

CHAPTER ONE

Creativity: Blind Men and Elephant Parts

Before I came here, I was confused about this subject. Having listened to your lecture, I am still confused—but on a higher level.

-Enrico Fermi

According to some accounts, Beethoven liked to pour water over his head and sing, becoming literally so immersed that he kept flooding his apartments and getting evicted. Did that reflect his madness, his genius, or his attempt to drown out the ominous buzz in his ears that began at the age of thirty? Legendary jazz pianist Thelonious Monk would abruptly stop playing during performances, and whirl around like a dervish. Was this bizarre behavior “proof” of craziness, or simply some showmanship he learned early on, while playing for a traveling tent show?¹

Creativity and madness are slippery things, hard to describe and impossible to quantify. Like pornography, we know them when we see them, but despite years of trying to wrestle them to the mat, there’s still no universal definition or test for either one—and when they collide, they raise a whole new cloud of questions.

So, which experts are correct: the ones who insist that “manic depression is almost indispensable to genius,”² or those who claim that

“we haven’t found compelling evidence of a connection between mental illness and creativity”?³ Like debates over the existence of God, this field offers more passion than proof; much of its certainty gleams with promise from a distance, but tends to vanish on approach.

For example, because nobody has pinpointed the brain wiring that enhances creativity, we can’t know for certain whether it also increases the risk of pathology, which is equally unmapped. These two variables are so enigmatic that each requires its own chapter (creativity first, madness next). Even then, this book will not explicate all their facets—just what happens when they are thrown together. And jazz, that wonderfully living and changing art form, will not be defined at all—there is too much ongoing fulmination about what it is, or isn’t, which is beyond the scope of this enterprise.

Creative Components

MOST GOOD DICTIONARIES echo the grand *Oxford English*, which reveals that the word “creativity” didn’t actually appear in print until 1875. This relative recency is one small reason for all the confusion.

When creativity is confined to the ability to bring something new into being, it covers everything from concertos to childbirth. But go just one step further and the squabbling begins: team A argues that creativity stems from environmental factors, team B believes that the key is tucked deep inside the brain, while team C claims that they must interact in some mysterious way. It’s that old blind-men-and-elephant thing where each person, unable to see the whole animal, insists that the part he’s holding constitutes the entire pacydermal truth.

The whole beast can be embraced at once with the theory of “confluence,” which acknowledges the convergence of numerous different elements.⁴ Psychologist Dean Simonton borrowed the term “stochastic process” from probability language to simply characterize this interaction as mysterious.⁵ If it were only up to me, I’d stop right there and go out for coffee, but most readers might want a bit more than that. Be warned, however: if you go a’Googling today for the definition of creativity, you’ll get over one billion, two hundred sixty million hits.

What follows are just two of the good ones:

1. Creativity is the ability to produce work that is both novel (original, unexpected) and appropriate (it works: it is useful or meets task constraints).⁶
2. Creativity is the interaction among aptitude, process, and environment by which an individual or group produces a perceptible product that is both novel and useful as defined within a social context.⁷

Unfortunately, such abstractions raise more questions than they answer. For instance, just how do you define and measure these abilities, aptitudes, and processes? Does everyone agree on what they look like? And what does “useful” mean, anyway? Useful to whom? For what? And, who says?

“Novelty” is only part of the story, since creativity is far more than simple newness. So if we consider “quality” as well, who gets to judge that? Experts? Teachers? Peers? And by what criteria? Are there concrete and reliable assessments of artistic quality, and if so, can they ever calibrate the essence of beauty?

And while we’re at it, who decides what’s “appropriate” in a creative domain? Is “meeting task constraints” the best yardstick for that brilliant trumpet solo that just ignited the room? Shouldn’t some intrinsic factors be considered as well? And if so, can we specify what they are, and how to identify them as they’re flying by?

This is only some of the static on this channel, which also includes the paradox that successful creativity requires both nonconformity and social acceptance at the same time. Genius adds its own dynamic, because achievements at that level create “propulsive moments” that can smash through traditional boundaries to change a domain.⁸ But even that isn’t reliable, since their progress may be blocked by the self-appointed guardians of a domain’s “purity” who refuse to move it away from its past.

Here’s another conundrum for the mix: do people qualify as creative if nobody likes what they create? History’s graveyard is full of artists celebrated for being “ahead of their time”—but only retroactively, since they died poor and unappreciated before they could get there. Van Gogh

made no money from his paintings, and even Bach's music was dismissed as being "over-elaborate and old fashioned" during his lifetime.⁹

But if the public is the ultimate judge of creative value, how do you calculate the fleeting impact of fads? Or of influential critics who get excited about something that puts everyone else to sleep (and vice versa)? Many times in my decades of jazz writing, a colleague's review made me wonder if we heard the same music. The frequent disconnect between critical praise and public favor can churn up great stress in a creative life. One famous example is Stephen Sondheim's musical *Follies*, which won seven Tony Awards in 1971 but lost its entire investment (\$800,000) because of poor attendance. It is often said that the musicals of Andrew Lloyd Webber wow the public but bore the critics, while Sondheim's work does the opposite. (How ironic that they share a birthday—March 22—even if nearly twenty years apart!)

"Originality" is yet another lump in the sauce. While newness seems central to the concept of creativity, by itself it guarantees neither admiration nor acceptance. In an inventive but rather baffling study, Simonton fed 15,618 classical melodies into a computer that evaluated the originality of their first six notes. When he plotted these results against the frequency of performance, he discovered that the most original pieces were not the most popular. The favorite music actually sat somewhere between "hackneyed" and "aggravating," nestled in that sweet spot between familiar and boring.¹⁰

Even if you doubt that six notes are enough to evaluate originality, and dismiss the musical judgment of computers, this study was one attempt to hoist something quantifiable out of the creative morass. I can also offer some anecdotal support for the idea that a mix of the known and the new has a special appeal. In the song "Don't Know Why," the monster debut for singer Norah Jones in 2002, the first five notes are identical to those of Vince Guaraldi's beloved "Charlie Brown's Christmas," then lead right into an unmistakable quote from Paul McCartney's "Yesterday." I believe these subliminal echoes of cherished anthems helped propel the song to number one, providing just enough nostalgia to soothe the listener without waking the beast of copyright infringement.

"Talent" is yet another concept that's easier to recognize than define. At least "productivity" has tangible units of measurement (how many songs or paintings), but this is more relevant in business than art—after all, it

only took a handful of stories to vault Franz Kafka and J. D. Salinger into the permanent pantheon of great writers.

Even premature death affects creativity by enhancing our view of how great someone *might* have been. Jazz has a long list of such tragic icons, including saxophonist Charlie “Bird” Parker and bassist Paul Chambers, both of whom died at thirty-four, and bassist Jaco Pastorius, whose stormy life ended at thirty six. Their brilliance is undisputed, but their legends—like those of Judy Garland, James Dean, Otis Redding, Whitney Houston, and Philip Seymour Hoffman—draw additional voltage from our communal sense of bafflement and loss.

Today creativity has come to encompass so much that it hardly means anything at all. In the ivory tower, whole careers are built on identifying its components and their interactions, and there are many excellent books to explore for those who want to wade further in. But it’s also possible to detour around the confusion by leaving creativity undefined.

In fact, now and then writers are so impatient with square one that they leap right over it, and nobody seems to mind. Researchers have made real scientific progress in understanding creativity without even mentioning the concept—as when mapping the brains of people playing music, which is described in Chapter 7.

Big Bad C

FOR ALL THE HOOPLA about cultivating creativity, it also has a negative side, even when it falls short of genius level. Psychologist Hans Eysenck puts it this way:

Creativity, solemnly praised, is in fact anathema. It threatens the structure and cannot be tolerated—the creative person is willy nilly turned into a rebel, an outcast, a maverick [. . . or diagnosed as bipolar?].¹¹

Although creativity can be a kind of life-enhancing filigree, like a gift for languages or a knack for soufflés, turning it into a livelihood is something else altogether. Many parents who value creativity mistrust the creative life, recognizing the vast difference between funding their

future lawyer's sax lessons and coaxing her into a fulltime jazz career. But this paradox is easily resolved by a gesture worthy of Solomon: whacking creativity into two types, the ordinary (little c) and the great (Big C).

Popular for more than seven decades, this distinction separates the cozy creativity—that domesticated companion who solves daily problems and tosses off witty remarks—from the scary kind, the mystical midwife of humanity's greatest art and ideas. Unlike little c, which is a universal plug-in, Big C requires a specific human vessel in which to flourish; it is sadistically elusive, despite the most urgent of invitations. It is also where the greatest madness supposedly lies.

Much of the Big C research has focused on people who are considered “eminent,” which presumes that public acclaim comes only to the talented (for an alternate view, see Hilton, Paris, and Kardashians, Any). Some scholars file all their subjects in the same drawer, despite the obvious differences in achievements and domains. For example, in Arnold Ludwig's widely cited *The Price of Greatness* (1995), the same factors that elevated Ernest Hemingway and George Gershwin in their respective fields are supposed to have boosted Henry Ford, Albert Einstein, and Martin Luther King in theirs. This seems reductionistic, at best. As psychiatrist William Frosch suggests in his discussion of creativity research,

The impulse to create and the skills necessary to each of the tasks are likely to differ. It may be that we are linking many kinds of acts because they are special and mystifying, not because they are the same.¹²

Big C was a major interest for Freud, who painted it with his usual limited palette of depression and discontent. His basic philosophy was this: once parents pour your mold and it sets, life becomes a constant struggle against its (always) uncomfortable fit. And so the very best that people can expect, even those who faithfully undergo psychoanalysis, the treatment he invented, is to replace their aberrant “hysterical misery” with the “common unhappiness” suffered by everyone else. In a universe that runs on pain, Freud reduces creativity to a consolation prize for the frustrated: