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EXPLORING CREATIVITY: A MULTI-PERSPECTIVE EXAMINATION

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HONORS PROJECT

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“Of madness there are two kinds, one produced by human infirmity, the other. . . a divine release of the soul from the yoke of custom and convention”

— Plato’s *Phaedrus* (265a)

What is creativity? The search for an answer to this question has been a lengthy and arduous one that continues till this day. Early philosophers likened creativity to a kind of madness as evidenced by the above Plato quote. However, definitions have continued to evolve as more research has been done in the area of creative thought. In this paper, creativity will be examined through the lens of 3 areas of study in order to gain a broad understanding of what creativity is. These areas include philosophy, psychology and sociology which were chosen due to their ability to be applicable to all of humanity. The personal nature of creativity and how we experience it causes its definition to be fluid. However, there are underlying similarities in each aforementioned perspective’s body of work on creativity that contributes to a greater comprehension to the individual of what creativity is. Understanding creativity helps individuals nurture, define and strengthen it within themselves.

The dictionary defines creativity as, “the ability to transcend traditional ideas, rules, patterns, relationships, or the like and to create meaningful new ideas, forms, methods, interpretations, etc. originality, progressiveness, or imagination” (Creativity, 2019). This explanation raises even more questions, but for now we will use this generic definition to establish a point of comparison during our investigation of creativity within the different areas of study and we will return to it later on in the discussion.

Let’s begin our discussion with the area of philosophy. Philosophy is the search for

beliefs supported by reason, concerning general and fundamental concepts. Comparing the three perspectives within this paper, philosophy has been studied for the longest amount of time yet its exploration into creative thought has been the most recent. Creativity when addressed by Plato or Socrates was done so in reference to a creative pursuit such as poetry and not referred to as creativity in itself. All the same, in the beginning of philosophical thought creativity was thought of as a type “madness” or “divine inspiration” (Kaufman, 2014). One’s mastery of a creative pursuit was not due to their knowledge or skill at the task, but rather the divine inspiration that was “breathed into” them by the Muses. The next great philosopher to address creativity was Immanuel Kant in 1790. Kant thought of creativity as an innate ability that expresses itself through imagination. He defines artistic genius as being both original and exemplary. Kant’s definition leads us to modern day philosophical theories of creativity.

Let us first focus on how creativity is explicitly defined in the more modern theories. It has been stated that, “there is a broad consensus that creativity is the capacity to produce things that are original and valuable” (Gaut, 2010). While that definition is considered the standard, some philosophers have added on some key components. For something to be considered creative, it cannot be done out of luck, it must be done purposefully. A creation must be done with understanding and skill, not just through a mechanical process and to be considered a creative action one must have the ability to assess their work. In other words, “the kinds of actions that are creative are ones that exhibit at least a relevant purpose...some degree of understanding...a degree of judgment...and an evaluative ability directed to the task at hand” (Gaut, 2010). In addition, there are also some explanations that include spontaneity as a key component of creativity. The addition of spontaneity, otherwise known as insight, means that a

creative solution cannot be reached by sheer will-power alone (Gaut, 2018). Furthermore, the value component is meant to rule out anything of “worthless originality” as being creative (Gaut, 2010).

Now that we know how creativity is defined in the mind of the philosophical community, let’s take a look at how they believe creativity can be nurtured within the individual and where exactly creativity originates. Many philosophers believe that there is no “naturalistic explanation” for creativity (Gaut, 2018). In other words, creativity can’t be explained by natural or materialist causes. Plato would say this is due to creativity being an act of the gods within us. Kant maintains that creativity is within a domain that simply cannot be explained. It has been maintained that by the properties of novelty itself, creativity cannot be predicted. A particularly interesting discussion is the connection between Value Theory and human creativity. Value Theory is an area of philosophy that is concerned with why and to what degree humans value things. Human beings seem to value exemplary creativity and it’s been asserted that the value comes from the idea that creativity is a part of who we are as human beings; “that we cannot fully understand ourselves without taking it into account” (Kaufman, 2014). In fact, there are theories of thought that place creativity in a vital role in the creation of the self.

So, what do these thoughts have to do with the origination of creativity? The answer is, they reveal that all humans have a distinct creative capacity. Therefore, we must look at where creativity emerged on an evolutionary and developmental basis. Many researchers believe the first sparks of creativity show themselves through children’s imaginary play. The function of this imaginary play is thought to be a, “uniquely human adaptation that functions in part to

enhance adult forms of creativity” (Kaufman, 2014). It’s noted that pretend play is a universal and cross-cultural activity that involves “defocused attention and cognitive control” (Kaufman, 2014). All of this leads to an enhanced capacity for creative thought in adulthood. This research leads to a couple of important conclusions. First, it implies that all humans are born with the ability to be creative, in fact, it is an important aspect of being human. Next, it indicates that in order to nurture creativity, we need to start young and encourage pretend play in young children.

Let’s narrow our focus even more onto that last point. In order to come to that conclusion, we must first ask, is it even possible to nurture creativity. We have established that a theory of philosophy is that all humans have a capacity for creativity. There are some philosophers such as Edward Young and Immanuel Kant who agree that creativity is innate, however due to its innateness it cannot be taught or learned. Yet, there are compelling arguments in favor of the ability to learn how to be creative. This is possible through the capacity to teach the kinds of abilities and motivations involved in creative thought and learning how to enhance creativity through the use of heuristics. This leads me to conclude that the innate capacity of creativity is compatible with its ability to be enhanced through learning certain heuristics and motivations.

Now that the general philosophical theories of creativity have been presented, let us move on to the sociological body of research. Sociological theories define creativity as a process rather than the characteristic of an agent. Creativity is defined as a, “process of originating, transforming, or adapting ideas, artefacts, systems, a sector or domain, states of the world, or

any other entity which is constructed as differing or deviating from what already exists” (Burns, 2015). The process should result in some sort of creative outcome. The agent or agents involved are significant to the process. They bring their own capabilities and access to resources that can greatly shape the creative process. In the sociological view, creativity is defined as “novel in context”, in other words it only needs to be original “in relation to existing entities in the context in which it is produced” (Burns, 2015). Creativity doesn’t involve being useful or valuable, sociologists consider this judgment to be separate from creativity.

As far as the origins of creativity, similar to philosophy it is thought that creativity developed as a form of adaptation and sustainability as part of evolution. It developed as a function of social structures, its production and acceptance is socially embedded. Even if an agent is working in solitude, the creative process is formed from, “languages, knowledge, procedures and expectancies that are socially constructed” (Elisondo, 2016). Social aspects are not simply considered external influences, but what makes up creativity itself. Later in the essay we will see the psychology argument of the creative cognition approach. Sociologists complement this cognitive processes claim by stating that the different experiences one has reshapes neural connections necessary to generate creative solutions. The interaction with others that makes up creativity can be both direct and indirect. Directness can come through working in groups, conversing with others to gain broader perspectives, etc. Indirectness comes in when ideas are produced, “in relation to others’ thoughts, knowledge, and productions” (Elisondo, 2016).

In addition to being a characteristic of creativity, direct interactions with others can help

to enhance creative thinking within the individual. Others often participate in the generation of new ideas, a prime example of this being the “brainstorming” method. Sociologists believe that locations have an integral role in nurturing creativity. Certain environments are more predisposed to facilitate social interaction which can help the development of creative processes. Sociological theory has produced five basic modalities used to augment the production of creative thought. These include, “origination/formation, transformation, combinatorics, adaptation and dialectics” (Burns, 2015). Origination/formation is the creation of a completely new idea, often through trial and error. Transformation is restructuring an existing element from what was there before. Combinatorics is a form of transformation that involves combining different components or linkages. Adaptation involves situations in which you take an existing entity and apply it to a different situation. Finally, dialectical strategies involve the interplay between two different perspectives or paradigms. Each of these different modalities is a way for an individual to induce creative thought.

We have now established research done in both the areas of philosophy and sociology. Let us move to our final body of research done in the field of psychology. Out of the three perspectives discussed in this essay, psychology was the first to delve deeply into the topic of creativity. In psychology, “mental processes are...the essence and the engine of creative endeavors” (Ward, 2010). In other words, creativity is a series of cognitive processes. The cognitive processes and structures used in creative thinking are thought to be the same as those used in non-creative thinking. The definition of creativity that is broadly accepted is also the one that is accepted by psychologists. This definition is, “the production of something both novel and useful” (Jung, 2013). The exact cognitive processes that make up creative thought are

still unknown, but there are theories.

Before we jump into those theories, let's discuss the origins of creative thought according to psychologists. In 1960, a man named Donald Campbell came up with a theory that he thought explained the development of creative thought. He believed that "achieving innovation" was the next step in the evolutionary process following from "blind floundering" to an "intelligent knowledge process" (Jung, 2013). Campbell claimed that creative thought comes from a mixture of "blind variation and selective retention" (Jung, 2013). The blind variation portion is similar to divergent thinking in the way that the function is to generate a large number of novel ideas. The selective retention portion comes in to separate the meaningful ideas from the absurd. Many believe that these cognitive processes help form the basis of creative cognition. Others agree that creativity was born from evolutionary purposes. It is hypothesized that two types of intelligence developed, dedicated and improvisational. Improvisational intelligence is, "the ability of a computational system to improvise solutions to novel problems" (Jung, 2014). This is the type of problem that creativity evolved to solve, problems that we have not encountered before.

Now that we have established some ways that creative thought could have originated, let us go back and look at the theories involving cognitive processes and structures where creativity might come from. It seems that the focus is not on specific brain regions themselves, but the connections between them, a "delicate interplay of both increases and decreases in neural mass, white matter organization, biochemical composition, and even functional activations within and between brain lobes and hemispheres..." (Jung, 2013). The theory of

“hubs” seems to be yielding more promise when it comes to associations with creative cognition. These hubs serve as neural networks or connections between different areas of the brain. One particular network that has received a lot of attention in creative thought is the Default Mode Network (DMN). It has been found that the DMN corresponds with “stimulus-independent thought”, activities such as, “remembering the past, envisioning future events, and considering the thoughts and perspectives of other people” (Jung, 2013). The DMN is thought to be the leading network associated with Campbell’s theory of blind variation and selective retention. It provides a “mechanism for introducing variation” as well as, “a mechanism for preserving and reproducing the selected variations” (Jung, 2013).

Cognitive processes are also involved with the advancement of creative skill. It is theorized that increased creativity is associated with decreased cortical arousal. In other words, stress, social stress, and intense noise all increase one’s cortical arousal which leads to decreased creative cognitions. The notion of decreased latent inhibition or disinhibition has been linked to greater creativity too. Disinhibition involves the disregard of social conventions as well as, a promotion of “exploratory idea spaces” (Jung, 2013). This would suggest that an individual should halt judgment on any ideas, regardless of how absurd or outside social convention.

This concludes the discussion of creativity according to the three perspectives of philosophy, sociology and psychology, let us now find the similarities between them. The first similarity can be found in how each perspective defines creativity. It seems that in order for something to be considered creative, it must novel or original. Whether generally novel or

novel in context, originality is a vital aspect of creativity, you cannot have creativity without it. Whether implicitly stated or implied, all three perspectives define creativity as involving a process. Creativity involves actions whether observable or inner actions. Even the dictionary definition of the word “creativity” includes novelty and an implied process. Therefore, these characteristics seem to be a necessary inclusion in any future objective definition of creativity.

The next similarity is that all the perspectives discussed creativity as a uniquely human adaptation. It seems that creativity developed for some sort of evolutionary purpose, perhaps as a way to deal with novel problems. As it may be, creativity could be embedded in what it means to be human in relation to the creation of the self. It is acknowledged that this is a large claim. This similarity in particular calls for more research as this is a very gray area that could have a considerable impact on how we view humanity.

The final similarity I would like to discuss is that all the perspectives believe that it is possible to increase your creative skill. It is important to recognize this because this means the individual can use suggested strategies to nurture creativity within themselves which can lead to improved problem solving skills, career success, and overall quality of life. Having the ability to think creatively is truly an asset in all areas of life. That said, I would like to reiterate and expand upon some of the suggestions for improving creative thought that have been offered. The first thing to think about is location. When one is trying to be creative, they should pick a location that facilitates social interaction, but is not an overly stressful environment. In relation to that, interacting with others can help creative ideas flow easier. Do not immediately disregard any ideas that come to mind even if they seem absurd or outside social convention.

Try exposing yourself to new ideas and situations that can offer a creative spark. Another strategy is engaging in relaxed attention. Try not to focus on a specific task, allowing your mind to make connections between two seemingly unrelated ideas (Kelley, 2015).

There are even more specific strategies called heuristics, that are used to enhance creative thinking. Heuristics are described as “a strategy or rule of thumb for generating ideas or for solving problems” (Deckert, 2017). One commonly suggested heuristic is redefining the problem. Try to reframe the question or start from a different point of view in order to get to the essence of the problem itself (Kelley, 2015). Another heuristic principle is free association. Examples of this include brainstorming or mindmapping in which one has a central topic and comes up with many related connections in order to spur new ideas. Similar to free association is structured association in which the thinking is directed towards a more specific end. An example of this type of heuristic is called De Bono’s Six Thinking Hats. In this exercise, each hat represents a different function or role and switching them helps to redirect or focus thoughts. Configuration heuristics involve the combination of existing elements. An exercise that represents this type is the morphological box. The morphological box decomposes the problem into separate elements that be combined and recombined to find solutions.

Despite having all of this information, a universal definition of creativity has not been established. The areas of philosophy, psychology and sociology have each lent their own theories on creative thought. While they do not altogether agree, there are some similarities between them that imply certain characteristics can be used towards the creation of a universal understanding of creativity. It seems that as we find out more about creativity the definition

will continue to evolve. However, no matter how it is defined, creativity is an extremely valuable skill that can improve every area of one's life. Now it's your turn, how can you be more creative? Perhaps try implementing some of the suggestions mentioned in this essay because improved creativity leads to improved problem solving, improved career performance, improved expression and thus, an improved life.

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