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ON CREATIVITY AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE SUPRANATIONAL STATE

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Summary

Building on the writings of Wittgenstein on rule-following and deviance, Kristóf Nyíri advanced a theory of creativity as consisting in a fusion of conflicting rules or disciplines. Only such fusion can produce something that is both intrinsically new and yet capable of being apprehended by and passed on to a wider community. Creativity, on this view, involves not the breaking of rules, or the deliberate cultivation of deviant social habits, but rather the acceptance of enriched systems of rules, the adherence to which presupposes simultaneous immersion in disciplines hitherto seen as being unrelated. The paper presents a demonstration of the fruitfulness of this theory by means of an account of some of the political, cultural and intellectual peculiarities of the Habsburg Monarchy.

Philosophers of various persuasions have at different times attempted to pin down the nature and peculiarities of large-scale social and political formations. The Greeks concerned themselves with the peculiarities of monarchies, republics, oligarchies, and of course with the nature of the *polis*, and German thinkers worried themselves philosophically about the oppositions of culture and civilization, society and community, nation and state. Philosophical consideration of supranational or imperial orders, in contrast, and in particular of that imperial order which was variously called Austria-Hungary, the Austrian Empire, the Habsburg Empire, or the Danube Monarchy, has been much less common. And where it has occurred it has been associated with a marked lack of sympathy and enthusiasm, often taking on the form of a mere apologia for something which, in a better world, would be more properly organized.

The historical reasons for this are not hard to find. At least in recent times, the dominant traditions of European philosophy have been closely associated with, and to a large extent unthinkable without, the classical nation state. And even the philosophy of England in the period of her imperial heyday was affected to such a

large extent by German ways of thinking that, with the noble exception of Lord Acton (to whom we shall return below), English philosophers produced nothing of significance by way of a philosophy of the imperial order, just as they have produced nothing of substance, either, on the peculiar multinational character of the United Kingdom itself.

Yet why should we concern ourselves today with, of all things, the philosophy of the supranational state? There are a number of different sorts of answer which can be given to this question. The first is purely philosophical: the ontology of political orders and of social and cultural formations in general, has a charm of its own, and the ontological assumptions a philosopher makes can be put to the test by being applied to those hard cases which do not fit the customary moulds. The second is a matter of the potential relevance of philosophy, or of philosophical clarification and reflection, to contemporary political affairs (to our ways of conceiving, for example, the European Union, or militant Islam, or Irish Republicanism). And the third is a matter of social and intellectual history. For Imperial Austria, like the Ottoman Empire and other supranational orders, manifested not only political but also cultural peculiarities, so that the question can be raised as to the degree to which the peculiar way in which Austria-Hungary was built up out of its constituent national, ethnic, linguistic and religious parts can be assigned some of the responsibility for the peculiar flowering of its cultural and intellectual life, especially in the *fin-de-siècle* period.

The Danube Monarchy was a response to a quite specific problem of nationalities in Eastern Central Europe. Not only was it composed of a plurality of 'historico-political entities', as one called the different kingdoms, archduchies, duchies, margravates, principalities, etc., in Austrian constitutional law; these several entities were themselves far from being ethnically homogeneous, the different nationalities being scattered, to different degrees throughout the Dual Monarchy, to the extent that no single ethnic or national group was confined to any one enclave or locality.

A similar diversity was present also in the religious life of the Empire, which encompassed Catholics, Uniates, Protestants (among them Lutherans, Hussites, Calvinists and others), Muslims and Jews, as well as practitioners of the Orthodox religion. Catholicism, of course, enjoyed an overwhelming preponderance; but smaller religious groups benefited from the tolerance of the Emperor; and

Jews, in particular, were at times able to rise to the highest levels within the Imperial hierarchy.

The Habsburg Monarchy was not a mere heap of territories randomly accumulated. Its peoples shared a common geographical region around the Danube, and more than 200 years of warfare against the Ottoman Porte had contributed not a little to the development among them of a feeling of a common fate and history. The peoples of the Monarchy shared further the presumption of belonging to a common political entity, a presumption bolstered by an allegiance to the Habsburg dynasty itself. Monarchical patriotism and loyalty to Austria certainly differed in degree according to regional, ethnic and social circumstances; but it is nonetheless the case that many people throughout the Empire simply felt that their fatherland was Habsburg. These dynastic loyalties, combined with a common army and monetary system, and with a freedom of movement, of trade and of employment within its frontiers, served not only to hold the Empire together against growing nationalistic pressures, but also affected the social and cultural development of its constituent peoples.

The Habsburg Monarchy was not a mere heap. But nor was it a tidy hierarchical structure organized around some single center. And nor, either, was it an artificial federation put together out of separate national units via bureaucratic machinations. Rather, it was a slow and accidental growth, which owed more to a long process of common evolution among its parts than to any deliberately worked out rational plan or construction. It was above all Hungarian authors who contributed to the formulation of a philosophical justification of a pluralistic order of this kind. Works such as *The Influence of the Founding Ideas of the Nineteenth Century on the State* by József Eötvös stressed the importance of the Church, of regional and local institutions, and of private associations, as socially unifying elements which served to counteract the centralizing power of the state. The freedom of the Church and of the municipalities he saw as mutually supporting each other, since both rested upon the same principle, i.e. that the power of the state can be absolute only in certain spheres. More generally he writes:

There are many who believe that what exists can be preserved only through the influence of a powerful central political force, and the fact that the system of centralization finds so many defenders amongst statesmen is for the greater part attributable to this belief. Yet it is a

point of view which rests on error. That which exists cannot be protected against changes by the state; it is much rather the immutability of a host of other relationships through which the state itself must be protected against upheavals.

Aurel Kolnai, another Hungarian, has written that it was the “very imperfection of the Habsburg system” which contributed to the cohesion of the Empire:

Had it achieved an evidently rational and universally approved ‘solution’, the obsolete superstructure might have been abandoned without peril. But in fact the comparatively livable solution it presented was dependent upon its own existence. Thus the number of people was great, in Hungary for instance, who, while viewing the Habsburg rule with cool detachment or even antipathy, yet desired it to survive and behaved towards it as loyal subjects, because they surmised that its downfall would in most respects be followed by a deterioration of conditions. (1942: 298)

The various groupings of the Empire were arranged not simply in horizontal juxtaposition, but also in a vertical manner, giving rise to a web of interpenetrations between levels whose constituent parts were not merely the various national and regional groupings, but also, for example, the court, the army, the nobility, the Church; and each of these, too, manifested in microcosm the multi-leveled structure of the whole. As Eötvös emphasized, such institutions served simultaneously as nuclei of local differentiation and as agents of a wider Austrian unification in an elaborate balancing act, of the sort that is exemplified in our own day in the case of Switzerland (and whose failure will likely soon be exemplified in the case of post-Saddamist Iraq).

In the parts of the Empire that were administered by Vienna, a trade off frequently took place between political and cultural aspirations and interests. Thus Czechs and Poles were given cultural autonomy as a substitute for political autonomy, not as a step on the road to independence. Germans in Bohemia and Slovenes in Istria looked upon Habsburg rule as a protection against the oppression by Czechs or Italians which greater provincial autonomy would undoubtedly have brought in its wake. But similarly the Czechs in turn opposed the ‘Great German’ program of including Austria (though not Hungary) in a unified German Reich. They preferred to keep the loose Habsburg structure within which they themselves were able to strive for greater

autonomy, and they were joined in these efforts by the Slovaks, who in their turn had no desire to be left stranded under Magyar rule. Thus the equipoise upon which the power of the Emperor rested derived support from every nationality that feared local dominion by a more powerful nationality on its borders. And thus also the large civil servant class by which the Empire was administered depended for its powers not only upon Habsburg authority, and not only upon acceptance by the large majority of the peoples of the Empire, but also upon continued disunity among these peoples.

This balance of centripetal and centrifugal forces manifested itself in different ways in reflection of different local conditions. Thus in Moravia, for example, Germans and Slavs lived in close interrelation, brought together most of all by the Catholic Church and by a widespread bilingualism, both of which served also to temper nationalist feelings in the population of Moravia as a whole. The Moravians indeed conceived their political allegiance almost entirely in dynastic and Austrian terms, and were consequently hardly susceptible to extraneous Pan-Slavist or Pan-Germanic influences, tending to take their cultural bearings from Vienna, rather than from Prague, all ethnic and linguistic differences notwithstanding.

In Bohemia, on the other hand, Germans and Czechs intermingled hardly at all, the national (ethnic) division largely coinciding with a difference in religion and in social class. There were, accordingly, a significant number of Czech intellectuals in Bohemia, particularly after the Austrian Compromise with Hungary in 1867, who readily embraced Pan-Slavist ideology as a counterbalance to what they conceived to be an unjust treatment of the Czechs. Such intellectuals then formed the nuclei of political movements which, under the influence of England and France, served as important dissolutionary forces within the Empire.

Austria was not, then, a simple congeries of different nationalities: the allegiances among different social groups were as often as not allegiances cutting across national boundaries, which meant also that the various national units were not divided into dominant and subjugated groups, so that it is impossible to speak of 'minorities' within the Empire. As Kolnai wrote in an essay of 1946/47:

Imperial Austria, like Switzerland, notwithstanding the numerical disproportion of their different nationalities, did not have 'minorities' because they had no ruling nations.

The ‘nationalities’ within a supranational state need not, then, be separate units in any strict sense; indeed they will, in the normal case, be merged one into another. As Kolnai writes:

A human society is not composed of nations [...] in the same clear-cut sense in which it is composed of individuals or, for that matter, of sovereign states. The spectrum of nationalities is full of interpenetrations, ambiguities, twilight zones. It follows that the conception of nationalism as a universal principle, the conception of a ‘just’ or ‘natural’ order of nation states, is in fact and in theory pure utopia. There can be neither an order of states nor of frontiers in which there does not enter to a large extent the factor of arbitrariness, contingency and historical accident. Pretending to ‘purify’ the body of mankind like other enterprises of a naturalist, pseudo-rationalist sort purporting to lay down ‘evident principles’ which generally prove to be illusory, means to push arbitrariness to its extreme limit. (1946/47: 536)

Thus that “modern primitivism” which wishes to eliminate the factor of contingency from human life disregards the “unique tempering and enriching effect exercised on man by his symbiosis with nationalities other than his own.” (Kolnai, 1946/47: 645) Kolnai is echoing also Lord Acton’s essay on “Nationality” of 1862, which points to the positive consequences of the lack of centralized hegemony which is vouchsafed by the presence of different nationalities within a single state. This provides, Acton says, “against the servility which flourishes under the shadow of a single authority, by balancing interests, multiplying associations, and giving to the subject the restraint and support of a combined opinion.” (1862: 289) Acton was almost lyrical in his description of the peculiar perfection which such a supranational entity may achieve:

If we take the establishment of liberty for the realization of moral duties to be the end of civil society, we must conclude, that those states are substantially the most perfect which, like the British and Austrian Empires, include various distinct nationalities without oppressing them. Those in which no mixture of races has occurred are imperfect; and those in which its effects have disappeared are decrepit. A State which is incompetent to satisfy different races condemns itself; a State which labors to neutralize, to absorb, or to expel them, destroys its own vitality; a State which does not include them is destitute of the chief basis of self-government. (1862: 298)

Thus the theory of nationality, Acton goes on “is a retrograde step in history”; indeed, it “is more absurd and more criminal than the theory of socialism” (1862: 300). Such ideas are entirely contrary to the spirit of German political thought, which preferred to conceive the nation state as a unitary whole analogous to the single organism and thus also as a pre-political entity, independent of human will and artifice and of any subjective feeling of allegiance. This conception tilts inevitably in the direction of a view according to which social and cultural integrity within each state must be guaranteed, for example by excluding or eliminating or re-educating those who do not share the national language or appropriate racial or biological characteristics.

Can it now be argued that there are appreciable positive consequences of a supranational order, of an overlapping and interpenetration of (for example) racial and linguistic groupings, which manifest themselves also in the spheres of intellect and culture? A view of just this sort was in fact argued in a short but important essay written by the composer Béla Bartók in 1942. Bartók’s essay was entitled “Race Purity in Music”, and it points out that when a melody is carried from one culture to another in this way then it is not simply transmitted whole but is affected on its journey by a variety of factors having to do with disparities in the cultural stock of its successive host cultures. The greater, for example, is the dissimilarity between the accents, metrical conditions, syllabic structure and so on, of two languages, the greater will be the changes that occur in the emigrated melody. Thus it is not merely that the migration of folk melodies from one country to another leads to an enrichment of the music of the new host culture. In the process of migrating, the melodies and other musical elements become themselves richer and more complex, sometimes to the extent that there become possible new types and varieties of music, and new forms of musical creativity.

This crossing and recrossing applies not only to melodies, of course, but to all the factors involved in musical activity. Bartók himself lays particular stress on the parallels between the development of arts such as music and the evolution of language. As he points out, English is impure in comparison with other Germanic languages; but it has precisely for that reason an incomparable elasticity and strength of expression. And in both cases an impurity of the linguistic stock or of the repertoire of musical elements is beneficial rather than detrimental to the intellectual or aesthetic power of the whole. Nor do these mutually beneficial influences apply to folk music and to the

wider folk culture alone. The higher music of Austria, too, benefited from the continuous exchange of melodies and other musical elements and forms between one part of the Empire and another, so that the Austrian musical tradition has often been described as being precisely averse to the emergence of a distinctive Austrian national style. What is today called ‘Viennese classical music’ is in fact a synthesis of styles of German, Italian and Czech origin.

The continuous movement of composers and musicians across the borders of the various constituent ‘historico-political entities’ is clearly illustrated by the case of Bartók himself, who was born into a bilingual (Hungarian-German) family in Gross Sankt Michael (Nagyszentmiklós), a town of Magyars, Rumanians, Germans and Serbs, which was at that time still in Southern Hungary and is now Sennicolau Mare in Rumania. He moved from there to Nagyszöllös, known to its Jewish population as Sevlus, which used to be in Northern Hungary, was incorporated into Czechoslovakia in 1920, and now is in the Ukraine under the name of Vinogradov. From there he moved to Pressburg (Pozsony, Bratislava), an ancient Slovak city, for two centuries capital of Hungary, to Bistritz (Beszterce, Bistrița), a Transylvanian town with a mixed population of Magyars, Rumanians and Saxon Germans, to Pressburg again, and then on to Budapest.

It is of course a commonplace to say that aesthetic value rests on something like a harmony of opposing forces, on a ‘unity in diversity’, and that the artistic or intellectual fertility of a culture will be fostered, other things being equal, by a wide diversity of sources and influences, by a maximum variety of elements. But the reader can with justice insist on more than the triviality – ridiculed already by Robert Musil – to the effect that it is a diversity of peoples which is responsible for the peculiar character of the culture of the Empire. It is nonetheless true that there is a more than merely accidental connection between an ethnically and linguistically highly diverse society and a rich and creative cultural and intellectual life. To see precisely why this is so, it is necessary to distinguish two different sorts of properties which may be possessed by the constituent parts of a complex intellectual product such as a work of art. A melody, for example, will have properties of its own, such as a specific form and rhythmic structure, but it will also have a specific relation to a broader tonal system. A word or sentence, similarly, will have properties not merely in virtue of its use in given utterances and on given occasions but also in virtue of its position in the relevant broader linguistic (phonemic,

lexical, morphological, semantic) systems. Such broader systems are pervasive in all dimensions of human experience, and human learning and development consists to no small extent in the interiorization of reference systems of the given sorts, so that the mental set and system of interrelated capacities which we bring to our perception or creation of works of art is determined by the reference systems handed down through our previous experiences and through the history of the culture in which we live. The underlying stimulus might be, for example, a collection of bangs and whistles; but what we hear, on the basis of a given mental set and of learned capacities for distinguishing and organizing this totality of aurally transmitted information, is a piece of music of a determinate form, satisfying determinate rules and standing in determinate relations to other pieces of music in a common tradition. The same perceptual and cognitive organizing tendencies are involved also in our understanding of language, where our perception transforms noises or visible marks of certain kinds in such a way that we apprehend phonemes, words, sentences, entreaties, prayers, and so on.

These considerations imply, however, that there are certain restrictions on the role of originality as a supposedly necessary moment of creativity. For they imply that any overemphasis on a view of art as a matter of completely novel creations must overlook what is most essential to the creative capacity of the individual artist. We can take our cue here from a distinction suggested by Musil between originality and individuality. "Clearly", Musil writes, "one can talk about originality only where there exists a tradition". (Musil, 1931: 1207). A literature consisting only of 'original' pieces would not be a literature; but neither would such pieces be truly original, for there would be no systems of reference against which they would stand out as such and in terms of which they could be read and interpreted.

This calling into question of the role of originality does not, however, imply a simple disregard for the individuality of the artist. For it is through individuals, and exclusively through individuals, that traditions are appropriated and passed on. Indeed Musil sees the individuality of the artist as residing not primarily in his originality, but rather in the precise ways he receives, takes in, describes, arranges, elaborates and reflects upon the relevant strand of the tradition in which he finds himself. The artist must somehow mediate between working within an existing tradition and giving his creation the imprint of something singular and distinctive. Individuality and

indebtedness to tradition thus become practically indivisible, and indeed constitute two inseparable moments of the creative process taken as a whole. This implies in turn that the process of creation is in a certain sense not an individual matter but rather such as to involve a wider community (and ultimately perhaps the whole fabric of society). It implies, too, that the conditions for the *creation* of original works of art (and of scientific theories and other products of the human mind) are not to be divorced from the conditions which govern the *reception* of the works in question.

One might now claim – and it is one of the major contributions of Kristóf Nyíri to have assembled the arguments for a view along these lines – that it is not simply the diversity of elements that is characteristic of true creativity and more specifically of the creativity that manifested itself in supranational Austria, but rather the fusion and re-fusion of entire reference systems (customs, languages, traditions, practices). Individual cultural products are then not merely new combinations of pre-existing elements, but rather manifestations of new forms and meanings, made possible by the new and more complex surrounding reference systems in which they have their place. Where complex interrelated reference systems are at work, artifacts are able to be produced which have enhanced chances of achieving high aesthetic value.

Building on the writings of Wittgenstein, and on Wittgenstein's reflections on the relations between rule-following and deviant behavior, Nyíri advanced a general theory of creativity as consisting precisely in the fusion in given individuals of what seem outwardly to be conflicting rules or disciplines. Only such fusion can produce something that is both intrinsically new and yet capable of being apprehended and passed on by a wider community. Creativity thus involves not the deliberate breaking of rules or the deliberate cultivation of deviant social habits, but rather the acceptance of *enriched* systems of rules, rules which are *harder* to follow because they presuppose simultaneous immersion in disciplines hitherto seen as being unrelated.

As the contrast between poetry with and without constraints of rhyme and meter shows, it is by no means clear that those forms of art which are produced against the background of a smaller number of pre-established frameworks are thereby the more creative. And as Karl Kraus was fond of pointing out, the presence of that extra system of constraints which is imposed upon the artist under conditions of

official censorship is not by necessity a negative phenomenon: it may contribute to a greater subtlety of the work produced.

The fitting together of entire reference systems is not a trivial matter: each system typically exists on many levels, on each of which essential and often unforeseeable incompatibilities may arise. Certainly it is not something that can be achieved by any conscious process of deliberation. There are, in fact, only certain restricted combinations of reference systems capable of existing at all in such a way that organic unity is preserved and in a way that leads to a magnification of significance or complexity in artistic style or genre. It seems, however, that geographical proximity often plays an important role in giving rise to an initially alien reference system's ability to become channeled or communicated across cultural boundaries in such a way that it can become fused with other, already established systems and thereby giving rise to new and fruitful consequences. Such communication is then at least facilitated if the cultures involved are not merely spatially contiguous but also part of some single overarching politico-economic whole. Where such a higher-level whole exists, and in such a way that it does not stifle the various separate cultures that are maintained within it, then these cultures, or their associated reference systems, can become merged together in what may be truly fruitful ways.

The fusion of artistic and intellectual reference systems will, in any case, be facilitated where conditions are such that given individuals can come to embody in themselves a multiplicity of outlooks which are otherwise disjoint. Such conditions will involve, for example, a freedom of movement across national boundaries and across boundaries of cultural and ethnic diversity. They will involve a high degree of multilingualism, intermarriage and resettlement, and the existence of a plurality of competing cultural and intellectual centers, no one of which – as contrasted, say, with the case of Paris in relation to metropolitan France – enjoys a position of total hegemony.

The fusion of cultural and intellectual traditions and customs will be facilitated also where the separate cultures themselves enjoy a high degree of historical continuity, where the larger whole has come into existence not through violent political change involving qualitative and catastrophic leaps, but rather through gradual historical changes of a sort which bring about an always partial and more or less provisional fusion of contiguous political entities. The associated cultural patterns and institutions may thereby grow together, slowly

and gradually, instead of being imposed upon each other from above and in such a way that the members of the constituent ethnic or national groupings are permitted, as a matter of course, both to retain their separate cultural identities and yet consider themselves at the same time to be subjects of a single political whole.

The fusion of traditions that is conducive to cultural and intellectual creativity will, finally, be encouraged where the different overlapping nationalities and groups do not share equal levels of development. Such unequal development supplies, as Acton notes, “a perpetual incentive to progress, which is afforded not merely by competition, but by the spectacle of a more advanced people.” (Acton, 1892: 296) And of course the Habsburg State, which embraced not only the Vienna of Schubert and Mozart in the West but also primitive subsistence economies in Galicia and Bukovina in the East, manifested the widest extremes of poverty and wealth.

These considerations also suggest an explanation of the disproportionately high degree of entrepreneurial success exhibited by certain kinds of immigrant (and perhaps particularly by Jews). The immigrant, we might say, will bring with him to the environment which is to be his new home assumptions, capacities, habits and ways of seeing that are derived from his native background. The resultant overlapping of different reference systems will then favor not only entrepreneurial creativity but also innovation and originality in general. These remarks have quite special significance in relation to those native Austrian artists and intellectuals, particularly those who came to maturity after the dissolution of the Empire, who gained recognition only after leaving the country of their birth – prophets who were little honored in their own country perhaps because what they had to say was, to the ears of their fellow countrymen, merely platitudinous. For it is in many cases only when he leaves his native environment that the prophet becomes acknowledged *as* a prophet: it is only then that his platitudes are put to the test, by being incorporated into or tested against new and alien reference systems.

Both for philosophers and for politicians, as indeed also for historians and cultural critics, it was for a long time difficult to see how such a fragile and multifariously complicated pluralistic order as the Habsburg Empire could have a place in a Europe of tidy nation states. Austria came to be conceived more and more as an anachronism, an anomaly, a structure no longer fitting into modern conditions of life. Both at home and abroad the idea was disseminated

that the Empire contained within itself the seeds of its own destruction – though it is important to recall that the actual prospect of dissolution was conceived within the Empire itself always as a last and most desperate resort, not infrequently being conceived in apocalyptic terms (*‘finis Austriae’*), so that the energies of all but the most irresponsible forces were directed to finding some means of holding its structure together.

The myth of imminent collapse has been encouraged in almost all the subsequent literature on Austrian history and ideas. The undeniable artistic and intellectual creativity of the Habsburg territories in the late nineteenth century and since has been seen not as evidence of the power and fertility of the Monarchy, but as symptoms of its terminal neurosis, so that the particular creativity of the Austrian *fin-de-siècle* has come to be ascribed to the putative stimulatory consequences of decay and political collapse. It is of course true that Austria never found a political solution to the problem of nationalities or to the problem of minority extremist groups within her various constituent nations. Yet the collapse of the Monarchy was due just as much to external machinations, and to an unfortunate war, as it was to its own internal weaknesses. We can of course never know what would have been the consequences had it been Archduke Franz-Ferdinand, with his project of a new tripartite Compromise between German Austrians, Hungarians and Slavs, rather than Woodrow Wilson, with his (ethnopolitically and geopolitically) superficial doctrine of the self-determination of nations, who was allowed to shape the politics of Eastern Central Europe in the twentieth century. We can, though, point to the positive features of the Habsburg idea, not only in the realms of artistic and intellectual creativity, but also in having found a way to allow a multi-ethnic, multi-language and multi-religious polity to survive for so long and so peacefully.

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This essay should be read in conjunction with our two parallel papers on the ideas put forward here:

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“Politics of National Diversity”, *The Salisbury Review*, 5 (1987), 33–37 (reprinted in R. Scruton (ed.), *Conservative Thoughts*, London: Claridge Press (1988), 101–114),

where further references are also to be found. The essay owes much to many years of discussions with Kristóf Nyíri and to Nyíri’s writings on Wittgenstein, creativity, tradition, and the philosophy of the Habsburg Empire, especially:

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