

On Creativity: A brainstorming session

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Abstract

The article problematizes in aphoristic condensation the heterogeneous concepts of creativity in philosophy, psychology and sociology and outlines their paradoxes. Creativity in these concepts is tied to the human potential to bring into being something new and to the capacity of drawing differences. In its contingency, creativity is ambivalent to a high degree—at one and the same time a desirable resource and a threatening potential. So on the one hand, creativity is meant to be mobilized and set free; on the other hand, it is meant to be controlled and reined in. The imperative of being creative is nowadays connected to the mobilization of the entrepreneurial self. Entrepreneurial action demands permanent innovation—and consequently ceaseless creative exertion. Everybody not only has to be simply creative, but more creative than the others.

Keywords: creativity, entrepreneurial self, innovation management

Theological Niceties. Creativity—in other words, creative potential—is a metaphysical concept. *Creatio ex nihilo* only exists as a divine act. To insert something into the undefined or empty, amounts to generating a miniature world. Even in creativity's form as a secularised human capacity, its religious roots have not been severed. True, we can formulate conditions more or less propitious for new things to emerge; we can analytically reduce the process into increasingly tiny units and describe what is taking place in the brain; but inevitably, an inexplicable 'leap' remains: a 'miracle' when expressed theologically. Even though, as the well-known formula has it, creativity involves 99% perspiration, we are still left with one per cent inspiration. This is revealed not least of all in a metaphorical terminology recalling the Pentecostal advent of the Holy Spirit: from the 'flash of insight' and the 'stroke of genius' to 'brainstorming', where 'the wind bloweth where it will' (John 3,8). Invocations of creativity always have something of the supplicatory prayer about them: *Veni creator spiritus*.

Potential. Creativity is tied to the human potential to bring into being something new. Its basis is, first, the power of imagination as the capacity to make the absent present; and second, building upon this, fantasy as the capacity to realize the (as yet) inexistent. Following the distinction suggested by the German sociologist Heinrich Popitz, generating the new can transpire along three paths: firstly, that of exploring (discovery and invention; the search for new knowledge); second, that of

shaping (the production and formation of artefacts); third, generating meaning (interpretation, philosophical justification) (Popitz, 1997). This distinction is ideal-typical. In reality the three dimensions of action intersect, as do the social functions and role models deriving from them.

Mirror game. The effort to pin down creativity culminates in an infinite regression. Something old lurks within everything new; the new builds on the old, modifies it, distances itself from it. The closer one looks, the more familiarly it stares back. Inversely, a moment of creative variation lurks within every repetition. One does not step twice into the same brook. For this reason, it is just as easy to confirm or deny that an artefact, discovery, or interpretation is creative. Those wishing to establish the old's present in the new will prove just as successful as those seeking the new in the old. What decides is the angle of vision.

Contingency. Creative acts do or do not take place. They can be enticed into being through work or enthusiasm, and above all through both, but they cannot be forced. As Max Weber wrote, 'ideas occur to us when they please, not when it pleases us' (Weber, 1946, p. 136). The entire realm of human knowledge, of artefacts and interpretations, hence all products of creative investigation, formation, generation of meaning, possess no necessary existential grounding. They could also be otherwise or not be at all (Makropoulos, 1997). In its contingency, creativity is ambivalent to a high degree—at one and the same time a desirable resource and a threatening potential. Consequently, with the experience of contingency comes a need to direct it, that is, to render its productive aspects useful and its destructive aspects null and void. On the one hand, creativity is meant to be mobilized and set free; on the other hand, it is meant to be controlled and reined in, oriented toward the solving of certain problems while kept at a remove from others. Liberation and domestication are here inextricably tied together. Phantasms of complete controllability must necessarily end up shattered, because creativity cannot be shoved into the domain of compliance—with absence of the anarchic moment, it is never present. Regimes of control change; what remains are attempts to steer the course of creativity.

Historical a Priori. What constitutes creativity has not been determined once and for all, but rather emerges from the various ways it has been attributed, evoked, and catalysed throughout history. This fact comprises determination of those capable of and called on for creative action (the gods or God, and human beings as well? which of the latter should be included or excluded?). It also comprises definition of the realms in which creativity can manifest itself; the shifting nature of the strategies and tactics through which it is governed; and both the final purpose of the creative action and the sources of its legitimacy (in the name of which authority does the call go forth to encourage or control creativity?). A genealogy of creativity would have to explore its historical semantic elements; the disparate technologies involved in forming the human capacity to discover and shape, and to generate meaning; the various models of creative accomplishment and self-

accomplishment (from genius embraced by the muses to unorthodox mind-mapping thinkers); finally, both the heterogeneous creativity specialists and various justifications of creative action: pedagogic (the personality's unfolding), therapeutic (fantasy's healing powers), economic (competitive advantages through innovation), and political (the well-ordered commonweal).

Metaphors. Because what creativity is cannot be precisely defined, metaphors run rampant. Described roughly, six associative fields are at work here (Joas, 1997), a specific anthropological or conceptual tradition corresponding to each. The dividing lines are hazy, the overlaps many. Firstly, creativity is associated with artistic action, with the moment of expressivity occupying the foreground. Human beings are here defined as expressive beings, both in terms of capacity and innate nature; the embodiment of this approach is the artistic genius, with lines of tradition reaching back to the Italian Renaissance and to Herder and German Romanticism, but also to the philosophical anthropology of Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner, and Arnold Gehlen. Second, creativity is conceived in terms of production. The focus here is on individuals as beings who realize and objectify themselves through work and its products; the craftsman is here an exemplary figure. The roots of this conceptual model extend back to Aristotle's distinction between praxis and poiesis; one of its most prominent formulations is the ontology of work formulated by the young Marx. With their concept of 'immaterial work', the Italian postoperaists offer a contemporary variant of the model (Lazzarato, 1993). It contrasts with, third, the concept of creativity as problem-solving action, with stress being placed on invention and innovation. The anthropology implied here is along the following lines: human beings are beings who master their lives, being able to rely neither on instinct-bound reactive patterns nor on simple behavioral routines. For this conceptual model, creativity is concretely situated; it responds to challenges demanding solutions that are both new and fitting: an approach exemplarily embodied in the figure of the inventor. It has been extensively formulated by American pragmatism as a theory of cognition and action, and by Jean Piaget in his theory of cognitive development. A fourth metaphoric field is that of revolution. Creativity here means liberating action, a radical new invention of social structure: the human being confronts the world as a border-transgressor, a 'creative destroyer'. Prototypes for this dimension of creativity are, naturally, nonconformists and dissidents *de tout couleur*, with manifestos of various artistic and political avant-gardes offering relevant programmatic statements. Creativity evokes, fifth, life-connected associations: metaphors of birth and generation, but also of biological evolution. In general, what is here being centred on is the phenomenon of emergence, creativity manifesting itself as personal or supra-personal energies even—and particularly—clearing new ground when encountering resistance. At this model's centre we find, on the one hand, the individual's drive-related dimension—the creativity of what Deleuze and Guattari called 'machines of desire' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988); and, on the other hand, the non-intentional processes of adapting to one's environment through natural selection. Theoretical efforts in this direction have been offered by Nietzsche, Bergson, and Freud, as well as by Darwin and various neo-Darwinists

(Simonton, 1999). Sixth and last, the probably most familiar creativity metaphor is that of play, identifying creative with purposeless activity. The paragon for *homo ludens* is the child. This model can be traced back to Plato's ideal of 'spend[ing] life in making our *play* as perfect as possible' (Plato, 1966, VII, 803 C); Schiller's declaration that 'the human being plays only when he is human in the full sense of the word; and he is only fully human when he plays' (Schiller 1795/1954, p. 601) moves in the same direction. Whether this or that metaphor or several at once are evoked depends on which creative potentials happen to be required and are meant to be furthered. That such varied associations can be linked to creativity is not the least of the reasons no one wishes to see them go. In the flurry of metaphors, each person discovers his or her own.

Common coinage. The heroic productive powers of the genius were only reserved for a few; everyone can and should be creative. Where geniality was exclusive, bestowed on some and not others, creativity has gradations—some have more of it, others less. Genius belonged in a sphere beyond the norm, common sense thus locating it in the vicinity of madness. Creativity is normal; it is distributed in conformity with the curves of Gaussian norm-distribution. Geniuses distinguished themselves through extraordinary accomplishments in the arts and sciences, perhaps also in politics and warfare. The attribute 'creative' ennobles even the most banal activities—from the washing-cutting-drying of the creative coiffeur around the corner to the creative bookkeeping of someone faking a balance. 'Every man is an artist' propagated Joseph Beuys in *documenta 5* of 1972, and this is the legitimating ideal behind every extension school's program. Creativity-promotion is democracy's cult of genius.

Interpellation. One is creative starting from birth—and is never finished with becoming so over a lifetime. This is the source of the implicit Rousseauism of most creativity programs: they offer cultural techniques meant to lead one back to a nature putatively buried by the process of cultural formation. Appeals ('be creative!') and self-understanding ('I'm myself to the extent I'm creative') here come together. The unity of description and prescription corresponds to a paradoxical temporal structure that fuses the 'always was' with the 'not yet': According to this schema, creativity is firstly something everyone has—an anthropological capacity; second, something one ought to have—a binding norm; third, something one can never have enough of—a telos without closure; fourth, something that can be intensified through methodological instruction and exercise—a learnable competence.

Political economy. Creativity is an economical resource that the market both mobilises and consumes: creative destruction is the entrepreneur's economical function; his profits result from 'carrying out new combinations' (Schumpeter, 1926, p. 110). In order not to go under, he must offer other commodities than the competitors, or the same commodities in better quality or at a more appealing price, more speedily furnished, and so forth. And success here is only for the moment. As soon as competitors catch on, the advantage vanishes. Entrepreneurial action thus

demands permanent innovation—and consequently ceaseless creative exertion. Everybody not only has to be simply creative, but more creative than the others; and nobody can be sure of finding takers for the new combinations. Despite all efforts to objectify or subjectify the conditions for success by market research or entrepreneurial intuition, individual economic subjects have only the principle of trial and error at their disposal. As the competition's products, ever-more artefacts, reserves of knowledge, and interpretations are piled up by the society as a whole. In this sense, creativity is 'general labour', the innovative side of general intellect and, as such, a direct productive force (Marx, 1894/1969, p. 114).

Spirit of Enterprise. To the extent that nowadays everyone is expected to act, in all life circumstances, as his or her own entrepreneur, the mobilization of innovative potential is itself privatised and individualized. Entrepreneurship not only forms the goal of all interpellations of creativity, but its privileged means as well. In contrast, the state appears as the great institutionalised hindrance to creativity. The individual who proceeds creatively resembles the successful investor: he speculates on the future and seeks his chances outside the beaten path. 'Buy low and sell high' is his principle. Today he lays his stake on offbeat ideas, hoping that tomorrow they comprise the norm. The market decides which creations yield effective interest. The remainder fizzles. The opportunity for success only waves a hand at those incurring the risk of failure upon their shoulders. Whether or not something is creative only emerges afterwards, when it appears pleasing, illuminating, or useful to others, in short: when it experiences valuation, or at least attracts attention. In the presence of disinterest, simply travelling other paths than the masses is useless—what is creative is the new that prevails (Sternberg & Lubart, 1991).

Distinction. The new is a relational category, existing through demarcation from the old. What is new is what was not there. (As soon as it is there it stops being new.) Being creative thus means drawing distinctions. This can involve the invention of previously unknown artefacts, insights, or interpretations; but it can also involve the recombination or variation of what is already present, the privileging of previously devalued or devaluation of previously privileged artefacts, insights, or interpretations (Groys, 1992). The possibilities for creating something new are unlimited; what is decisive is the moment of difference—creative persons thus being always already postmodern. The creative imperative necessitates permanent deviation; its enemies are homogeneity, compulsory identity, standardization, repetition. Attributes of being apart and special are only enjoyed by those who do not fit in. But within the promise of alterity, a threat is lurking: 'be someone select ... or you'll be a reject' is the way it is put in a guide to constructing 'Me Inc'. (i.e. one's own personal business) (Peters, 2000, p. 8).

Ambiguity. Like every order, societal order needs constant renewal in order to deal with changing circumstances. Creativity is thus a civic responsibility, its promotion a political duty no less important than street-maintenance or preserving public safety. But creativity is also a subversive force, a force threatening every order.

Celebrating the great negation, Bakunin exclaims that ‘the passion for destruction is a creative passion, too!’ (Bakunin, 1842/1969, p. 69). Hence political rhetoric either alternates between appeals to freedom and postulates of loyalty or has recourse to oxymorons such as ‘creative obedience’ and ‘revolutionary discipline’. The political Janus-face has its counterpart in moral ambivalence: creative achievements are both the directing of a military campaign and the negotiation of a peace treaty.

Technologies. The appeal to be creative is no less paradoxical than the legendary appeal to be spontaneous. Creativity can neither be ordered into existence nor pressed into study plans or work contracts. One cannot command something indefinite. In any event, factors can be specified that make creative acts more likely. Creativity-promotion involves controlling contexts—it creates nothing, but makes things possible. Nevertheless, programs of ‘innovation gymnastics’ thrive (Hentig, 2000, p. 60)—and these have of course moved far past the stage of home prescriptions. An army of scientific specialists is investigating the relevant terrain, furnishing those hungry for creativity with ever-new training methods (this itself a creative accomplishment under the sign of the market). The specialists base their work on everyday forms of idea-production, these assimilated into systematically derived, often professionally run and institutionally supported strategies for innovation management. Precisely this constitutes the leap from technique to technology. Contemporary creativity programs thus make use both of inventories from the communication and information sciences (neurolinguistic programming) and of discoveries in cognitive research (activation of the brain’s right hemisphere); they adapt formerly ‘alternative’ educational concepts (learning through projects, ‘future factories’, therapeutic techniques (free association), and practices of artistic avant-gardes (*écriture automatique*).

Performative contradiction. The creative imperative demands serial singularity, ready-made difference. Creativity-training standardizes the breach with standard solutions. It normalises deviations from the norm, instructing us not to rely on what has been learned. The paths to the particular should be the same paths for all. For this reason, they are as general as possible: an irritation of certainties and of conceptual and behavioural patterns that have been hammered in from birth (*lateral thinking*); an exclusion of both inner and outer censoring instances (a doing away with ‘creativity killers’); artistic naivety (being dumb as a creative strategy); associative leaps and analogy-formation (synectics); the systematic exploration and grasping of possible solutions (brainstorming, mind-mapping, and similar procedures). Being creative means hard work yet demands the lightness of play. The realm of necessity forces what can only thrive in the realm of freedom.

Fun-culture. Being creative is fun. Joy at individual or common activity and its results is not the least of the motivations for creative action. Psychologists name this ‘intrinsic motivation’, and it serves as one of the main sources tapped by the ubiquitous appeals to creativity. People in a good mood are more productive. Because not so much occurs to the unhappy and depressed, our fun-culture blossoms.

Gone are the times when carnivalizing daily life was still a subversive project and the Munich Situationists in the SPUR group could declare that ‘being creative means pleasure playing with everything through permanently new creation’; in the Bavarian German original: ‘*Schöpferisch sein heißt: durch dauernde Neuschöpfung mit allen Dingen seine Gaudi treiben*’ (The SPUR group, 1961, pp. 16/17). Today this is taken care of by comedy shows on all channels, and firms engage professional fun-makers who place clown-noses on staff members in order to ready them for new business strategies through ‘motivational theatre’.

Speed of circulation. Creativity needs leisure, the market forces speed. Creativity released by the economic imperative thus undermines the basis of its existence. The higher the pressure to innovate, the shorter the half-time of the new and the greater the corroding of creative potential. To be sure, everyone can be creative, but no one can be so constantly. ‘If I were only free for a few days or weeks from the need to always offer something new’, complains the creative individual, ‘then I’d certainly come up with some truly new ideas’. To which his manager offers the crushing reply: ‘without deadline-pressure you’d end up producing nothing’. When leisure-time is systematically shortened or functionalized into a catalyst for innovative processes, only the simulation of creativity remains. (Doubtless, such simulation also requires a fitting measure of fantasy.) Perhaps this is the reason why nothing seems more antiquated than what just seemed so trendy. Progress—the return, once again, of what has often seemed new.

Les misérables. That necessity is invention’s mother is only maintained by those not in need. Those tormented by hunger or anxiety seek bread and shelter; they are not inclined towards creative experiments. Creativity requires free spaces in which the pressures of self-preservation have been at least temporarily suspended. But necessity itself knows no imperative. Those living in misery cannot afford to always stick to the straight path. The adroit hand-flick into the stranger’s wallet, the beggar’s pity-evoking story, opening the clasp of the passer-by’s purse, the less ambitious and more ambitious tricks for gaining what one needs but cannot afford, for making money through whatever can be sold—all of this demands the highest possible degree of innovation, improvisational talent, and deviation from the norm. The art of survival is the poor man’s creativity.

Beyond the imperative. In face of the exactions of the creative imperative, neither the pathos of refusal nor the furore of raising the stakes will prove sufficient. When deviance becomes a normative demand, flagrant non-conformism emerges as absolute conformity. But when renunciation of the new is inflated into a principle, this itself marks a creative difference, with the concomitant hope of gaining distinction. Originality- and repetition-compulsion are two sides of the same coin. Freedom that deserves the name only begins where neither one nor the other prevails. The negation of the ubiquitous creativity postulate is not ‘Don’t be creative’, but rather a turn away from speaking in the imperative. One cannot not be creative, but perhaps one can stop wanting to always be creative.

Social Fantasy. The ‘creative moment’, the ‘eureka’, may be the individual’s prerogative, coming over him in the proverbial quiet little room, but one is never creative when alone. Creative action is always addressed somewhere and is always ‘an action upon an action, on possible or actual future or present actions’ (Foucault, 2000, p. 340). There are no creative monads. The creative individual lives face to face with others, whose recognition he hopes for and whose displeasure he fears, with whom he forges common ideas or whom he avoids, who furnishes him with problems or whose solutions are not satisfactory to him, whose footprints he steps into or out of, and so forth. Like Nietzsche’s ‘chain-thinker’, ‘every new thought that he hears or reads of’ appears to him ‘immediately in the form of a chain’ (Nietzsche, 1969, p. 864). One of creativity’s main objects is the social self. Like the ego, society is always invented, formed, established anew. To show that social fantasy can be more than the sum of efforts to contain it in truth-regimes, behavioural codices, and world-views would be a truly creative project.

Addendum—a test. Theories of creativity unfailingly soar to the highest heights of philosophical abstraction while simultaneously landing in the most awful aporias. In response to the questions of what creativity is and, above all, who is creative, they furnish nothing but contradictory answers. For this reason, in conclusion let us look at a creativity test as simple as it is unerring. It was devised by Niklas Luhmann:

The test involved here is a self-test that, however, can be derived from a survey-procedure. It is likewise a two-stage test. The first stage involves following a very simple behavioral rule: The subject must take his conscience into his neighbor’s room. Whenever he sees that the neighbor is reading books he himself has not yet read and then has a bad conscience, he is not creative—he simply wishes to imitate his neighbor. Whenever, to the contrary, he sees that the neighbor is reading the same books as he is and then has a bad conscience, he is presumably creative. For in the latter case he is—perhaps unconsciously—seeking new paths. Hence creativity is here tested in terms of the way guilt-feelings are steered. This is, however, only the first stage of the test. The rule applied in the second stage is as follows: Whoever carries out the creativity test is not creative for just that reason, since this shows he is interested in being creative. And in the end everybody wishes to be so (Luhmann, 1988, pp. 18, 19).

translated by Joel Golb

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