

A Metaphysics of Creativity

Dustin R. Stokes
University of Toronto

I. History, mystery, and neglect

What is special about art? One of the first answers to this question will involve mention that artworks and artists are creative. Set to one side for the moment what this fact amounts to, just assume that there is some truth to it. This fact is at tension with another fact: aestheticians, at least of the analytic school, have said very little about creativity relative to other special features of art.

Upon quick perusal of collections in Aesthetics from my bookshelf, I find only six entries out of 258 focused centrally on creativity, and all of them except for one focused on genius rather than creativity generally.¹ One will, however, find scores of entries on definitions of art, ontology, aesthetic value, and interpretation, among others. If in fact ‘creativity’ is one of the first things that rolls off the tongue in ordinary and critical conversations about art, why is it so grossly overshadowed by these and other topics?²

Part of an answer is found in the history of thought on creativity. Common to both ancient and modern explanations of creativity is a central if not exclusive emphasis on genius. Famously, Plato took the master poets to be conduits for divine inspiration. Homer knew nothing of real charioteering but rather reported whatever his muse inspired him to report. Works of genius derived not from the expertise or skill of the artist, but rather from the divine inspiration they were lucky to have.

¹ Texts consulted: Alpers, *The Philosophy of the Visual Arts*, Feagin and Maynard *Aesthetics*; Gaut and Lopes, *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*; Kivy, *The Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics*; Korsmeyer, *Aesthetics: The Big Questions*; Lamarque and Olsen, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The Analytic Tradition*.

² See Gaut and Livingston on the “occlusion of creativity”, ‘The Creation of Art: Issues and Perspectives’, 1-6.

In the early 18th century, Joseph Addison, following the ideas of 3rd century A.D. critic Longinus, endorsed a notion of *natural* genius.³ The natural genius is unconstrained by artistic rules or conventions. In fact, as Peter Kivy recounts Addison's notion, the natural genius is outside all conventional realms, creating art without any knowledge, a kind of creative primitive, if you will. Addison distinguishes this kind of genius, which echoes the Platonic version, from a learned genius who, lacking the innate capacities of the natural genius, must learn and master his art. Although Addison explicitly claims the contrary, he favours the natural genius as superior since, among other reasons, it is only the natural genius who may create something truly original.⁴ This marks the importance of novelty for those that follow Addison but at a cost, namely, requiring absolute novelty of creative genius.

Kant's model of artistic genius is developed in his *Critique of Judgment*. The definition he offers at the start of his discussion of genius is telling. "Genius is the innate mental predisposition (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to art"⁵ Genius is thus a natural ability to create artworks of the highest quality, namely, ones which give the "rule" to art. Two points to note on rules for Kant. First, geniuses give the rule to art by creating works from which rules for the (imitative) making of later works may be extracted. And second, geniuses do not—and this is an analytic point for Kant—use rules to create such works; there are no rules for creating works of genius. Rather, such works must be original, giving the rules rather than following

³ Addison and Steele, *The Spectator*. The relevant text from Longinus is *On the Sublime*. However, according to Peter Kivy, the notions of genius adopted by Addison are likely not those of Longinus but rather of an earlier critic who has become known as 'pseudo-Longinus.' See Kivy, *The Possessor and the Possessed*, 13. Much of the above discussion is indebted to Kivy's text, which provides a discussion and analysis of the ideas of Addison and Longinus.

⁴ See Kivy, *ibid.*, 22-36.

⁵ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 174.

them. So Kant too, like Addison, endorsed absolute novelty as a condition on creative genius.

Were we to continue through the 18th and into the 19th century, we would find much of the same. Most theories of creativity from this time are, like those of Plato, Addison and Kant, theories of genius. From the ancient roots in Plato and Longinus, to the German idealists after Kant, to the romantics, there is an emphasis on radical originality, innate cognitive capacity, and irrationality.

It is an understatement to say that these philosophers offered insights into the creation of art: much of their work is essential for the development of modern philosophical aesthetics. However, they tended, explicitly and otherwise, to mystify creativity in a way that thwarts further analysis. The Platonic view chalks creativity up to divine inspiration, stripping the responsibility from the creator and tagging creativity as no more explicable than divine intervention. On neo-Longinian views such as Addison's, creativity results from a native disposition towards genius. Kant's view rejects creative use of rules or constraints, requiring absolute novelty.

If one were to take any of these views as a kind of explanatory metric for creativity, the prospects for explanation would look grim. They leave us with little illumination regarding what the phenomenon of creativity is, and which features of the phenomenon are the ones that underwrite its importance to art, science, and the lot of human life. And the features that do get the attention are treated in such a way that mystery is compounded rather than removed.

Here are three common features.

Creation ex nihilo: Creative ideas, tradition has often had it, come from nowhere. This derives, it seems, from the fact that creative *F*s are novel *F*s and the supposition that novelty, if it is genuine, is entirely new. It is of course another step

or two to the inference that novel *F*s come *from nowhere*. Suffice it to say that theorists of creativity—Addison and Kant are both examples—have in fact made such inferences, and studies of creativity have suffered (or simply not occurred) as a result.

Flash phenomenology: Creative ideas come to us, *just like that*, as we say.

This phenomenology is what motivates the Platonic view and its contemporary adaptations. Ideas that come to us in a flash are not ones that we deliberately form and thus are not ones for which we are responsible. Who or what is? Gods. Muses. A euphoric drug trip. And so on. This is discouraging if one wants an analytic or naturalistic explanation of creativity.

Incubation: According to a 4 stage model of creativity endorsed by a number of natural scientists and psychologists—including Hermann von Helmholtz, Henri Poincaré, Arthur Koestler, Graham Wallas, Jacques Hadamard—the initial conscious, preparatory stage of creativity is followed by an unconscious stage of cognitive processing.⁶ The phenomenon is a familiar one. One is consciously struggling with a problem and then leaves it aside for something else. Upon return to the problem...Eureka!...one has the needed insight that is the solution or quickly takes one to the solution. Something important, it seems, happens during this unconscious period of incubation. The creative insight from this stage is then subjected to evaluation and criticism in the final stage.

Analyses of incubation appeal to Freudian egos or unconscious automata, typically focusing on the seemingly random and uncontrolled combination of ideas.⁷

⁶ Hadamard, *An Essay on the Psychology of Invention in the Mathematical Field*; Helmholtz, *Vorträge und Reden*; Koestler, *The Act of Creation*; Poincaré, H., *Science and Hypothesis...*; Wallas, *The Art of Thought*; Mendolsohn, 'Associative and attentional processes in creative performance,' Martindale, *Cognition and Consciousness* and 'Creativity and Connectionism'.

⁷ For example, Poincaré, as cited by Koestler (*The Art of Creation*, 164). See also Poincaré, H., *Science and Hypothesis...*

There certainly is truth to the thought that incubation occurs and that it is important to creativity. Tagging it as the work of the unconscious self, however, blocks theoretical angles from analytic aesthetics, naturalistic philosophy of mind, and much of cognitive science.⁸

There are also some theoretical choices which exacerbate the task of analyzing creativity. First, as already indicated, theorists often take as their examples, geniuses or masterminds. This is understandable: someone asked to explain creativity may just list figures like Bach, Beethoven, Picasso, Van Gogh, and so on. Creativity and genius are importantly related concepts. However, taking a genius like Bach or Picasso as the departure point for an analysis of creativity increases the complexity of the task right from the gates. Second, creativity, and this too is understandable, is typically explained from within the context of some particular artistic (or scientific) domain. So many a book has been written on musical genius or, even more specifically, the creativity of Bach or Mozart. This too may be problematic, since it is difficult to distinguish the properties that are specific to the creativity (whatever that should turn out to be) from those that are features of the artistic domain or genre. Creativity does not occur in a vacuum, so context-specificity is not unmotivated. But one does better to isolate the general phenomenon, if there is one. Finally, theorists often fail to make an important distinction. To what categories of thing do we attribute 'creativity'? We talk about creative artworks. We talk about creative artistic processes. And we talk about creative artists. Are creativity attributions the same, no matter the kind of attributee? And is there one kind of attribution that is fundamental?

⁸ There has been recent naturalistic work on incubation. For experimental research, see Smith and Blankenship, 'Incubation Effects' and 'Incubation and the persistence of fixation in problem solving.' From the angle of philosophical psychology, see Stokes 'Incubated Cognition and Creativity.'

The following account attempts to identify the fundamentals of creativity and its situation in a broader theory of aesthetics. The underlying spirit is *minimal*, beginning at the bottom rather than the top, and *pragmatist*, taking actual critical and appreciative practice as a theoretical constraint. A theory of art must take as its objects of inquiry and analysis whatever our best practices of criticism and appreciation take as their objects. “Ontology of art is in this way answerable to epistemology of art,” as David Davies puts the point.⁹ This is endorsed as a general methodological principle. Call it, following Davies, the *pragmatic constraint*.¹⁰

The account centres around answering the question of attribution. To what category or categories of things do we properly attribute creativity? The suggestion is that creativity is, most basically, attributed to a process which culminates in an accomplishment. The next step then, is to say what typifies the artistic creative process, and how this is informed by and informs philosophical aesthetics. Just these few steps take us far.

II. *The question of attribution*

Is there one category of thing most basic for predication of creativity? We have three candidates: persons, products, and processes.

Persons

As suggested in the introduction, historically, the bulk of studies of creativity have been studies of radically creative persons, geniuses. This is perhaps reasonable

⁹ Davies, D., *Art as Performance*, 18.

¹⁰ Many, perhaps most, analytic aestheticians endorse such a principle. For example: Currie, *An Ontology of Art*; Danto, *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*; Davies, S., *Definitions of Art*; Levinson, *Music, Art, and Metaphysics*; Stecker, *Artworks...*; Thomasson, *Fiction and Metaphysics*, among others.

given our ordinary usage of ‘creativity’ and its cognates. If I were to ask you what ‘creative’ means, you might provide an ostensive definition, ostending the masters before their masterworks.¹¹ There is another intuitive reason theories focus on genius: geniuses, however we try to explain them, are intriguing and inspiring. There are few things more romantic and mysterious than the artistic genius at work. So why focus on the banal when we have Bach and Beethoven?

However, there are problems with analyses that focus on creative persons as the central subject of creativity, some of them already alluded to. From Plato to at least the 19th century, with few exceptions, the creative genius is portrayed as a tortured, irrational, divinely inspired soul. The abilities to create masterful artworks are, on such accounts, often innate and out of the control of the genius, creative insights often coming in dreams or reveries. Finally, these are the artists that make the rule for art, in Kant’s terms, and thus the level of novelty required for a work of genius is maximal. All of this makes for challenging explanatory work, as it only takes a little magic to make a lot. It is thus that for most theories of genius, the explanation goes no further. The exceptional features of the genius are tagged, but we are offered no deeper insights into how a genius, even if divinely inspired, goes about *creating*. So one might acquiesce in an inspirationalist or nativist model, but for many of us this does not suffice as an explanation; we are left wanting more. Perhaps geniuses are inexplicable. But this may just be all the worse not for theories of creativity in general, but for theories of creativity that focus on genius.

¹¹ Note that ordinary usage is not limited to any of the three suggested candidates. In ordinary circumstances, we call artworks themselves creative. And we describe certain artistic processes as creative. So ordinary usage, insofar as it ever does so, is not going to adjudicate between the adequacy of person vs. product vs. process approaches.

Let us be more charitable. Imagine, for the moment, that we have a truly informative theory of radically creative persons. Why would we be interested, either from an aesthetic or philosophical standpoint, in such a theory? Put another way, why do we *value* geniuses? Whatever the answer is, it seems that we do not value geniuses, as it were, for genius's sake. Geniuses (or creative persons) possess no intrinsic value qua geniuses. Rather, we value geniuses for one of two reasons. We may value a genius for the artworks s/he creates. Alternatively, but not exclusively, we may value a genius for the artistic processes used in creating art. And so, to answer the first question, we would expect from a theory of genius some illumination on the connection between geniuses and their products and/or between geniuses and their creative processes. An account of creative persons, geniuses or less, must therefore place some emphasis on creative products and creative processes.

Perhaps then, one can give an informative theory of creativity that focuses on genius. But if that theory is to shed light on the things for which we value genius, a focus just on the person will not suffice; the theory will have to analyze creative products or processes, if not both.

Products

We no doubt talk about artworks as creative, and it seems appropriate to do so. Innovations like Monet's impressionism, Picasso's cubism, the poetry of E.E. Cummings or Emily Dickinson, and Gaudí's arches, are nothing if not creative. But what do we mean when we say this?

According to a view in philosophical aesthetics from the middle of the last century, associated most closely with Monroe Beardsley, one thing we do not mean is that the works are aesthetically valuable *because* they resulted from some creative

process. Beardsley argued just the opposite, namely, that the value of a work of art consisted solely in the formal properties of the manifest work and the experience of those properties. The implication here is twofold. First, we enjoy and value artworks not for the modes of production that generate them. To think otherwise is to commit what Wimsatt and Beardsley famously call the *Intentional Fallacy*. In evaluating or interpreting an artwork, appeals to an artists' intentions, designs, biography, or the context of presentation of the work in question are fallacious.¹² Beardsley does not stop with aesthetic evaluation, but extends his anti-intentionalism to creativity. "The true locus of creativity is not the genetic process prior to the work but the work itself as it lives in the experience of the beholder."¹³ This second claim carries normative import: we should attribute creativity to artworks as products and *not* to the processes that begot them. The strength of this claim is not to be understated. Aesthetic value, Beardsley writes, "is independent of the manner of production, even of whether the work was produced by an animal or by a computer or by a volcano or by a falling slop-bucket."¹⁴

Gaut and Livingston take Beardsley's strong anti-intentionalism to be one of the movements of 20th century aesthetics and criticism which contributed to a revitalization of formalism and, in turn, to the "occlusion of creativity". "In the New Criticism's break with both common-sense biographical criticism and those versions of biographical criticism based on existentialism, hermeneutics, and phenomenology, a leading idea was that an appropriate form of aesthetic appreciation requires the critic to focus entirely on the finished text's or other artistic structure's inherent, artistically relevant features... Facts about the text's provenance were to be set aside, especially

¹² Wimsatt and Beardsley, 'The Intentional Fallacy'

¹³ Beardsley, 'On the Creation of Art', 302.

¹⁴ Beardsley, *ibid.*, 301.

whenever such facts were a matter of the “private” psychology of the creator, held to be unknowable or irrelevant.”¹⁵ Structuralism and post-structuralism, although at odds with New Criticism in other ways, nonetheless shared this, one of its central tenets: the artist and the circumstances of artistic creation are not aesthetically or critically relevant. This broad anti-intentionalism long dissuaded the attention of aestheticians from the *creation* of art.

We should distinguish product approaches to aesthetic value from product approaches to creativity.¹⁶ Anti-intentionalism is more typically presented as a theory of the former kind.¹⁷ And indeed it is as a theory of aesthetic value, sometimes termed ‘aesthetic empiricism’, that it is more plausible.¹⁸ There is an obvious sense in which the work may become overshadowed, in criticism or evaluation, by biographical information about the artist and her modes of production. So there is something to be said for isolating just the work and its perceptible properties, as both the anti-intentionalist and formalist suggest.¹⁹ The relevant question, of course, is whether this is the correct or best method of aesthetic evaluation and appreciation.

This question, at the centre of a long standing debate, will not be addressed here. There is, however, one type of view in opposition to a product approach to

¹⁵ Gaut and Livingston, ‘The Creation of Art: Issues and Perspectives’, 3.

¹⁶ Creativity may be an aesthetic value, but it is certainly not the only one and moreover, may be characteristically different from other aesthetic values. Or, creativity may not be an aesthetic value at all (this is, in some sense, how one might read Beardsley after all), in which case all the more reason to separate the treatments of general aesthetic value and creativity, *vis-à-vis* the product-approach.

¹⁷ In what follows, take Beardsley’s anti-intentionalism as the paradigm example of a product approach, for both aesthetic value and creativity.

¹⁸ For a critique of ‘aesthetic empiricism’, see Currie, *An Ontology of Art*. See also Davies, D., *Art as Performance*, 25-49.

¹⁹ Note, however, that putting the point this way begs one of the relevant questions, namely, just what a work of art *is*. On some accounts, as discussed below, the artwork is, in part, the genetic process which led to the manifest object or event. One must be careful, then, when talking about *the* artwork. When needed for clarity and/or theoretical neutrality, the terms ‘manifest work’ or ‘work’ will be used to denote the physical artefact.

aesthetic value that provides some insight on how one might respond to product-approaches to creativity. A number of ontologies of art take artworks to be, in some sense, events. According to Gregory Currie, for example, artworks *are* the discovery, by an artist, of a structure (of colours, sounds, words, and so on) by way of a certain heuristic path. As such, the mode of discovery, how the artist produces the work in question, is partly constitutive of the work; artworks are thus event-types.²⁰ David Davies argues instead that artworks are event-tokens; they are performances which include the genetic actions which culminate in the end product. For Davies, the latter provides the ‘focus of appreciation’, which embodies the creative achievement of the artist.²¹ Both ontologies directly oppose any broad product approach, since the artwork is not exhausted by the formal properties of the finished product. How that product was created is constitutive of the artwork and thus is part of what we aesthetically value. This general lesson should be kept in mind in considering product approaches to creativity.

How, then, does a product approach do as a theory of creativity? It is hard to see how it could do very well. Rather, it looks like a forced consequence of a view like anti-intentionalism. If one concludes with Beardsley that facts about the process of artistic production are not aesthetically relevant then one faces the following dilemma. Either, (a) creativity includes features of artistic process and production and is therefore not aesthetically relevant, or (b) creativity does not include features of artistic process and production and therefore may be aesthetically relevant. Neither (a) nor (b) are attractive options. Horn (a) violates the pragmatic constraint: its abandonment of creativity as aesthetically irrelevant is inconsistent with critical practice and appreciation. Horn (b) denies basic conceptual intuitions about

²⁰ Currie, *An Ontology of Art*.

²¹ Davies, D. *Art as Performance*.

creativity. Beardsley opts for (b), arguing that creativity should instead be located in the finished work (and perhaps the experiences that audiences have with that artefact).

Beardsley's position seems to be a consequence of his theoretical commitments, as captured by the following line of reasoning.

(P1) If some F is a feature of or includes features of artistic process or intention then F is not aesthetically relevant.

(P2) Creativity is relevant in aesthetic evaluation and critical discussion of art.

(C) So, creativity is not a feature of and does not include features of artistic process or intention.

(P1) is just a rough articulation of Beardsley's anti-intentionalism. (P2) is motivated by the fact—which Beardsley acknowledges—that art appreciators and critics alike talk about creativity in their evaluations of artworks. This fact also survives rational reflection, thus meeting the pragmatic constraint. The conclusion—which is the negative component of horn (b) of the dilemma—follows straightforwardly from (P1) and (P2). The argument is thus valid, but the conclusion counterintuitive. Let us explore some cases that underwrite that counter intuition, and then reconsider the premises.

We are standing before an early impressionist painting, say Monet's *Impression, Sunrise*. You say to me, among other things, that the work is genius, truly creative. I inquire why, that is, what makes it creative? You might, in your early response, manage to report features of the painting itself and how they are especially novel relative to the prior history of painting. So you might note the emphasis on light and shadow, the vivacity of the colours, the fact that the sun is of nearly the same luminance as the surrounding grey clouds. In justifying your attribution of creativity, however, it is likely that you would describe impressionist techniques. You are likely to mention the short, loose brushstrokes used; the use of pure (unmixed) paints side-

by-side (so that the viewer does the mixing, as it were, to create the impressions of mixed colours); the placing of wet paint on wet paint. All of these features, among others, are typical of the process of impressionist painting; they are the innovations of the artistic movement. And that is just the point: in giving reasons for attributing creativity to the Monet painting you have, quite naturally, invoked features of Monet's process of creation. And not only is this explanation natural, it or something like it is needed. Without mention of these features, your explanation would fall flat. But by invoking them, you have justified your attribution.

This case is not particularly special. We might have a similar kind of discussion about a cubist or fauvist painting, or Bach's *Brandenburg Concertos* or *Well Tempered Clavier*, a Henry Moore sculpture, George Martin's four-track recordings of the Beatles, Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*, Capote's *In Cold Blood* and so on. To make sense of the creativity of these works, one must say something about the genetic processes from which they resulted. To overlook details of the genetic process is to overlook the creativity in the works. It is thus hard to swallow the conclusion that the artist's creative process is not (at least partly) constitutive of the creativity of her artwork in the light of cases like these.

(C) is thus, as initially expected, to be doubted. Observing our practices, creativity does include and indeed perhaps *just is* the features of artistic production and intention. The anti-intentionalist, however, reaches (C) as a natural extension of his view, as embodied in (P1). And here lies the dilemma. Coupling (P2)—the rationally considered intuition that creativity does matter to aesthetic evaluation—with (P1) the anti-intentionalist is stuck with (C). He thus must embrace horn (b): creativity is not located in artistic process but *solely* in the finished work and our experience with it. The product approach may instead deny (P2) and opt for horn (a).

This is to admit that creativity involves features of artistic process and intention while denying the aesthetic relevance of those features, and thus, of creativity. This choice comes at the cost of inconsistency with appreciative and critical practice.

The anti-intentionalist is stuck with one or the other option in virtue of his commitment to (P1). This looks problematic for a product approach to creativity and, more broadly, to a product approach to aesthetic value. Thus what began as an analysis of anti-intentionalism qua theory of creativity results in a reductio of the broader position, since it only takes acknowledgement of the plausible (P2) coupled with the basic thesis of the view (P1) to support the unintuitive consequence (C). The only way out it seems, is to deny the problematic (P1). And this is just to abandon anti-intentionalism.

Process

Let us return, one last time, to the initial question: when we talk about creativity what features of an artwork and its generation are we talking about? Consider once more the Monet example discussed above. Reflection on this example revealed that in giving reasons for an attribution of creativity to the Monet painting, one would invoke features of Monet's genetic process: how he actually painted *Impression, Sunrise*. One might mention features of Monet's brushstrokes, his use of the medium of paint, his use of light and colour. One might also invoke features of Monet's thought process: perhaps he intended to capture an impression, an instant rather than just a place; he thus chose an instant before him and then attempted to depict it as seen, in its natural light. One might also mention how Monet broke from his own tradition, both in intention and action: the goals of impressionists were consciously at odds with artistic tradition and their works manifest this fact. Albeit a

rather hefty rational construction, this is the kind of story one should tell if one wants to give a thorough explanation for the creativity of Monet's piece. Note the various kinds of events and properties that one has invoked in doing so: how does one choose among them a *locus*, in Beardsley's terms, of creativity?

One does not have to. Instead, this variety should be maintained: artistic creativity is a process, and a variegated one at that. This should come as no great surprise. The creativity that resulted in *Impression, Sunrise* was not one intention, imagining, brushstroke, study, choice of subject. It was a process which involved each event and more. We do of course sometimes speak of singular creative thoughts or creative actions, but our appreciation of artistic creativity takes wider scope. It would be unsatisfying to be told only that *Impression, Sunrise* is creative *because*, say, Monet made a decision to do no pre-mixing of paints or *because* he formed an intention to capture the luminance of the sun as he saw it at that instant. Each event may be essential to Monet's achievement, but as much as each of them are needed, all of them are needed. Without *that* decision and the corresponding action, and without *that* intention, among several other thoughts and actions, Monet would not have made the work he did. We should think of creativity not in terms of single events or properties, but rather in terms of process.

Processes are continuous: sequentially structured in stages or phases. They are thus particulars, but with both temporal and spatial parts. Processes are the kind of thing that *perdure*; they are not wholly located at any one time. Events, on most accounts, have temporal parts. Perhaps the ontology of events will illuminate an ontology of processes.

Metaphysicians distinguish different kinds of events. Zeno Vendler distinguishes *achievements* from *states*.²² Achievements are instantaneous: one reaches the top of the mountain or finishes the 5 lb. hamburger. States—like loving, knowing, hoping— last for some period of time. States are homogeneous—any part of a state satisfies the same description as the whole. Neither achievement terms nor state terms denote a procession of stages, as in a process; they lack, as Vendler puts it, continuous tenses. They are thus not processes. *Activity* terms and *accomplishment* terms, however, do possess continuous tenses. These two types of events are distinguished along two dimensions: homogeneity and culmination. Activities are homogenous. And activities are non-culminating: there is no terminus upon which the truth of the predication of the activity term depends. Accomplishments differ in both respects. They are non-homogenous: the description of the whole event will not appropriately apply to any sub-part of the whole. And accomplishments are culminating, proceeding towards a terminus the occurrence of which justifies predication of the accomplishment term. Vendler compares the activity of *running* with the accomplishment of *running a mile*.

If it is true that someone has been running for half an hour, then it must be true that he has been running for every period within that half-hour. But even if it is true that a runner has run a mile in four minutes, it cannot be true that he has run a mile in any period which is a real part of that time, although it remains true that he was running, or that he was engaged in running a mile during any substretch of those four minutes...It appears, then, that running and its kind go on in time in a homogeneous way; any part of the process is of the same nature as the whole. Not so with running a mile or writing a letter; they also go on in time, but they proceed toward a terminus which is logically necessary to their being what they are. Somehow this climax casts its shadow backwards, giving a new color to all that went before.²³

²² Vendler, 'Verbs and Tenses'. See also Ryle, *Concept of Mind*; and Casati and Varzi, 'Events'.

²³ Vendler, 'Verbs and Tenses', 145-6.

Both activities and accomplishments are processes in the sense that they involve successive stages. However, processes require, by definition, that something is processed, that is, that there is some output or terminus.

Given this last desideratum on processes, accomplishment is the event category most adequate to characterize processes. And in fact, artistic creative processes best fit the category of accomplishments, albeit imperfectly. ‘Creating an artwork’ denotes something non-homogenous. By analogy with running, if it is true that an artist has created an artwork over a year’s time, it will not be true that she has created the work at any proper part of that time (although we can naturally say that she was engaged in creating during those times). And a creative process is culminating: only when an artist has succeeded in making a work, can we say that she has created art. That is, it is only then that the accomplishment “casts its shadow backwards” upon the process that begot it, and then that we can attribute creativity to the artist’s activities.²⁴

Understanding artistic creativity in this way has its flaws. Accomplishments, and more generally events, are ordinarily interpreted as independent or separate occurrences: she accomplished such-and-such, this (event) occurred. So our speech at least indicates that we take such events to be the results of processes, not the processes themselves. Moreover, describing an *F* as a process, as contrasted with describing it as an event, contextualizes the parts of *F*; it is thus understood as having stages, each of which is contextually situated between prior stages and stages

²⁴ This is a simple but elusive point. The running analogy may help once more. If *S* is engaged in the activity of running, *S* can stop at any time and the following proposition will be true (at that time): ‘*S* has run.’ However, if when attempting to run a mile, *S* stops before finishing the following proposition is false: ‘*S* has run a mile.’ The same goes for creating artworks. If the artist were attempting to create an artwork, but were to stop before the terminus, then we cannot say of her (for any of the relevant times) that ‘She created an artwork’. The truth of this proposition requires creative accomplishment, not merely artistic activity.

forthcoming. Second, accomplishments necessarily involve a terminus. And at least typically, this terminus is consciously targeted: writing a letter, running a mile, and baking a cake all have a clear culmination occurrently tokened in the mind of the accomplisher. The latter is less true for artistic creative accomplishment, if accomplishment is the right category. An artist will rarely have in mind such a clearly defined terminus. He may have some emotion he wishes to express or idea to represent or medium to explore, but the finishing point or product, when it arrives, is largely unforeseen. It is an open question whether this makes creativity a special kind of accomplishment, or of a distinct category.

The forgoing analysis clarifies some of the special, fundamental features of artistic processes and the terms used to describe them. The identified features imply some desiderata for an ontology of creativity. Creativity is not an homogeneous object, property or event. Nor is it wholly located at one time or other. Finally, it involves both the culminating event and the stages that lead up to that event. ‘Process’ likely remains the best choice of term, but ‘accomplishment’ brings out the fact that creative processes are ones that process towards some end. Without the end, the process is not a creative one; and without the process, there is no end. Artistic creativity is thus a spatio-temporal package, perduring towards and until the culminating artwork is made.

This approach comports well with our practices of criticism and appreciation, and for the same reasons that the product approach failed. We do not, when attributing creativity to some work of art, attribute it *only* to the product before us, that is, the manifest properties. Our appreciation is (partly) of the artist’s having undergone a certain process to make that product. And moreover, our practice acknowledges the fact that the product possesses interesting properties *because* there

was a special process that generated it. Thus we value genetic processes not merely as instrumental to some end. As Richard Wollheim has it, appreciating a work of art is to attempt to retrieve the process that generated it. When engaging an artwork, we ask, suggests Denis Dutton, ‘what has been done here?’²⁵ Wollheim and Dutton are suggesting a general mode of aesthetic appreciation. It is debatable whether all appreciation of art is backward looking in this way. Whatever the truth of such suggestions, the only point made here is this: in appreciating creativity, we do *ask* Dutton’s question. And this is the question we *answer* in justifying an attribution of creativity.

III. Conditions on creative process

Creativity is a process, but what kind of process is it? One can read studies and theories of creative process written by artists, art theorists, critics, art teachers, philosophers, psychologists, business management firms and self-help publications, among others. It might be hard to see, if one selects two books from two of these approaches, how they are even talking about the same phenomenon. How, then, can one say something general about the processes to which we rightly attribute creativity, given volumes of such theoretical variety? The answer: toss them out. Reinvention has its advantages. Rather than incorporate case studies of geniuses and analyses of creativity in narrow artistic and scientific domains, one does better to begin with minimal conceptualizations of creative process.

Agency

²⁵ Wollheim, *Art and its Objects*; Dutton, ‘Artistic Crimes’. For further discussion of this feature of appreciation, see Davies, D. *Art as Performance*, p. 27-8.

What, at minimum, characterizes a creative process? First, a creative process needs a processor, and one with agency: we do not attribute creativity in absence of a responsible agent. Consider our linguistic intuitions on the following. If you were to say to me, ‘That sunset is creative’, I might pour you another drink or nod out of charity, but I could rightly take issue with your use of the term ‘creative.’ Sunsets may be beautiful or vibrant or stunning, but not creative. Your utterance is thus conceptually problematic, and for the same reason that the following is problematic. “*The Starry Night* is creative but no one is responsible for it.” After a moment’s reflection, the misuse of ‘creativity’ reveals itself. Creative artworks are things that are done and made, and for which we praise their makers. The processes that generate them involve intentional agency and it is this process, at least in part, for which we praise the agent. This implies that the process must depend in some non-trivial way upon that agency. We do not appropriately praise (any more than we blame) agents for processes out of their control. We capture this intuition with a simple condition on creativity; call it the *agency condition*. Some F is creative only if F counterfactually depends upon the agency of an agent A .

The notion of agency at work and the relation between F and A will, for a complete analysis of creativity, need to be made precise. Philosophers typically require a cognitive and deliberative capacity for agency; while cognitive scientists require less, perhaps only self-governing or self-moving autonomous behaviour. The strength of agency at work in the agency condition depends upon what one thinks about creativity and responsibility, and how cognitive a phenomenon one takes it to be. Given an interest primarily in artistic creativity, how responsible are artists for their work? Do they foresee the end results in detail? Do they have a clear problem in mind? A clear strategy or method? How many accidents do we allow before we

strip the attribution of creativity and call it a mere happy accident instead? Answers to some of these questions may be obvious; others are not. But they are the questions that a theory of creativity must answer to build a minimal model of creative process. Agency is fundamental to creative processes, artistic or otherwise. An agency condition is thus specified as one necessary condition for the concept, without being sharpened further.²⁶

Novelty

Considered intuitions secure another feature of creative process: *novelty*. Creativity implies novelty, that is, novel ways of making and doing. Artists succeed by working in new and original ways and thinking new thoughts. Thus, an *F* is creative only if *F* is novel. Identifying novelty as a condition on creativity, however, only introduces a new task of analysis: what is novelty? One might think novelty is just newness *simpliciter*. So some *F* is creative only if *F* has never occurred before. Perhaps, on first glance, this characterizes paradigmatic cases of radical creativity or genius. But specifying categorical novelty as a condition on general creativity has its problems.

First, the suggestion is simply incomplete. One needs to specify the sense in which a creative *F* is novel *simpliciter*, answering at least the following questions. Is every event in or property of *F* novel? Or is it merely necessary that some number or percentage of properties be novel? Or just one? Just essential ones? Assume these questions can be addressed and set them to one side. Margaret Boden provides a relevant and useful distinction between *historical* novelty and *psychological*

²⁶ Note that this is no trivial matter. Specification of an agency condition puts the present analysis at odds with much of the tradition, namely, inspirationalist accounts like Plato's, nativist accounts like Longinus' and Addison's, and irrationalist accounts like Schopenhauer's (see Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*).

novelty.²⁷ An *F* (Boden speaks of ideas) is historically novel if and only if *F* is novel with respect to the entire history of ideas. An *F* is psychologically novel for some agent if *F* is new relative to the mind of that agent (that is, the agent tokening the relevant thought or performing the relevant action). The first is categorical novelty, the second, relative novelty.

Does categorical novelty exhaust our interest in artistic creativity? Consider an example. Imagine a young artist in the mid 1960s, working on an island somewhere in the eastern part of the globe. The island is technologically modern but culturally remote, its population ignorant of the various artistic movements of the western world. Call the artist Q. Q has developed his own style, which can be characterized as follows. On very large canvasses, Q paints blurred rectangular blocks in two or three vibrant colours typically positioned on a monochrome background. The blurred blocks seem to float on the canvass, dividing it into sometimes opposing sometimes complementary spaces. The viewer seems invited into the painting, almost hypnotized by its contrast of depth and simplicity. Now, if we were to come upon the work of Q, we would instantly think of Mark Rothko. Given that Rothko had already established the “multiform” style as his signature in the 1950s, we would withhold an attribution of historical novelty to Q’s work. We would, however, find Q’s work novel, and presumably creative, in rich ways, and this in spite of the fact that Q’s style is not novel *simpliciter*. First, Q’s accomplishments are psychologically novel in Boden’s sense. But they are novel in a broader sense, namely, relative to the population of which Q is a part. Q’s artistic achievement is what we might call *population-relative* novel. We, even if members of the elite New York artworld of Rothko’s time, would (given the appropriate information about Q’s

²⁷ Boden, *The Creative Mind*.

circumstances) recognize this and would praise Q accordingly. Categorical novelty thus is not the only kind relevant in aesthetic appreciation.

This acknowledgment is consistent with our practice. When praising an artist's creative achievement, we will say that so-and-so's work was "so new for her time" or it "was an innovation of the period." An attribution of creativity is often relativized to context, and that for the reason (at least in part) that the novelty is so relativized. In Kendall Walton's well-known hypothetical society of *Guernica* makers, a two dimensional *Guernica* (like Picasso's) may be novel, but not for the reasons that it is novel in our artworld. It would be novel not for its sharp, jagged, and violent figures (as it is in our society) which would be *standard* properties of such works in the *Guernica* making society, but for its flatness, a *variable* property for the *Guernica* category. Thus, as Walton suggests, Picasso's *Guernica* would strike this hypothetical artworld as 'cold, stark, lifeless, or serene and restful, or perhaps bland, dull, boring—but in any case *not* violent, dynamic, and vital."²⁸ And so the same productive behaviour may be counted as novel relative to one population for one set of reasons, and novel (or not) relative to another population for another set of reasons.

A creative process, then, requires novelty, where the degree or kind of creativity mirrors that degree of novelty. This is not yet enough. For example, I can step away from my computer and out into the department hallway, hop on one leg and tug on the opposite ear while repeatedly yelling " 'Nixon' IS a good name for a dog". This behaviour results from my own agency and is novel relative to, well, just about anything. Goofy behaviour it is; creative it is not. So the agency and novelty conditions are insufficient to characterize a creative process.

²⁸ K. Walton, 'Categories of Art,' 347

Value?

A number of theorists have considered creativity to be an obviously value-laden concept, and have thus made value a central or the central criterion for creativity.²⁹ There are a number of ways that one might incorporate such a criterion. Creative processes may involve evaluation on the part of their agents. This, though likely, is hardly informative. Insofar as creative agents are thinking when creating, and evaluating a situation is a way of thinking about that situation, creative processes involve evaluation. A more promising inclusion of value in a theory of creativity is to make value a condition of the process and/or product, from the perspective of the audience. So an *F* is creative only if *F* is valued or to be valued.

This may be right, and indeed it would be consistent with the pragmatic analysis offered to this point. One worry is that this commitment invites a number of very challenging open questions: What kind of value are we talking about? Artistic? Aesthetic? Cognitive? Are creative *F*s objectively valuable, or mind-dependent? Intrinsically or instrumentally valuable? Endorsement of a value criterion thus incurs a heavy analytical burden. This, of course, is no reason to reject the suggestion: one does not reasonably make theoretical decisions based on ease of analysis. There is, though, a more fundamental reason to be wary of the theoretical purchase of a value criterion. Assume one did endorse something like the bald value condition suggested just above. What would one know about the *nature* of creative process that one did not already know with the agency and novelty condition in hand? Knowing that something is valuable or to be valued does not by itself reveal *why* or *how* that thing is

²⁹ This is true of both philosophers and scientists. See, among others, Boden, *The Creative Mind*; Novitz 'Creativity and Constraint' and 'Explanations of Creativity'; Gaut, 'Creativity and Imagination'; Gaut and Livingston 'The Creation of Art: Issues and Perspectives', 10-11; Martindale, 'Biological Bases of Creativity'; Poincaré *Science and Hypothesis...*; Sternberg and Lubart 'An Investment Theory...', 'Buy high and sell low...', 'The Concept of Creativity.'

valuable. By analogy, being told that a carburetor is useful provides no explanatory insight into the *nature* of a carburetor: how it works and what it does. And it is the latter kind of story that is needed, at least for a start, in theorizing creativity.

If one finds the value criterion plausible, one may endorse it and with it the obligation to address the open questions mentioned above and to explain further *why* creative Fs are valuable. If one does not find the value criterion plausible, one may reject it and maintain a descriptive account of creativity. The present, modest analysis is non-committal to but consistent with either choice, closing with a final suggestion aimed at explaining *why* creative processes are what they are.³⁰

Cognitive change and possibility

Agency and novelty are not sufficient for creativity. An analysis of creative processes thus needs an additional condition. As just discussed, some have opted for a value condition. Set value to one side, however, and consider the following observations.

Thought is generally systematic. What contents one has tokened and how one has tokened them depends upon one's broader cognitive profile. Further, what one *can* think depends upon this profile. Finally, the actions one performs, and indeed the actions that one *can* perform, depend upon one's cognitive profile and the skills that one possesses (among other situational and environmental circumstances). Now,

³⁰ One might worry that this value neutrality is inconsistent with the arguments offered in *II.* above. Recall that the process approach was partly justified by appealing to the fact that in appreciating and criticising art, we value processes intrinsically, not merely instrumentally (and moreover, the person approach was criticized oppositely). But one can maintain that creative processes are valued for their own sake, without committing to value being a necessary condition or constitutive feature of creative processes. The process is just whatever it is (and a few plausible conditions are being suggested here), and may thus be valued *because* it is a thing of that kind (i.e. meets the conditions specified). This is distinct from making value itself a constitutive condition for a concept of creativity.

creativity requires novelty. And novel thoughts and actions may require the acquisition of new knowledge or skills, the imagining of a hypothetical situation or consequence, the visualization of actions, and so on. When one makes the latter kinds of changes, one changes with it one's modal profile. Thus what one *can* do and think changes with what one has done and thought.

One might take this relationship between cognitive novelty and cognitive change to imply modal facts about creative processes. So if creative processes involve thoughts and/or actions novel for some agent *A*; and, given the systematicity of thought and action, this novelty requires of *A* certain cognitive and behavioural changes; then the novel thoughts and actions *could not* have been tokened by *A* before the time they in fact were tokened. They were, for that agent, *nomologically* impossible (made possible only by the relevant changes). Put most strongly, one might set up a *modal condition* as follows. An *F* is creative only if *F* could not, relative to the cognitive profile of the agent in question, have been done or performed (by *A*) before the time it actually was.

Such a modal condition accommodates the intuition that a creative process seems typified by changes in an actual cognitive profile which, in turn, enable changes to the corresponding modal cognitive profile. A cognitive profile can be individuated at lesser or greater fineness of grain. The level of mental tokens (and individual actions) is likely too fine, as some thoughts or actions will be relevant to the possibility of a creative advance, while others may be causally efficacious but clearly not necessary. More coarsely, cognitive profiles can be individuated at the level of overall organization, how a set of thoughts and actions relate with one another, and with certain circumstances. This would be in line with the general process conceptualization of creativity; for any creative process, there will be an

organization of thoughts and actions essential to that process, a kind of heuristic path that leads to the culminating accomplishment.

A modal condition could be finessed along a number of dimensions, but some condition like it, broadly construed, looks promising. Combined with agency and novelty, it provides a minimal characterization of a creative process, emphasizing that creative accomplishment requires cognitive change on the part of an agent. This implies—as the next step for an analysis of the creative process—the development of a cognitive architecture of creativity. Contrary to much of theoretical and popular tradition—which talks about *the* creative process and *the* stages of creativity—creative thinking does not consist in one cognitive capacity or one set of capacities. Instead, a creative process involves a complex of cognitive capacities and skills. An architecture of creative cognition would begin to identify the possible roles, structures, and relationships that compose that complexity.

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