

# Creativity as a Virtue of Character

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## Abstract

What is it to be a creative person? There is a minimal sense according to which it just is to possess the ability to produce novel and worthwhile artefacts. Yet there is a richer sense to the term that presupposes agential insight, mastery and sensitivity to reasons in bringing about what is aimed at. A stroke victim who reliably produces beautiful patterns as a by-product of his action is not creative in the richer sense in which an artist who aims to produce them and could have done so differently is. Is creativity in this richer sense ever more than just a skill? In the light of suggestive empirical work it is argued that motivation is central to exemplary creativity. Exemplary creativity involves intrinsic motivation and is a virtue or excellence of character. We not only praise and admire individuals whose creative activity is born from a passion for what they do but, other things being equal, expect them to be more reliably creative across different situations than those who are extrinsically motivated. This is consistent with the recognition that intrinsic motivation is not required to be creative and people's creative potentials differ. Creativity in people will flourish where intrinsic motivation is foregrounded with the relevant values and socio-economic structures lining up appropriately. It tends to wither where they do not (unless, like Van Gogh, a person's creativity is exceptionally virtuous).

## 1. Introduction

What is it to be a creative person? How can we best cultivate creativity? When, where, and why does creativity underwrite judgments of esteem and praise? These questions are of fundamental practical and philosophical significance.

Creativity is responsible for the most valuable advances of humankind from the natural and human sciences to engineering, technology, business, and the arts. Furthermore, we are often told that it is crucial for economic growth (BIAC 2004), individual fulfillment (Maslow 1968), or associated with well-being (Park, Peterson, and Seligman 2004). Hence, for example, the constant worries about how school education stifles creativity through the pressures and failings of “teaching to test” (Lim 2010, Rosenthal 2010). At the same time, disciplines taken to foster creativity, such as art or music, are often cut from curricula (Burton 2011), and public provision is slashed in times of austerity (Jacobs 2011). What we should think and do about such matters depends upon how we think of creativity.

The philosophical interest in creativity ranges over a host of issues from the acquisition of concepts, the construction of representational resources, generative knowledge, and conceptual changes in science to creating works of art. It is a philosophical commonplace that creativity is highly valued. Yet just what kind of achievement it is to be a creative person has been much neglected. Is it most fundamentally to possess some kind of amazing capacity or skill? Or is there more to it than that? In what follows, it is argued that exemplary creativity should be thought of as a virtue of character rather than just a mere skill or capacity. Indeed, paying attention to the neglected role of motivation will show us what exemplary creativity consists in, why

this makes best sense of our evaluative practices, and how it is that creativity may best be cultivated.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Reliability in Virtue of What?

Creative acts are commonly held to be ones that produce something novel and valuable through the use of skills, abilities, or aptitudes. An influential characterization of creativity in this vein is given by Boden (2004, p. 1) as “an ability to come up with ideas or artifacts that are new, surprising and valuable.” Although this captures the sense in which someone qualifies as creative just in virtue of the capacity to produce in specific and many instances artifacts or ideas that are novel and worthwhile, it is not particularly helpful in getting at the kind of relationship among character, thought, and action required for an agent to be praiseworthy as a creative person (Stokes 2008, pp. 116-7).

In order to bring this out, consider the following case. A stroke victim is in recovery and striving to learn to write again. In writing therapy classes, he can only produce marked patterns that are hopeless as linguistic notation but are both novel (at

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<sup>1</sup> It is sometimes assumed that creativity is an intellectual or artistic virtue in the literature (see, e.g., Zagzebski 1996, p. 167). Arguments put forward for the claim often focus on psychic health or emotional well-being (Swanton 2003, pp. 161–173, Goldie 2008). The argumentative route taken here is rather different, focusing as it does on motivation (though it has affinities with Woodruff 2001). This is particularly significant given the neglect of the role of motivation in the philosophical literature on creativity (as noted by Gaut 2010).

least relative to some previous performance efforts) and aesthetically valuable as abstract art. The sessions with the therapist require intense concentration, and a huge amount of perseverance is required. The sessions are also immensely frustrating and humiliating. He knows he should be able to write, envisages the marks on the page as they should be, and yet systematically lacks the control over his hand that is required to produce the words on the page. The continual failure to write makes the stroke victim feel angry and ashamed. Although this would be enough to make some people give up, it only strengthens his resolve to master writing once more.

Let us assume that it is amazing that the stroke victim can produce what he does given the nature of the stroke. Despite a problem with the visual system sub-serving motor guidance, his exceptional visual ability explains how he is able to do what he does. Nonetheless, the ability to produce beautiful abstract patterns and the inability to render words on the page are the result of a mismatch between the damaged motor-guiding vision system (information passing through the dorsal stream) as contrasted with the exceptionally attuned descriptive vision (ventral stream). Note that the systems can dissociate either way, explaining why visual agnosics, after damage, can fail to recognize familiar objects and yet manipulate and even draw them perfectly accurately (Matthen 2005, Milner and Goodale 1995). Furthermore, the nature of the systematic mismatch is such that were he to attempt to produce valuable abstract patterns, he would fail (i.e., the results would be a mess).

In a sense, the stroke victim is creative. He possesses both the visual aptitudes and personal traits that dispose him toward engaging in acts producing novel and valuable artifacts. It is partly in virtue of the strength and combination of courage, perseverance, and self-control of emotions that the stroke victim engages in the writing activity each day

with its concomitant results. Yet the marks made are neither a result of any aesthetic insight nor willed (i.e., aesthetically motivated). Indeed, the marks are not really the result of intention since he is attempting to make linguistic symbols and failing. He has no aesthetic sensibility or interest, fails to see the patterns on the page as aesthetically valuable, and is wholly unmotivated to attempt to produce them for aesthetic reasons. What he does produce is aesthetically novel and valuable only as a systematic byproduct, albeit one that is a function of personal traits and aptitudes, of something else that he is striving to do. In an aesthetic sense then, what we have is a lucky accident of a particularly reliable and systematic kind within an extremely narrow range (i.e., the capacity to produce novel and appreciable simple abstract patterns on paper).

What does this show? The stroke victim is aesthetically creative in a minimal sense, insofar as what is meant is just the creation of novel and valuable artifacts. He is also admirable and praiseworthy insofar as he shows courage, determination, and some flair in what he does. Nonetheless, given that he does not aim at, in any way respond to, do anything with, elaborate, or develop the initial aesthetically valuable marks on the page, we should think of this as merely novel behavior that accidentally though systematically leads to the production of novel and worthwhile products. This is to be distinguished from novel, valuable behavior that is agential in being guided by and directed toward fulfilling the agent's intention or purpose. Creativity in the more robust sense involves something like "a relevant purpose (in not being purely accidental), some degree of understanding (not using merely mechanical search procedures), a degree of

judgment (in how to apply a rule, if a rule is involved) and an evaluative ability directed to the task at hand” (Gaut 2010, p. 1040).<sup>2</sup>

Creative people experiment with what they do, for example by trying out different ways of elaborating initial attempts (sometimes obsessively so if we consider the nature of models and preparatory sketches), in ways that enable them to refine or transform what they do in the service of the goals and values of the relevant domains. Indeed being able to recognize the good in a “lucky accident” and going on to use it to advantage depends upon the kind of insight and mastery tied up with being a creative individual. The creative person is sensitive to and acts in the light of reasons. It is her responsiveness to reasons that grounds her judgments and actions in recognizing what is new and valuable in the relevant domain. Thus, for example, an artist standing in the right kinds of creative relations to such abstract patterns would tend to explain choices in terms of what it is for a pattern to sit right, what this particular color tone achieves, and so on (Kieran 2007). The stroke victim, in contrast, has no idea about such matters.

This explains why we would expect an artist who made the patterns to be creative in the aesthetic domain, whereas we would not expect the stroke victim to be able to do anything more. We would presume that an artist who made the patterns would be able to do things differently, be able to make other patterns that would be aesthetically appealing

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<sup>2</sup> Gaut uses the word “flair” to capture these features in recognition of the idea that creative acts have to come about a certain way (2003, pp. 150–151). What matters here, irrespective of particular details, is that we should recognize something like a sensitivity-to-reasons account of creativity that is stronger than the minimal sense proffered by Boden (2004, p. 1).

or elaborate and develop them in appreciable ways. The stroke victim's aptitudes, abilities, and character traits are causally responsible, and reliably so, for the production of aesthetically novel and valuable artifacts. Nonetheless, he is not praiseworthy in the same kind of way as an artist would be in bringing insight and mastery to bear on the imaginative production of something that is similarly aesthetically appreciable.

What is the upshot thus far? There is a minimal sense of creativity that is tied to agents just producing novel and valuable artifacts. However, there is a further sense of creativity that is tied to presuppositions of mastery, control, and sensitivity to reasons in guiding how agents bring about what they aim to do. It is creativity in this sense that attracts a certain kind of praise for agents in being responsible in the right kinds of ways for the imaginative realization of ideas or artifacts.

### 3. Motivation and Creativity as a Virtue

It is one thing to show that praising someone as a creative person rests on assumptions about agents acting in light of the appropriate kinds of reasons. It is quite another, however, to show that this is a matter of virtue. Creativity is a virtue only if part of what is praiseworthy and admirable concerns excellence of character. According to Aristotle, "virtuous acts are not done in a just or temperate way merely because they have a certain quality, but only if the agent acts in a certain state, viz. (1) if he knows what he is doing, (2) if he chooses it, and chooses it for its own sake, and (3) if he does it from a fixed and permanent disposition of character" (1976, II.4, pp. 1105a28–1105a33).

Let us consider the second condition. Interest in the relevant task or domain of activity for its own sake seems central to creativity. Indeed, there is a wealth of studies in

experimental psychology that are highly suggestive in this respect. In one classic study (Amabile 1985), 72 creative writing students were given the task of writing poetry. A control group was given the task of writing poetry with a snow theme, reading a short story, and then writing another poem on the theme of laughter. The other two groups were given the same tasks, except that after the short story, they were told to read and rank-order lists of reasons for writing. One group was given a list of previously established intrinsic motivating reasons for writing (e.g., self expression, the joy of wordplay, insight). A second group was asked to read and order a list of extrinsic reasons for writing (e.g., making money, social status, graduate prospects). As judged by 12 independently successful poets, the group primed with extrinsic motivating reasons produced the least creative work of the three groups.

The undermining effect of extrinsic motivation is hardly specific to artistic cases. Even further back, Garbarino (1975) conducted an experiment where 24 fifth and sixth grade (i.e., 12-year-old) schoolgirls were given the task of tutoring 24 first and second grade (i.e., 6-year-old) girls in a simple poker chip game. The subjects were randomly assigned into pairs and one of two conditions: a no-reward condition and an extrinsic-reward condition (a movie ticket). Those primed for the extrinsic reward performed the task less well. They grew more impatient more quickly with their charges, were less interested if their charges really understood the task at hand, and tended to be more negative in emotional tone when compared to the no-reward group. Those devoid of any extrinsic reward were more careful, patient, and positive in emotional tone and used their time more efficiently. As a result, the 6-years-olds tutored by those in the no-reward condition learned more and made fewer errors. What might we make of such studies?

Intrinsic motivation seems to be understood in terms of aiming at the values internal to the relevant domain. Thus, for example, self-expression, delight in wordplay, and cultivating understanding are taken to be intrinsic motivations in the respective studies. Extrinsic motivation, in contrast, is taken to aim at ends or goals that are not themselves part of the values internal to literature or teaching but, rather, ones that can be instrumentally realized through performing the relevant task or kind of activity. This might be brought out in the following way: Intrinsic motivation involves acting out of a desire to realize what makes something valuable under the relevant description in the given domain. In the literary case, this involves being motivated to produce something that is expressive, imaginative, or beautiful. It is a desideratum of any adequate account of artistic values that it precludes certain attributes, ranging from price to social cachet, as counting toward a work's value as art. Hence in creating a literary work, to be motivated to write something in order to get financial reward or attract social prestige is to be extrinsically motivated. It is, we might say, to treat the creation of an artistic work as a mere means to the realization of ends and values that are external to the domain of artistic values.

In the scenarios presented, whether a task is framed in terms of intrinsic or extrinsic motivations makes a significant difference as to how creatively or otherwise the subjects performed. Why might that be? There are several possible explanations. One possibility is that subjects primed by extrinsic motivations suffered from divided attention in a way that those primed by intrinsic motivations did not. Perhaps thinking about a prize or social benefits led subjects to devote less attention to the respective tasks. An alternative explanation is that those primed with intrinsic motivations were more sensitive to and motivated by reasons bound up with the goods internal to the activity in question.

In this light, consider someone whose governing motivation in making music, say, is just to gain social credence. Whatever else is true, social status is hardly something that is internal to the values of art, though of course art is often used to achieve or bolster it. Imagine, in this case, that the person's extrinsic motivation explains the kind of jazz or dance music chosen and how playing it is approached. While being driven to play the music as he does may attract the sought-after social cachet, it also explains exactly why the playing is formulaic and unimaginative. It explains, for example, why the person is less likely to take risks or experiment. Experimenting would not only involve paying greater attention to and seeking to understand the music at some deeper level, but put at risk the very extrinsic goods so easily attained without that much hard work or thought. After all, what matters to this person is less that the music is as good or interesting as it could be and more that the extrinsic goods of social recognition are realized. Indeed, the person is less likely to have the patience, honesty, and courage required to be as creative as possible if the motivating goals governing what he does are really just the extrinsic social ones. He is much more likely to be satisfied with any resultant popularity and acclaim when he plays than someone who is motivated by the relevant goals and values pertinent to music. The extrinsically motivated agent is keying into certain social dynamics and goods, where the aesthetic quality and value is coincidental to such, whereas the situation is exactly the reverse for someone who is intrinsically motivated. Intrinsically motivated musicians strive to get noticed, build up a following, and get paid in order to be able to make their music; the purely extrinsically motivated desire social success or money and use display in the musical activity in order to try and get it.

In some given domain, extrinsic motivation often explains why someone identifies the easiest aims and goals to lead most directly to the desired outcome. Thus, when

creativity is governed by extrinsic rather than intrinsic motivation, someone is far less likely to be creative. Why? When the governing motivation is not directed toward intrinsic values but contingent extrinsic ones, and when extrinsic values pull away from the internal ones, extrinsic motivation will be inimical to creativity.

Consider two students at the same level in some domain who are both equally motivated to pass a test. Bullish Boris cares little for his subject but wants good grades for his job prospects. He strives to internalize the relevant knowledge, capacities, and perceptual, cognitive, and affective routines as quickly as possible. Careful Cara cares passionately for her subject and hence works in a different way. She works at breaking down the components of the general routines, capacities, and knowledge required. This enables her to analyze and work at them in ways that block easy and automatic internalization. Bullish Boris's progress at a superficial level will be a lot quicker than Careful Cara's. Boris may well, for example, be in a position to pass the test much sooner than Cara. Nonetheless, Cara will have much greater understanding and control concerning what sub-serves the general capacities, routines, and expertise called for. While Cara may well have covered far less ground for the test than Boris over the same time frame, she will nonetheless be in a position to realize far greater understanding and mastery over what she has studied. Cara can attend to, critically explicate, and make use of a far greater number of perceptual, cognitive, and affective variables than Boris can. Cara is thus in a position to be creative, with respect to what she has learned, in ways that Boris is not.

Motivation shapes attentiveness, the envisaging of possibilities and openness to revision of ends as a work proceeds. If motivation is intrinsic, a subject is more likely to take risks, more likely to attend in an open-minded way to what she's done, envisage

different possibilities, and be directed by thought in action toward realizing the inherent values of a given domain. When the motivation is extrinsic, someone is more likely to take the easiest and most unimaginative, formulaic, and glib way of creating something. Why? Work in the service of extrinsic goals often only coincidentally tracks and typically pulls away from the intrinsic values of the given domain. Hence, creative excellence in a given domain depends upon being motivated by the values intrinsic to it. Furthermore, the motivation to be sensitive to, respond in the light of, and act for the sake of the relevant reasons and values internal to some given domain can be more or less deeply embedded in someone's character. The more deeply embedded the intrinsic motivation, the more creative someone will be in a given domain across different situations, and the more we admire and praise them as a creative person.

It is worth pausing to address a particular challenge and in so doing bring out the argument structure. It might be objected that all that has been shown is that intrinsic motivation is instrumentally valuable in leading to the production of more creative results. What matters here, the challenge states, is surely the creative results rather than how they were arrived at. To the extent that people are intrinsically motivated, they will tend to produce more creative work. All that has been shown is how to arrive at the best results. This is a good deal short of showing that exemplary creativity is a virtue of character (at least as virtue is traditionally understood).

What it is to be intrinsically motivated with respect to some domain, say, art, philosophy, or science, is for one's activity to be guided by the values internal to that domain. In structuring our attention, judgments, responses, and actions toward what it is that is valuable in the relevant domain, intrinsic motivation enables us to be creative across different times, situations, and challenges. In contrast, when someone is purely

extrinsically motivated, say, by the drive for social recognition or distinction, domain-irrelevant features will tend to play a causal role in their activity and figure in the wrong sorts of roles in judgments and actions. This explains why, lucky circumstances aside, what it is to be a robustly reliable creative person tends to depend upon intrinsic motivation. Furthermore, staying true to intrinsic motivations in the face of difficulties and temptations is an achievement of character.

Consider Van Gogh. After his failure as a pastor and missionary, Van Gogh decided to take up art in 1880. He had some natural talent (though no more so than many). His pen and ink drawing *A Marsh (near Etten at Passievert)* (1881) demonstrates a flair for the use of intricate cross-hatching to achieve texture and depth in landscape depiction. Nonetheless, for the first five years or so, his paintings tended to be clumsy, flat, and poorly composed. Even as late as 1885, Van Gogh struggled with depicting movement and the persuasive rendering of figures. His first major painting *The Potato Eaters* (1885) was fiercely criticized, at least as perceived by Van Gogh, for the ineptitude of its figures, and this spurred him on to work obsessively at depicting the figure in motion. He dedicated the entire summer of that year to persevering with figuration over and over again. The noticeable resulting improvement in figuration came together with his discovery of Japanese Ukiyo-e prints and neo-impressionist color experiments. Thus Van Gogh came to develop his geometric, almost calligraphic notations in paint to mark out figures and landscapes. This enabled him to render features with immense variation in visual density, openness, and texture. In doing so, he was able to convey a great sense of rhythm, flow, and movement. What explains why Van Gogh developed as he did? The explanation concerns, at least in part, Van Gogh's motivation.

Van Gogh modified motifs for the sake of pictorial order and emotional significance. Many painters who have such goals do not worry about the lack of realistic delineation or movement. Yet this was a particularly significant problem for Van Gogh given that he desired his painting to be a visually expressive exploration of landscape forms and the people in them whilst also being verisimilar. Van Gogh's motivation was directly concerned with realizing some of the values internal to art in new ways, in contrast to what he saw as the tired academicism of his day. The motivation explains why something was a particular artistic problem for Van Gogh, in ways it would not be for other painters, and indeed how and why he came to the innovative solution he did. However, Van Gogh's intrinsic motivation is neither just a causal factor enabling his achievement nor just an explanatory one that makes sense of the artistic problems apprehended by him and the solutions he arrived at. The strength and depth of his intrinsic motivation over time are praiseworthy given his extreme perseverance, courage, and honest self-criticism. After all, this is a man who persevered despite the lack of recognition, who sold only one picture in his lifetime, to his brother Theo, and who lived in extreme poverty in order to create his art.

Van Gogh is an extreme case. There are, after all, many creative people who attain recognition, social status, and material wealth. But Van Gogh is especially praiseworthy because of the extremities involved in staying true to his intrinsic motivation. Nonetheless, the point is that someone's intrinsic motivation in a domain as a basic disposition across time and situations is itself a praiseworthy achievement of character.

It matters not whether we are talking about creativity in art, philosophy, or science. It takes honesty to evaluate the nature and value of what one is doing properly; it

takes courage to be prepared to fail; it takes humility and open-mindedness to recognize when one has gone wrong; and it takes perseverance and fortitude to continue to work at something for its own sake or in seeking to do justice to an idea. This is in part because creativity typically pushes the limits of what has already been done and is thus often difficult to achieve. It is, however, also because the drives and biases that are part of the human condition tend to pull us toward compromise, self-deception, and over-inflated estimations of the nature and value of what we do. It is tempting for those who achieve success or status to allow extrinsic motivations to intrude. When a person starts to worry about social status or wealth, for example, rather than striving to do what is worthwhile, it is all too easy for judgment to become corrupted by considerations of popularity, recognition, and belonging. Even in circumstances of relative comfort and after previous successes, people can be motivated by extrinsic concerns, such as the flattery of others or the drive to appear superior (Kieran 2010). Creativity requires, after all, a kind of independence from conventionality and freedom from just these kinds of drives and biases.

This is not to claim that creative action as such requires intrinsic motivation and not all creativity is virtuous. Nonetheless, there is good reason to conceive of creativity as a virtue when agents' creative successes are driven by deep-seated intrinsic motivations. Why? Deep-seated intrinsic motivation is an aspect of character that guides and explains why a person is creative across different times, situations, and external pressures. It is, moreover, partly constitutive of excellence of character and, as such, is to be praised and esteemed.

## 4. Motivational Complexities

A crucial point to note is that the contrast between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations as adduced in the psychological literature requires nuance. There are, after all, domains and practices in which social recognition or wealth, for example, are values internal to the relevant activities. A socialite, a particular kind of pop star, or a hedge fund manager all aim in virtue of their vocations at realizing the very things that are usually characterized in the literature as extrinsic motivations. Yet in such cases, financial and/or social recognition are criteria of success (i.e., to be motivated by such things in these kinds of cases is to be intrinsically motivated when this just means to be motivated by the values internal to the relevant domain). Exemplary creativity clearly can be manifested in those domains in ways that are admirable, praiseworthy, and enable us to distinguish those who excel from those who do not. So, matters are complicated, but for present purposes, we need only recognize that the values realized in creative acts can take different forms. Creative achievements might concern values that are intrinsic (truth), extrinsic (making people happy), inherent (expressive of feeling), purely instrumental (achieving huge financial returns), or relational (one vacuum cleans better than another). Intrinsic motivation conceived as it is here, as motivation by the values and goals internal to some relevant domain, does not straightforwardly equate with the direct realization of intrinsic values.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The natures of intrinsic, extrinsic, final, non-final, conditional, and relational values are complex and a subject of philosophical controversy. See, e.g., Korsgaard 1983, Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen 1999, and Rønnow-Rasmussen 2002.

We also need to recognize that extrinsic motivation sometimes reinforces rather than undermines creativity. William Blake was surely overstating matters in claiming that “where any view of money exists, art cannot be carried on” (Blake 1826). Indeed, Dr. Johnson is not only more worldly but surely truer to the mark in observing that “no man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money” (Boswell 1776, p. 731) or, we might add, recognition, status, and esteem (and usually some combination thereof). In any given domain where creativity is prized, people are often spurred on by motivations that are extrinsic to the values internal to the domain. These run the whole gamut of human motivations from the desire for financial gain, prestige, social conformity, adulation, or rebellion to revenge. Moreover, as the evidence suggests, such extrinsic motivations can sometimes enhance rather than undermine creativity.

Recent psychology studies have shown significant enhancement effects on creativity due to extrinsic rewards. In one experiment (Eisenberger and Rhoades 2001), 115 college psychology students were asked to read a short story about popcorn popping in a pan and asked to provide five titles. Every second student was given, as part of the printed instructions, the promise of a financial reward if the titles were judged to be among the most creative (e.g., “The Little Kernel that Could,” “The Golden Years,” and “Growing Pains”). Those students promised a reward produced titles of significantly greater creativity than those in the no-reward incentive condition ( $M_s = 2.75$  and  $2.56$ , respectively),  $t(114) = 1.72, p < .05$ . This should come as no surprise to anyone versed in the history of domains where creativity is at a premium.

How can we explain the apparent tension? It seems that on conceptual and psychological grounds, we have good reason to hold that when intrinsic motivation is embedded in character and drives creativity, it both underwrites creative achievement

and is praiseworthy. Yet extrinsic motivation clearly sometimes can and does enhance creativity. Collins and Amabile (1999) claim that we should distinguish between synergistic extrinsic motivation, which can enhance creativity under limited circumstances by providing information or enabling intrinsic motivation, and non-synergistic extrinsic motivations, which diminish a subject's feeling of self control and undermine creative activity. Even so, extrinsic motivation is assumed in general to interfere with creativity and "when individuals are attempting to solve a problem or generate possible solutions, being intrinsically involved in the task and not distracted by extrinsic concerns will help them to produce more original ideas" (Collins and Amabile 1999, p. 305). What explains why extrinsic motivation in some circumstances enables or reinforces creativity and in others undermines it?

Creative excellence does not require that the motivation involved be direct in the sense of consciously aiming at being creative, nor does it require that the motivation be *solely* for the sake of the internal ends of the relevant domain (i.e., for its own sake). We often just see and respond to certain kinds of considerations as appropriate and are motivated to act accordingly without thinking in terms of what the creative thing to do is. What matters is how an agent's motivational set enters into and guides judgment and activity. Creative excellence involves being motivated by the appropriate kinds of reasons, figuring in appropriate roles in guiding deliberation and activity toward the values internal to the relevant domain. This can be reinforced or undermined by extrinsic motivation depending upon how it enters into the thought processes, apprehensions, responses, and judgments arrived at in the carrying out of the particular activity in question. When extrinsic rewards are seen as being positively related to the pursuit of the values internal to the relevant domain, then extrinsic motivation can enhance intrinsic

motivation (e.g., by reinforcing attention to the very same features and kinds of reasons). Hence, we can recognize the importance of bootstrapping and reinforcement effects of extrinsic motivations (Goldie 2011) when they feed into the cultivation of intrinsic motivation. It also explains why creative environments tend to be ones where pursuing the values internal to the domain in question line up with recognition, achievement, and advancement. When extrinsic motivations are in tension with the pursuit of the values internal to a domain, an agent's creativity will tend to be diminished. In such cases, extrinsic motivation tends to distract from attention to the features and reasons that intrinsic motivation would be directed toward. What matters is what the agent's hierarchy of motivating ends is and how the various interrelations thereby shape the responses and judgments as the agent engages in the activity.

Exemplary creativity is not just mere skill since it involves more than some level of insight and mastery to bring about desired ends. It involves excellence of motivation. First, it is typically involved in acquiring the relevant mastery and insight to bring about the desired ends. Indeed, agents whose capabilities and dispositions are not governed at the appropriate level by the relevant intrinsic motivations will typically fail to live up to the requisite excellence required to be reliably creative (or at least as creative as they could be). Second, our attributions of praise vary accordingly. We esteem and admire those whose creativity is born out of a love for and intrinsic motivation concerning the values of a relevant domain in ways in which we do not praise or admire those who are extrinsically motivated.

The argument does not deny that those who are extrinsically motivated can be creative in the sense of producing novel and worthwhile thoughts or artifacts. It is just that, given the embedded motivational structure, the extrinsically motivated will tend to

certain kinds of errors or compromises that the intrinsically motivated would not (at least when the environment's extrinsic rewards do not line up with the relevant values). Hence Faulkner was no doubt creative when hacking out screenplays for Hollywood, but not as creative as when he was simultaneously writing Nobel Prize-winning novels.

Conceiving of exemplary creativity in virtue-theoretic terms captures central aspects of our evaluative practices. We not only praise and admire individuals whose creative activity is born from a passion for what they do but, other things being equal, we expect them to be more creative than those who are purely extrinsically motivated. Those lacking intrinsic motivation, other things being equal, will tend to produce work that is not as creative because they have goals and values that are at best accidentally and tangentially connected to the intrinsic values of the relevant domain. Hence, among other things, the intrinsically motivated will not only work in different ways from the extrinsically motivated but will tend to be more courageous, perfectionist, patient, and work harder in more intensive ways and display fortitude in the face of public disdain. Furthermore, it makes sense to cultivate intrinsic motivation in order to cultivate creativity. If we value and reinforce intrinsic motivation, it will make people more robustly and reliably creative in the face of contingent and unreliable extrinsic pressures. Exemplary creativity is a virtue of character.

## 5. Art Star

Despite the argument already given, it might be objected that surely someone could be purely extrinsically motivated and non-accidentally hook up to the appropriate values internal to a given domain. When this is the case, the objection runs, surely someone

could come to be as creative, other things being equal, as she would have been had she been intrinsically motivated. If this is so, the objection goes on to say, exemplary creativity cannot be a virtue of character since it need not involve excellence of motivation.

To make the point in concrete terms, consider an artist like Jeff Koons, who was a commodities broker on Wall Street when he sought to move into the art world. Rather than misattribute motivations to Koons, let us imagine a fictional but closely related person Koons\*. Assume that Koons\* thinks it would be easier for him to make money and gain celebrity status in the art world than by pursuing a career in trading. Thus Koons\*'s move into the art world is solely motivated by the desire for things like commercial gain and celebrity status that are external to the values of art.

Koons\* moves from trading into the art world by entering high-profile art exhibitions; this makes sense given the external rewards that are targeted. In deliberating about what kind of works to make, how to go about doing so, and how to present them, Koons\* does not consider the values internal to art as such. Rather, he carefully looks at and researches the background, track record, and aesthetic preferences of the art prize panels. The judges, let us assume, are all good aesthetic evaluators and closely approximate the relevant criteria for being excellent critics (i.e., possess the refinements of sentiments, capacities, and broad range of comparative experiences required to be good aesthetic judges) (Hume 1757). Thanks to thorough research and a certain natural felicity, Koons\* wins the art prizes and is reliably creative. Thus, the objection goes, to be as creative as possible does not require intrinsic motivation. If that is so, then exemplary creativity cannot be a virtue.

The response to the objection is twofold. First, notice that Koons\* is as creative as he is in virtue of non-accidentally, systematically, and reliably tracking the values internal

to art, albeit tangentially and indirectly.<sup>4</sup> We might think that as a socio-psychological matter, this is highly implausible. After all, even when extrinsic rewards are related to the values and goods internal to a given domain, the interrelationships are typically extremely complex and indirect. Nonetheless, the objection only requires that this is a conceptual possibility (and moreover, as noted earlier, we might hope or strive to ensure that external rewards line up with the creative realization of values internal to the relevant domain).

What enables Koons\* to track the relevant values is the subservience of his own responses, judgments, and creative actions to the character and judgments of the good critics on the art prize panels. Thus, whatever else is true, the nature of Koons\*'s creativity is heteronomous rather than autonomous. It is one thing to defer to and follow

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<sup>4</sup> The assumption is that Koons\* is fairly well protected modally in virtue of tracking the art prize judges who track the appropriate art standards. Nonetheless, in the real world, one might think that, following Hume, given that good critics are rare, the chances of Koons\* picking the right judges to track are going to be pretty low. Thus it is likely that he will be susceptible to error in a way that the intrinsically motivated agent would not be (i.e., by pandering to the dictates of contemporary artistic fashion). Nonetheless, it remains a conceptual possibility, however unlikely, and that is all that the objection requires. Exactly how creative Koons\* is will depend upon how reliable he is in tracking the art panel judges and how one is supposed to determine the relevantly close possible worlds. This is tricky assuming that many possible worlds vary along every conceivable dimension. Nonetheless, whatever the relevant conditions (see, e.g., Lewis 1973, 1986), the intuition here is that someone can be reliably creative in a given domain for the wrong sort of motivating reasons.

the judgments of others; it is quite another to exercise your own judgment in arriving at what you do. While the value of what is created may be the same, creating something just by following the path laid out by others is not the same kind of praiseworthy achievement as creating something by exercising your own judgment. Koons\*'s creativity constitutes a failing or lack of the kind of autonomy we expect and praise in exemplary creativity.

Picasso, Einstein, or the student who achieves an outstanding first in philosophy is praised because of the presumed relation to the nature of the creative achievement involved. We take it that, at least in part, creative insights are an upshot of the individual's own critical understanding and appreciation of the relevant domain, rather than a heteronomous transposition or application of the insights of others. This is not to deny that individuals can and do arrive at creative insights via epistemic deference to others. Indeed, this is exactly what Koons\* does. It is just that exemplary creativity involves arriving at creative insights autonomously through the appropriate exercise of the agent's own judgment, skills, and dispositions. Autonomous creativity is more valuable and a greater achievement. Heteronomous creativity, in contrast, is either blameworthy (when, e.g., the heteronomy involved is to be explained by the possession of a vice; Kieran 2010) or constitutes a failing in lacking the praiseworthy relation that someone who is creative on his own possesses. It is one thing to be creative via heteronomous deference to others; it is quite another to be autonomously creative. The achievement in the latter case is more valuable and greater.

Note, furthermore, that the way in which Koons\*'s artistic activity is heteronomous and yet highly creative depends upon the motivations and character of the art prize judges (Kieran 2011). It is only because the art judges are well motivated (i.e., motivated to make their judgments as they do based on the values internal to art) that

Koons\* is in a position to track and create valuable works. If the judges were principally extrinsically motivated, and the prizes were awarded on the basis of financial gain or nepotism, then Koons\* would not be tracking good standards and would not be that creative or successful.

Koons\* is rather like the agential equivalent of the system used by Epagogix. It is a proprietary expert system utilizing neural network-based algorithms to predict success for movie studios, producers, and investors. Indeed, the predictions and advice proffered include what particular changes to locations, stars, scripts, and plots will do for a movie's chances of success and likely financial return. In essence, it works by looking for patterns among previous hits and making predictions based on those patterns. It is big business. Now perhaps Epagogix is really good at these predictions. This is not much different from Koons\* being good at creating works by taking on the criteria inferred from the judgments of good critics. Thus, as a conceptual matter, it is clear that an agent could be extremely creative by being purely extrinsically motivated and non-accidentally tracking the appropriate judgments and values internal to a given domain. However, this is only so when the structuring of the relevant external rewards follows from and is tied up in some indirect and systematic way to access the judgments of relevant people who are intrinsically motivated. Indeed, the way in which this is so manifests a lack or blameworthy failing insofar as it manifests a heteronomous rather than autonomous relation to the creative insights involved. Thus Koons\*'s extrinsically motivated creativity is parasitic on the judgments of those who are intrinsically motivated (i.e., the virtuous case).

Nonetheless, the objector might further press, Koons\* *could come* to acquire creative autonomy (unlike Epagogix). The pure extrinsic motivation gives rise to his

tracking of the art panel judges. In so doing, Koons\* comes to acquire justification for and understanding of aesthetic judgments, acquires the capacity to deliberate critically about such for himself, and thereby comes to acquire creative autonomy. What this shows is that the distinction is not to be carved simply in terms of whether someone is extrinsically motivated or intrinsically motivated. Rather, what matters is whether or not someone's extrinsic motivation feeds into judgments and actions in a way that considerations inappropriate or irrelevant to the realization of the relevant internal values come to play the wrong kind of role.

Let us characterize a judgment extrinsicalist as someone whose creative activity in some task is guided by judgments driven by goals and considerations external to the domain in question (e.g., in art—money, social status, etc.). A motivation extrinsicalist, in contrast, is motivated by such considerations and goals but does not allow them to enter into or inappropriately drive her judgments in what is created. The former acts the way he does because it will enhance financial reward or social status. The latter is motivated by the appropriate ways of realizing the values internal to the relevant domain. Now it could in principle be that someone who is purely extrinsically motivated may thus be driven to create *only* those kinds of artworks that have features that, she believes, will enhance or maintain her income or social status. The judgment extrinsicalist, in contrast, may deem that transgression in making contemporary art is good because it is the kind of thing that gets you noticed; so he is likely to go wrong in creating what he does on the basis of an aesthetically irrelevant reason. In contrast, the motivation extrinsicalist makes aesthetic judgments for the right sorts of reasons. The purely extrinsically motivated agent can be as creative as his talent and expertise allow him to be, given that his thought in

action is nonetheless driven and shaped by being motivated by values intrinsic to the relevant domain (in this case, aesthetic ones).

As a psychological matter, an agent's insulation of judgment from motivation in the manner just sketched above seems difficult to achieve. Notice that the motivation extrinsicalist can only realize creative excellence when the extrinsic motivation itself hooks up with and either creates or reinforces motivation to attend and respond to appreciative judgments in appropriate ways for the right sorts of aesthetic reasons. A different way of making the point is that, unless an agent is intrinsically motivated in the activity in question, however conditional upon some further end and whatever the higher order explanation for being such, then extrinsic motivation will feed into and lead to judgment extrinsicalism. Hence, we tend to be wary of those whose goals concerning an activity are stated in purely extrinsic terms. Intrinsic motivation in the activity of creation must come to be the governing motivation if the creative activity is to be as excellent as possible. This is compatible with the motivational spring for engaging in the activity itself being something other than the internal values and ends, whether it is from a desire to alleviate boredom, improve the mind, pass an exam, socially conform, or gain financial reward. The recognition that this is so enables us to acknowledge the many mixed motives from which creativity may spring and the bootstrapping effect they may have, while nonetheless respecting the crucial role that intrinsic motivation plays.

Virtue as an achievement of character involves in part excellence of motivation. It does not follow from this that intrinsic motivation is constitutive of or required to individuate any creative action. In the case of some virtues, it seems to be a conceptual matter that what it is for something to count as an action of the relevant kind requires individuation partly in terms of the relevant excellence of motivation. Thus, for example,

for an action to count as kind, it may necessarily be the case that the agent must be motivated by the welfare of others. I may give money to a beggar because I want him to stop bothering me, or because I want to impress my girlfriend, or because I am moved by his plight. The action may only qualify as kind if it is performed under the last of those motivations. However, this is not the case for other kinds of cases. Creativity as such does not require intrinsic motivation. It is, in this respect, akin to honesty (when we mean something like just telling the truth). We can tell the truth or make new and worthwhile artifacts while being purely extrinsically motivated. However, what it is to possess the virtue of honesty or exemplary creativity is to be motivated to tell the truth or produce new and worthwhile things for the right sort of reasons. A deep-seated intrinsic motivation is a disposition that explains why, other things being equal, the virtuously honest person will reliably tell the truth or why someone will be creative across a range of situations even in the face of variance in extrinsic reasons. Furthermore, excellence of motivation is itself an admirable and praiseworthy achievement. Still, agents can in principle be creative in the sense of imaginatively doing something or coming up with new and worthwhile ideas while being purely extrinsically motivated. This is non-virtuous creativity.

Virtuous creativity involves excellence of motivation, and this in turn helps to insulate agents against drives and temptations that undermine or diminish the realization of creative potential. This is stronger than a purely consequentialist conception of virtue, according to which, virtue is just the possession of dispositions of character that systematically produce good (in this case) creative consequences (Driver 2007). There is a sense in which the view articulated incorporates something like the consequentialist claim. If you want to be as creative as possible, then, at least typically, it will be better to be

intrinsically motivated. However, ingrained intrinsic motivation is also an achievement of character that is in and of itself praiseworthy and admirable. We do not and should not praise the extrinsically motivated person as we would praise the intrinsically motivated one.

## 6. Shaffer's Mozart Phenomenon

A distinct objection zeroes in on the apparent recognition that many extremely creative people have achieved what they have as a side-effect of peculiarities of character and natural talent. The possession of creative excellence sometimes seems to be bound up with aspects of personality that ordinary people cannot meaningfully aim at. Given that virtue is considered to be an excellence or disposition of character that we can normally meaningfully aim at, exemplary creativity, the objection goes, cannot be a virtue.

Consider Mozart as portrayed in Peter Shaffer's play *Amadeus*. Mozart is a kind of semi-autistic childlike fool who is gifted with a supreme talent. In contrast, Salieri's intrinsic motivation drives him to work exceedingly hard. Nonetheless, Salieri's mediocrity as a composer stands in striking contrast to the brilliance of Mozart's eccentric brilliance. Salieri's envy causes him to rage against what he takes to be a divine cosmic joke, motivating the Machiavellian plotting and rivalry around which the play revolves. There is nothing that Salieri can do to outshine Mozart. Take, for example, the scene where Mozart is introduced to the court at Vienna. Salieri plays the "March of Welcome" he has worked on so painstakingly.

Bewildered, Mozart does so [halts and listens], becoming aware of Salieri playing his “March of Welcome.” It is an extremely banal piece, vaguely—only vaguely—reminiscent of another march to become famous later on.

(Shaffer 2007)

Mozart mockingly proceeds to play Salieri’s piece in front of the court, making cruel fun of its comparative mediocrity and reshaping the music into what would become the march from the *Marriage of Figaro*. The love of art and cultivation of intrinsic motivation cannot compensate for either Salieri’s lack of natural gifts or the peculiarities of personality upon which Mozart’s creative genius seems to rest. Creative excellence, the objection runs, is often a byproduct of fundamental talents and oddities of character that we cannot meaningfully aim at. Furthermore, given that creativity depends on natural talent, which varies immensely, it is not open to all of us to be a creative genius no matter how well motivated we might be. Thus, the objection goes, even exemplary creativity cannot be a matter of virtue.

It might be tempting to dismiss the objection as being based upon a falsely romanticized fiction. This would be a mistake. There are numerous biographies that suggest creative excellence often depends on a combination of natural talent with idiosyncratic character traits or clinical conditions (Jamison 1993). John Nash achieved far more than the Princeton colleagues who outclassed him at complex chess games. Einstein, famously, was not the brightest person in his class. Francis Bacon and Van Gogh were greater painters than some of their more naturally talented peers. Although it is true that in at least some such cases, part of the explanation must advert to the role of intrinsic motivation, this is not always the case. Nasar’s (1994) highly acclaimed

biography of John Nash suggests that his creative achievements issued partly out of oddities of condition and character, specifically the nature of his social ineptitude and his paranoid schizophrenia. If Nash had been divested of such, we are led to believe, then he would not have been as creative as he was. In a similar light, recent biographers have suggested that the realization of Caravaggio's genius was tied to his explosively violent temperament or a borderline antisocial personality disorder (Graham-Dixon 2010, Robb 2000).

We cannot aim to suffer from certain mental conditions or possess certain temperaments or particular idiosyncratic personality traits. Yet, the objection suggests, many highly creative people are creative in part as a byproduct of such. Indeed, in at least some cases, it would seem that cultivating intrinsic motivation would have led to less, rather than more, creative results. This shows, the objector will insist, that exemplary creativity is not a virtue.

It seems commonsensical to accept that the creativity of many individuals is intimately bound up with idiosyncrasies of health, psychology, and motivation. Nonetheless, this does not tell against conceiving of exemplary creativity as a virtue. Creativity, like other intellectual or practical virtues, involves intricate skills, the basis and workings of which may depend upon and be enhanced or diminished by certain natural talents, temperaments, and idiosyncrasies of character. To take one example, the virtue of temperance requires skills bound up with the self-governance, regulation, and expression of emotion. How difficult it is to achieve such states may vary from individual to individual according to natural differences in temperament and talent. We should think of virtue in terms of possessing and typically manifesting at a minimal threshold level certain characteristics in action along the relevant dimensions. All that is required to answer the

objection is to point out that creativity is multidimensional and admits of degree. It is no part of the argument that intrinsic motivation ensures creativity or even creative excellence in achievement. As we saw earlier in Aristotle's characterization of virtue, the reasons one is motivated to act are only part of the story. Why? Creative virtue also depends on judgment, talent, and opportunity (among other things). Nonetheless, the extent to which an agent is intrinsically motivated is the degree to which she is excellent in a respect that is central. It is a praiseworthy achievement and explains why the agent will be less susceptible to certain kinds of creative errors or temptations than those who are extrinsically motivated.

## 7. Conclusion

An exemplary creative person is someone who has acquired a certain degree of mastery and knows what she is doing in coming up with novel and worthwhile ideas or artifacts. In doing so, she is motivated by the values internal to the relevant domain and chooses what she does for reasons that hook up with those values in the right kind of ways. The exemplary creative person does this not as a matter of happenstance, but rather out of an ingrained disposition of character. This is admirable and praiseworthy. To remain true to the right kind of motivations in some domain while avoiding the myriad biases and temptations to which we are naturally subject is an achievement of character. This is not to claim that creative action or even being reliably creative in some domain necessarily requires intrinsic motivation. However, it does explain why the exemplary person is praiseworthy in a way that the extrinsically motivated person is not and why it is that, other things being equal, the intrinsically motivated person will often be more reliably

creative than the extrinsically motivated person. Intrinsic motivation insulates agents from pressures against and inhibitors of creativity and thus helps to ensure robustness across different situations and influences.

It follows, as a practical matter, that if we desire to cultivate creativity or design an education system geared toward doing so, it is ill conceived to emphasize purely extrinsic motivations. A much better way forward is to emphasize intrinsic motivations while designing organizational structures, systems, and rewards in such a way that they are perceived to be related to and arise from a domain's relevant internal values. Creativity flourishes when intrinsic motivation, values, and socioeconomic structures line up appropriately. It tends to wither when they do not (unless, like Van Gogh, a person's creativity is exceptionally virtuous).<sup>5</sup>

## References

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