

"Creativity as a Virtue of Character"

Talk given by Prof. Matthew Kieran (Leeds University) on Tuesday January, 28th, 4-6pm, Colin Matthew Room, Radcliffe Humanities.

His talk aimed at stating what it means exactly to be a creative person. He highlighted a few points which, for him, helped define the concept and gave us clues as to how we could become creative, since creativity can be stimulated and developed. You are not born creative even though there is also the case of people who are born more creative than others? e.g. idiosyncratic disposition, genius; you become creative, and you are more likely to reach the highly sought-after state of creativity if you follow his criteria (but it is not guaranteed. There is no recipe for creativity).

1° Education

Creativity is omnipresent whatever the domain: as long as what you create is **novel** and **valuable**. **Creativity is thus relational.** It depends on what people have done and achieved.

Prof. Kieran mentioned Margaret A. Boden's book *The Creative Mind: Myths and Mechanisms* published by Routledge in 2003, mostly focusing on psychological and historical creativity. In many instances, she showed artefacts that are novel and worthwhile.

He then, himself, gave a few examples through a PowerPoint presentation, like Cavaliere d'Arpino's (1568-1640) paintings (Giuseppe Cesari was an Italian Mannerist painter, also named Il Giuseppino and called *Cavaliere d'Arpino*, because he was created *Cavaliere di Cristo* by his patron Pope Clement VIII. He was much patronized in Rome by both Clement and Sixtus V. He was the chief of the studio in which Caravaggio trained upon the younger painter's arrival in Rome). He insisted on Caravaggio, *The Taking of Christ*, 1602



Painting taken from The National Gallery of Ireland where it is displayed

http://www.nationalgallery.ie/Home/Collection/Irelands_Favourite_Painting/Caravaggio

Creativity requires a certain degree of mastery and skills; hence the need for education and training. Yet, mastery and skills alone are insufficient for creativity.

Something else is needed. To help us understand what, Prof. Kieran showed a painting by Picasso: a sketch a foot drawn when he was 13.

At the age of 14, Picasso painted *Portrait of Aunt Pepa* (1896) a vigorous and dramatic portrait which Juan-Eduardo Cirlot has called "without a doubt one of the greatest in the whole history of Spanish painting".



Picture taken from the The Museo Picasso Málaga

<http://www.blogmuseupicassobcn.org/2013/03/the-early-picasso-in-malaga/?lang=en>

And a triptych which secured Francis Bacon's reputation: "Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion" c.1944.



Painting from the Tate Museum <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bacon-three-studies-for-figures-at-the-base-of-a-crucifixion-n06171>

The title relates these horrific beasts to the saints traditionally portrayed at the foot of the cross in religious painting. Bacon even suggested he had intended to paint a larger crucifixion beneath which these would appear. He later related these figures to the Eumenides – the vengeful furies of Greek myth, associating them within a broader mythological tradition. Typically, Bacon drew on a range of sources for these figures, including a photograph purporting to show the materialisation of ectoplasm and the work of Pablo Picasso.

The extra qualities needed are:

2° Motivation and Character

People **need to be able to explain why they do it, how they do it, and what is going to change**. This is linked to motivation and character.

Virtue as an excellence of character. Aristotle already mentioned virtue as a character trait that human beings need in order to live life at its best. (see his two ethical treatises: the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Eudemean Ethics*). Professor Kieran's use of 'virtue', however, references the aesthetic dimension but not necessarily the normative moral dimension.

Prof. Kieran analyses **experiments**

Experiment 1: conducted among groups of 24 students doing creative writing. They were tested depending on their intrinsic or extrinsic motivation in 1985

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation, Amabile (1985)

Subjects: 72 Creative Writing Students (24 per group)

GP1 list of intrinsic motivators prior to task

GP2 list of extrinsic motivators

GP3 No list

They were judged by 12 independently successful poets: GP2 did the least creative work.

Experiment 2: conducted among a group of 12 year-old kids. They had to teach 6-year-olds poker chip game

Some were given an extrinsic reward and the others no reward

Those with extrinsically motivated rewards performed the task less well.

There are various issues here:

Intrinsic motivations = the values are internal to the relevant domains

Extrinsic motivations = the end (reward) is the aim, so they don't focus on the task, which is only a means to an end.

The Claim = **intrinsic motivation** structures our attention (more robust)

For extrinsically motivated, irrelevant features tend to play a causal role in the activity and figure in the wrong.

Prof. Kieran showed us a few more paintings:

Vincent Van Gogh, "Etten Marsh", 1881



Drawing from The National Gallery of Canada

<http://www.vangoghgallery.com/catalog/Drawing/1167/Marsh.html>

Vincent Van Gogh, "Blumenbeete", 1883



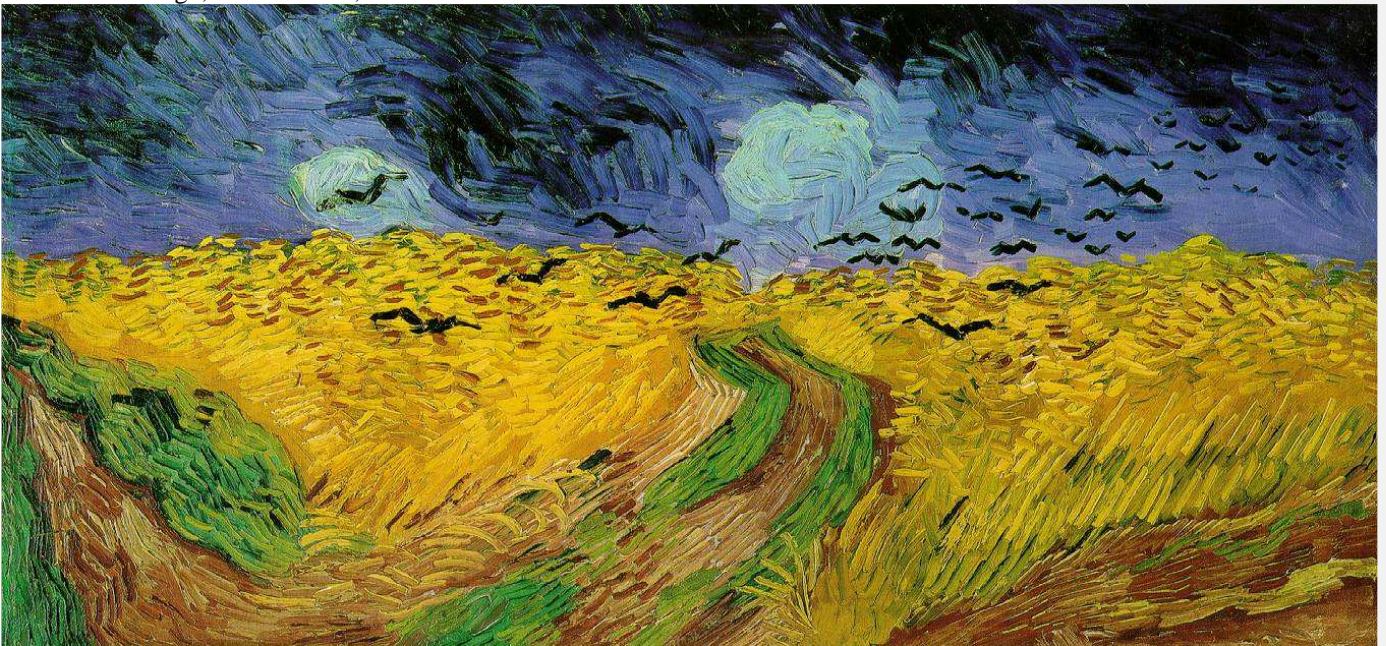
Painting from the National Gallery of Art

<http://www.european-traveler.com/switzerland/vincent-van-gogh-landscapes-exhibition-basel/>

Vincent Van Gogh, "Peasant Woman, Kneeling", 1885



Vincent Van Gogh, "Wheatfield", 1890



From the Van Gogh Museum <http://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/vgm/index.jsp?page=3343&lang=en>

Van Gogh did not reach such a level of technicity straight away. He spent a year focusing on figuration only, so that he was better at it at the end. (see the progression from one painting to another). He was motivated by one goal: grasping a truth/ expression out of landscape. He was not a creative saint.

He had an **intrinsic motivation** (causal factor that enabled his achievement), **plus perseverance, courage, self criticism (ie he had a certain character)**.

The next point is that not all creativity is virtuous.

2° Bis _ Motivational complexities

Prof. Kieran starts by quoting W. Blake's "Laocoön"

"Where any view of Money exists Art cannot be carried on, but War only

Read Matthew C X. 9 & 10v

by pretences to the Two Impossibilities Chastity & Abstinence Gods of the Heathen"

He noticed that tangible rewards can work as well. They can reinforce virtuous motivations, since:

-we praise and admire individuals

-we expect them to be more creative

The example was to find short story titles. One's egocentrism/ sense of self-esteem may make them become more creative. This is not necessarily virtuous, but it is for their own gain, the way they are viewed by others etc...

3° Art Star Objection (Jeff Koons)

Tracking the **values internal to art** via Human Art Prize Judges (analogy to Epigogix, which is a UK-based company founded in 2003 that uses neural networks and analytical software to predict which movies will provide a good possibility of return on investments and which movie scripts or plots will be successful. It was featured in an article by Malcolm Gladwell in *The New Yorker*. It has also been featured in *Super Crunchers*, Ian Ayres' book about number analysis, in *CIO* magazine and in Kevin Slavin's TED talk)

There can also be **a move from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation.**

The Koons star case is not exemplary.

A few details on Jeff Koons (born January 21, 1955) He is an American artist known for his reproductions of banal objects — such as balloon animals produced in stainless steel with mirror finish surfaces. He lives and works in both New York City and his hometown of York, Pennsylvania. He has caused controversy by the elevation of unashamed kitsch into the high art arena, exploiting more industrialised objects of consumption than, for example, Warhol's soup cans. His work *Balloon Dog* (1994–2000) is based on balloons twisted into shape to make a toy dog. Renowned critic Robert Hughes wrote that Koons is “an extreme and self-satisfied manifestation of the sanctimony that attaches to big bucks. Koons really does think he's Michelangelo and is not shy to say so. The significant thing is that there are collectors, especially in America, who believe it. He has the slimy assurance, the gross patter about transcendence through art, of a blow-dried Baptist selling swamp acres in Florida. And the result is that you can't imagine America's singularly depraved culture without him.”

<http://www.jeffkoons.com/site/index.html>

<http://theotherjournal.com/2010/11/08/the-real-jeff-koons-consumer-culture-and-the-grammar-of-desire-2/>

To conclude, Prof. Kieran states that all that matters is the **internal motivation... whatever the motivation was at the beginning**. It is all about natural talents, temperaments or idiosyncrasies, i.e. being resilient, self-motivated, self-critical.

See: Peter Shaffer's Salieri and Mozart in *Amadeus* (rivalry between the two composers staged) Caravaggio's jealousy of the artist and art historian Giovanni Baglione (the latter took

Caravaggio to court as he accused him of besmirching his artistic reputation by circulating anonymous verse terming him a dauber and a disgrace to painting. Caravaggio spoke badly of all painters of the past, and present, because he thought he surpassed all others), John Nash's schizophrenia etc....

Their internal motivation, which was far from virtuous, made them surpass themselves....

Questions asked after the talk

-The first question was about the difference between **creativity** and **originality**. Prof. Kieran did not really respond to this because he said it would open up a new field. He said that historical creativity is originality, whereas psychological creativity is new to you but maybe not to someone else (the object/ artifact etc... may exist elsewhere, you were just not aware of it).

-The second question was about **different kinds of creativity**. Intrinsic motivation won't give you a guarantee of creativity. It is the hierarchical driver.

See Ludwig Wittgenstein, the Austrian-British philosopher, who famously said: "I ought to have... become a star in the sky. Instead of which I have remained stuck on earth."

There are creative people who are not doing creative things, and you can be creative without being exemplary creative.

- How to distinguish whether the **motivator is intrinsic or extrinsic**? It is difficult to tell as the boundaries are often blurred (mixture of both).

-Why choose "the courage/ self motivation" qualities rather than "obsession" for example?

These are traits, rather than virtue maybe (being obsessed may be problematic).

Creative virtues don't always go together with moral virtues. Creative virtue at the expense of moral virtue sometimes.

-What does creative genius involve? Difference in kind maybe. Genuine creativity can be rule-following. **Combinatorial creativity**. For example, it could be bringing something already known to a new domain.

-What about the other side of the fence? Audience, art critic...

There are virtues of characters and virtues of mind. (Mixture of virtues of mind and virtues of character). **Ethic and aesthetic** aspects.

To conclude, creativity is a layered concept.

Remark: What could have been valuable is to hear how the cross-disciplinary audience could have used this layered concept in their own research. How was this very philosophical approach applicable to the people in the audience? I felt it remained very theoretical and I would have liked to see more crossover with the subjects represented in the room. Why is it worth thinking about the concept of creativity? What can we do with it? How can we use it in music, literature, languages etc...? Maybe some food for thoughts for another talk.

Commentaire [x li1]: Another point I would have liked to hear more is about how challengeable the concept of creativity is (since Professor Kieran said he takes creativity in the conventional sense, i.e. making new things of cultural/aesthetic value – but what about other understandings of creativity?)

Report by Dr. Céline Sabiron and added comments by Dr. Xiaofan Amy Li