perceptions of affordance or solicitation are distinct from imaginings: when you see that you could use a hook to catch a rope, you don't *imagine* that the hook can catch a rope. To be sure, imagining that things are otherwise than they are can be part of the process by which we come to conceive of a creative solution, but I think we're apt to exaggerate the importance of imagination to creativity.

So, I think that a key element of artistic creativity is perceiving or conceiving certain novel affordances or solicitations for molding or making or shaping some raw material (or using a medium) in a way that gives it a new significance that fits with the aspirational aim. It's not true to the phenomenology of creativity, I believe, that there are two *separate* stages of production and selection of ideas, and as the Anna and Belle case suggests, it is hard to find a space for creativity in such a model. Rather, the artist *simultaneously* perceives or conceives of a possibility *and* regards it as a worthwhile contender for promoting the aspirational aim, or simply recognizes it as (perhaps partially) realizing it. Often, when one shapes the material to realize this possibility, the resulting new configuration stimulates another perception of a further way of contributing to the aspirational aim.<sup>5</sup>

For example, either as a result of study or some freak talent, a great traditional painter *sees* that painting a figure in a particular section of the work in such-and-such pose would convey defiance or tenderness, or that such-and-such stroke of paint would make a smile more mysterious. (This entails, of course, that the modification of the material would indeed constitute a good way to convey defiance, for example.) Or someone like Georgia O'Keeffe conceives of specific shapes and rhythms of colour as a way of evoking something as abstract as music. In the same vein, it is natural to say that a poet puts her finger on

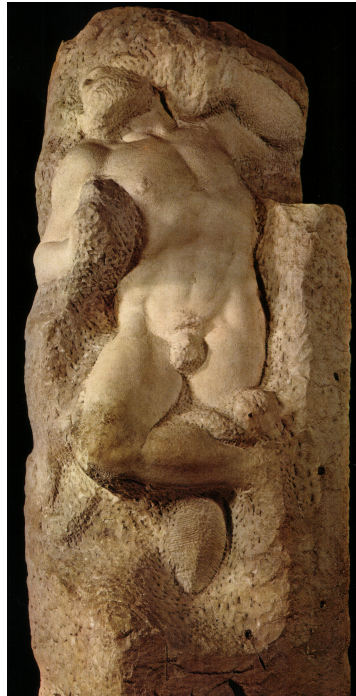
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<sup>4</sup> While Siegel (2014) postulates 'answerability contents' to explain the nature and accuracy conditions of solicitations and experienced mandates, I myself prefer an imperativist account of the content of such experiences (Kauppinen 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps this is part of what Collingwood means when he says that for a painter, painting and seeing are each conditional upon the other (1938, 304) – the visual "experience itself only develops and defines itself in your mind as you paint" (ibid., 303).

something the rest of us can't quite articulate, exploiting possibilities in the raw material of language that are in principle available to us all. A novelist or dramatist notices something about human interaction or psychological development, and by constructing a story or drama around it, draws her audience's attention to it by carving out the things that ordinarily obstruct it from view. A composer hears a groovy bassline in her mind when hearing a topline melody, and can sing it or write it out in the form of staff notation.

What I say here is sometimes echoed by the testimony of artists themselves. Look at this unfinished sculpture by Michelangelo



and consider the apocryphal quote attributed to him: “In every block of marble I see a statue as plain as though it stood before me, shaped and perfect in attitude and action. I have only to hew away the rough walls that imprison the lovely apparition to reveal it to the other eyes as mine see it.”<sup>6</sup> For a similar idea expressed in the context of a very different form of art, some

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<sup>6</sup> I've found no evidence he actually said this, but he did write, more prosaically, that “The sculptor arrives at his end by taking away what is superfluous.” (Letter to Benedetto Varchi, [https://it.wikisource.org/wiki/Lettera\\_a\\_messer\\_Benedetto\\_Varchi](https://it.wikisource.org/wiki/Lettera_a_messer_Benedetto_Varchi))

time ago, I happened to see a clip of the Edge being interviewed on YouTube, in which he said the following: “Whenever I pick up a guitar, I’m like ‘OK, I know there’s songs in here. I just need to... find them’.”<sup>7</sup> Or, finally, switching to modern sculpture, here’s how Robert Hughes describes Robert Rauschenberg’s method for putting together his 1950s avant-garde assemblages, with a direct quote:

An afternoon’s stroll in downtown Manhattan could and did furnish him with a complete “palette” of things to make art with: cardboard cartons, broken striped barrier-poles, sea-tar, a mangy stuffed bird, a broken umbrella, discarded tyres, a shaving mirror, old postcards. “I actually had a kind of house rule. If I walked completely around the block and didn’t find enough to work with, I could take one other block and walk around it in any direction – but that was it. The works had to look at least as interesting as anything that was going on outside the window.”

(Hughes 1991)




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<sup>7</sup> <https://youtu.be/D4e16arIxs?t=39s>. It’s been a while since he’s found what he’s looking for.

Here, again, neither effort nor a guiding aim seems to be in the picture – Rauschenberg walks around, notices disparate things, and conceives of a way to put them together, all in service of his aspirational aim of capturing what’s interesting about his world.

To some extent, we’re all capable of seeing novel possibilities for giving some material a shape that resonates – we’re all more or less creative. But some people have a disposition or tendency, or a talent that is distinct from technical ability, to perceive them, often as a result of years of study and perhaps certain personality traits. To confirm that this is really worth calling a case of perception, we could employ Siegel’s (2009) *method of phenomenal contrast*. In her most famous example, someone who is hired to cut down pine trees without initially knowing what they look like comes to have a different visual experience of the trees when he gains the relevant recognitional disposition – the forest now looks different to him (Siegel 2009, 100). I contend that a block of marble *looks different* to me than it did to Michelangelo – not in terms of size or hardness, but in terms of the possibilities for shaping it contains. There’s a phenomenal contrast, which reflects a difference in the content of the experience. In other cases, to be sure, this is more obscure – it’s more natural to say that a poet conceives of new possibilities for using the medium of language rather than hearing words differently from the rest of us. Even so, the poet might experience the sound of one word as suggesting another when I don’t.

What is more, the possibilities artists see or conceive of in a raw material or medium are such that coming to share the vision them helps the audience to come to learn or appreciate something important, or directly pleases, uplifts, or moves them – that is, they have genuine aesthetic value, or serve the aspirational aim. They also have the will and skill to realize their vision in a form that makes it possible to communicate it to others, at least to some extent. Here’s how I’d tentatively formulate this in the form of a thesis:

*Creative Perception*



Aesthetic creativity fundamentally consists of perceiving or conceiving, in a raw material or medium, novel affordances or solicitations that serve an aesthetic aspirational aim, and shaping it so that some such possibilities are realized.<sup>8</sup>

As far as I can see, this view is consistent with many theories of *how* one comes to perceive or conceive such novel possibilities – it might be by way of divine inspiration, unconscious association, blind variation and selective retention, or analogical reasoning. But it contrasts with views that emphasize evaluative judgment, random variation, or means-end rationality. I think it could easily be extended to cover, say, creativity in engineering or philosophy by varying the content of the aspirational aim and the object of perception or conception. In the next section, I'll explain how thinking of creativity in this way helps solve the puzzles I started with.

#### **4. Resolving the Puzzles of Merit and Achievement**

Suppose, then, that Picasso's or Marvell's creativity consisted in perceiving or conceiving of affordances that served their aspirational aims and working them out. What are the implications of this for the question regarding the grounds of artistic merit? Is creative perception attributable to the artist? I think so. Recall that the criterion for attributability is not control but self-disclosure. To be sure, the self that is disclosed by creative perception is very different from a deep self in the usual sense. It is not the self as a valuer or carer, but *the self as an active perceiver*. Part of who you are is that things strike you in this way or that way in pursuit of an aspirational aim. To ward off possible misunderstanding, I'm not denying that our values and cares affect what and how we perceive things. They certainly do (see Suni

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<sup>8</sup> Some people hold that strictly speaking, the product of the creative process is the idea, and the realizing it is just a matter of ordinary skill. Instead of entering this debate, I'll just hereby give permission to those who hold the view to scratch out the last clause (unless this is a library book).

2022 for a detailed examination). But it seems plain that two people with the same attitudinal profile and sensory inputs might still perceive differently, especially when it comes to solicitations. For that to be possible, and not just by way of chance, it seems we must be capable of spontaneity that goes beyond desire, intention, or evaluation, or conscious choice for reasons. And that is the locus of our creativity with its interesting profile: it is neither passive or lucky nor under our voluntary or rational control.

Some might take issue with the claim that absence of voluntary control is compatible with merit. For example, in the course of defending the importance of skill for creativity, Gaut argues that “In describing someone as creative, we accord her a kind of credit for her activities, and we do not give credit for mere luck.” (Gaut 2012, 267). Skill, of course, does bring an activity under some degree of volitional control. For most creative achievements, some sort of skill is certainly necessary for realizing the perceived possibility for serving the aspirational aim, but that is secondary to the perception or conception itself. And although there are perceptual skills (such as the ability to tell the make and model of a car from seeing a small part of it), they’re not the sort of thing it is natural to attribute to someone like Picasso. So I don’t think perceiving novel affordances is under voluntary control via skill. Nevertheless, it still doesn’t seem that it’s just luck that got Michelangelo to see the statue in a block of marble – even though he couldn’t bring about seeing it with an act of will.

It thus fortunate that it has become commonplace to deny that the absence of voluntary control entails that something happens by sheer luck – after all, I don’t have voluntary control over whether I believe it’s now sunny, but that I (correctly) believe so is not a matter of luck either.<sup>9</sup> As I said above, it is common these days to think that our beliefs are under a kind of control in virtue of issuing from reasons-responsive capacities or competences

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<sup>9</sup> To be sure, you might say there’s a kind of constitutive luck involved in my having the abilities and competences necessary for knowing that it’s sunny, but that doesn’t undermine in any way the fact that my knowledge is creditable to me.

of our own. But is active perception or conception under rational control either? On prominent conceptions of what is involved in rational control, such as McHugh (2013), it's arguably not – even if there *are* reasons to move the brush or bend a string in a particular way, the artist need not be able to recognize them *as* reasons, or be capable of *reasoning* to the conclusion that it's the right thing to do.<sup>10</sup>

My view, then, is that active perception or conception manifests what I will call *spontaneous agency*. Suppose, again, that Marvell realizes that talking about “vegetable love” reinforces the depiction of the impatient lover's perspective in a striking way. Plausibly, there is a kind of analogical transfer in play – vegetables, after all, are notably slow-moving things. In more general terms, this is a matter of *complex pattern-recognition and pattern-extension into new domains or contexts*: recognizing the parallels between vegetable growth and imperceptibly progressing emotions, as well as recognizing that drawing such parallels is new and unusual, and that the word “vegetable” fits in the rhyming scheme of the poem, and more. (The patterns regarding shapes and colours in painting are quite different – if you think of how Picasso drew Don Quijote's head, presumably in the background are the people and paintings of people he's seen, the descriptions by Cervantes, and so on – but I think the principle is the same.) Naturally, there is an endless variety of such patterns to be recognized and extended into new domains or contexts. The ones that Marvell picks out depend on at least two things: his personal history and experiences, on the one hand, and the emotional resonance of those patterns for him. The particular one he chose presumably felt right to him in the light of his aspirational aim, and he trusted his feeling enough to go ahead with it. I don't think that this suffices for us to say that he was in *control* of what came to his mind. But I think this interplay of pattern recognition/extension, emotional resonance, and self-directed attitudes *does* suffice for us to recognize coming up with the phrase as *his* activity, something

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<sup>10</sup> Nor is creative perception habitual, like the non-deliberate control we exercise when driving a familiar route. (Thanks to David Shoemaker for emphasizing this.)

in which Marvell himself is at work, even if he doesn't control what he does. It's not just luck (Marvell would have come up with an apt word in many nearby possible worlds), and may even amount to a kind of competence that is incompatible with sheer luck (recall here Bradford's emphasis on competent causation).

Perhaps it is granted that such spontaneous agency exists and in part defines who we are. But what kind of credit or discredit do we deserve for the way we exercise our spontaneity? Clearly, we shouldn't be held accountable for it. You shouldn't resent me for lacking Michelangelo's (or, say, Philippa Foot's) vision. But the kind of responsibility responses that Shoemaker talks about do seem potentially fitting, in particular admiration and even elevation. Drawing on empirical literature, Shoemaker suggests that admiration involves "feelings of uplift, thoughts about agential excellence, and action tendencies for emulation and/or self-improvement" (2015, 40). These are the right sort of responses to people who excellently exercise their ability for creative perception/conception in the service of aspirational aims, though emulation may be out of our reach.<sup>11</sup> Their successful creative agency reveals something important about them, and not only to others. On my proposal, it is predictable that creating art is also a process of self-discovery, even when it doesn't explicitly aim at it.

### *Artistic Achievement*

Finally, let me turn to what I've just said means for achievement and difficulty. I've accepted that all achievements are difficult, but denied that difficulty entails intense effort. Instead, the fundamental reason why successful artistic performances are difficult is that it's hard to

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<sup>11</sup> Does it matter here *why* the artist adopts the aspirational aim? Matthew Kieran (2014) argues that it does – in my language, that someone who is intrinsically motivated by, say, search for beauty is more likely to perceive what serves a valuable aspirational aim than someone who adopts the same aim because of external rewards. And whether or not that is the case, they merit more admiration.

perceive or conceive of significant new possibilities for realizing aspirational aims in raw materials – even if we have training and talent and habituation and understanding. One reason it's so hard is that effort doesn't suffice, and indeed may get in the way. To be sure, it seems that what often happens is that you deliberately try to create circumstances in which the inspiration or insight arrives. This may, of course, require some effort. But walking around the block with eyes peeled, like Rauschenberg did, hardly requires *intense* effort. Looking at the bigger picture, it is also true that coming to see things in a way that is not only psychologically novel but also something historically new and valuable characteristically takes a lot of study and practice. As Simon Blackburn puts it, in most cases, “there is a long apprenticeship, a painstaking mastery of craft skills learned from, and often imitative of, those who have so far led the field, and preceding any great leap forward. The pianist's answer to a fan who gushed how lucky he was — “yes, and the more I practise the luckier I get” — pretty much sums it up.” (Blackburn 2014, 152) I don't want to deny any of this. Nevertheless, whether such practice and other preparatory activities require effort, even intense effort, or dogged persistence, they are not what we get aesthetic credit for. It wouldn't diminish the creative achievement if you immediately saw what you need to do. Indeed, there are many examples of ideas coming in a dream, which is allegedly how Keith Richards found the riff of ‘Satisfaction’ and Paul McCartney came up with the melody of ‘Yesterday’. There are also prodigies who don't seem to require much practice. And if you didn't come up with creative products, that ‘great leap forward’, you wouldn't deserve aesthetic credit for your ten thousand hours of practice, or whatever.

Still, in spite of the unimportance of effort, artistic achievements are difficult even for artists, as anyone can verify by checking out Paul McCartney's post-Beatles oeuvre. Is there something in common to the difficulty of creating a revealing portrait and the difficulty of running a marathon, then? I think there is, and I'll finish with a suggestion. Let's start with

the notion of *trying*, which is intuitively connected with difficulty. (To avoid misunderstanding, let me emphasize that trying to do something is compatible with succeeding, although in ordinary conversation we often talk about trying only when someone failed or may fail at their task.) I'll stipulate that to try to X, you must aim at X-ing, make some effort to X, have some idea of how to X, and make use of this idea in your attempt to X. If I try to draw a triangle, I must aim to draw a triangle, or that's not what I'm trying to do. If I don't make *any* effort to draw a triangle, I'm not *trying* to draw a triangle, even if I really *want* to do so. If I have no idea of how to draw a triangle, I can't even begin to do so, so I can't try to do it. (A small child who doesn't at all know how to draw a triangle can't try to do so, even if they know what a triangle is.) If I don't make sufficient use of my knowledge of how to draw a triangle, I'm not trying to do so, even if I happen to produce one.

With this notion of trying in mind, we can tentatively define agent-relative difficulty as follows:

*The Simple Trying Account of Agent-Relative Difficulty*

Activity X is difficult for S in C if and only if it's possible for S to perform X in C but S's simply trying to X doesn't suffice to make it likely that S performs X successfully in C.

Roughly, something is difficult for me if it's unlikely I'll succeed by simply trying.<sup>12</sup> (I might still succeed, but that would be due to sheer luck.) Before discussing this further, I want to explicitly endorse Bradford's (2015) method for generalizing from agent-relative difficult to difficulty, period – roughly, we should look at average agent-relative difficulty for the contextually relevant set of individuals.

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<sup>12</sup> Von Kriegstein (2019) also emphasizes low probability of success in his account, but tries (in my view unsuccessfully) use an average adult's capacities as a reference point.

So, let's test and clarify this thesis with some examples. Saying 'abracadabra' is not difficult for me, because simply trying to say it makes it likely that I succeed. Note that even though it's not difficult for me, I might still fail, even holding fixed my circumstances, such as my state of inebriation. Similarly, walking to the shop is not difficult for me in my present physical condition, as it's likely I'll succeed by simply trying. However, note that the amount of effort it takes to simply try to walk to the shop is larger than the amount it takes to simply try to say 'abracadabra' – I haven't really tried to walk to the shop if I don't start putting one foot in front of another for some time.

Running a marathon, in turn, is difficult for me in my present (or past or future) physical condition. At the very least, I'd have to try very hard, rather than simply try it. In this type of case, the explanation for why simply trying to X won't make success likely is that it takes a lot of intense effort. In contrast, running a marathon *per se* is not difficult for Kenenisa Bekele, who would indeed simply need to try to run the requisite amount of miles. Running a marathon in 2.05, in contrast, would be difficult even for Bekele – that takes intense effort even for the fittest runners.

It's also difficult, if not impossible, for me to create an aesthetically valuable painting. Again, simply trying to do so won't make my success likely. But neither would trying very hard. My problem can't be remedied with effort, since it comes down to something like lack of talent, or lack of immersion in the practice and tradition. But, as I've said, the same goes for Picasso, *mutatis mutandis*. In his case, too, simply trying won't suffice – nor will trying hard. The explanation for why simply trying doesn't make success likely is different in this case. It's that success takes more than effort or skill or talent – it takes inspiration, vision, or insight, or generally speaking fruitful spontaneous activity that is beyond voluntary and rational control. And such things cannot be called forth by direct effort, though we can of course strive to create the right circumstances for exercising our

spontaneity. So the reason why simply trying won't suffice is not that one has to try hard to succeed, but that the relevant capacity isn't under direct control in the first place.

## 5. Conclusion

As I was finishing this chapter, I came across a comment by the art historian Herbert Molderings, who holds that at the core of Duchamp's aesthetics was "the idea that all things can be perceived and conceived differently" (2010, xv). I've tried to make the case that this simple idea captures a lot about what's distinctive of creative processes, which at some point escape our voluntary and rational control but can nevertheless ground aesthetic merit. Evidently, a lot of reflection and reasoning may precede adopting what I've called an aspirational aim, and a lot of practice may facilitate coming to perceive or conceive of possibilities that contribute to realizing it, when the material or medium is shaped according to such perceptions or conceptions. But my thesis has been that in the end, novelty enters the process via something like spontaneous extension of a pattern that resonates with the artist and manifests itself in active perception. Since such creative perceptions are attributable to us, we deserve credit for the resulting realization of aspirational aims, if they have aesthetic or other value. Since we can't bring them about by simply trying, creating worthwhile art is difficult even if it is effortless when successful, and may thus amount to a significant achievement. So if the way you experience the world turns out to be beautiful, as Rooney's protagonist put it, it is fine and proper to admire or even love you.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> This paper has its origins on my comments to Susan Wolf's Donnellan Lectures on aesthetic responsibility at Trinity College Dublin in May 2017. I'm grateful to her for inspiration and feedback. I also owe special thanks to Gwen Bradford who invited me to present the original version of this paper at a session on Achievement and Difficulty at the Central APA in Chicago in February 2018, and has discussed the ideas with me on several occasions. I'm also grateful to Lilian O'Brien and David Shoemaker for generous written comments, and audiences in Chicago, Helsinki, and Houston for insightful criticisms, especially Dane Gogoshin, Sade Hormio, Uriah Kriegel, Hasko von Kriegstein, Jason Raibley, Tim Schroeder, George Sher, Ninni Suni, and Teemu Toppinen.



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