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Is originality crucial to creativity or is all creation in some sense recreation?

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Creativity is a frustratingly illusive term that is simultaneously understood and disputed by all who use it. Among its users adamantly sure of its meaning, the term conjures hugely disparate definitions on an individual basis. In an attempt to decipher this puzzling term, I suggest that the concept of creativity is something that tends to reside in close proximity to imaginativeness and oftentimes is synonymised with like notions such as innovation and invention. It is with these latter ideas that I take issue in this essay: the suggestion that originality is the definition of — or in some way a crucial aspect of — creativity.

In our society there is a common misconception that something being 'creative' has unequivocally to do with its being novel. The responsible party for the creativity therefore is its *creator*, someone who has invented something entirely new, a never-before-seen innovation. We automatically attribute invention with the accolade of creativity; one must possess a creative quality of mind to conceive of something individually and independently that others are yet to conceive of. However, is this to say that a creation — or more precisely a recreation — not born of originality is therefore defunct of creativity, or belonging to some lesser order of creativity? I aim to dispel the stigma attached to plagiaristic activity, not just in the literary world but in various walks of life, by questioning the originality of formerly unquestioned creations and proving that in spite of unoriginality — or in some cases *owing* to it — creativity is still very much in play and by no means negated by an absence of this quality. By doing this, I will demonstrate the inescapable probability that all creation is, in some sense, recreation.

It seems sensible to start with the etymology of the term 'originality' as its ironic nuances are of particular interest to me. As Ron Carter foregrounds in his book *Language and Creativity*, in addition to its definition of novelty, 'originality' also refers to the idea of a primary source, as in 'origins'. Carter goes on to explain, 'The word derives from Latin *origo*, meaning a rise or beginning or source… In terms of etymology, therefore, there is no sense of anything "new"' (Carter, 2004: 26). This somewhat self-contradictory meaning — if we consider that 'originality' simultaneously signifies something unique and something traceable back to a primary source — is far more apt in light of the discussion at hand, in describing the reality of all creations. If we consider, for example, Swiss Artist Paul Klee's famous quote, 'A line is a dot that went for a walk' (1964), in his autobiographical musings *The Diaries of Paul Klee*, we uncover very provocative food for thought on the subject of derivative invention, counter-intuitive though that phrase may sound, in regarding a line as a recreation of sorts. To entertain Klee's notion, imagine the dot to be the original thought and the line, inspired by this concept, a development of the idea; quite literally a progression. To extend this area of thought, we might consequently view the first drawing to be a continuation of thought surrounding the line; as Klee himself also articulated, drawing then

becomes much like taking a *line* for a walk. In accordance with simple logic such as this we are forced to question the origins of all creations, even those that we conceive of as inventions or innovations in their own right, not unlike the decidedly unremarkable line itself. Tenuous an argument as it may seem, this serves to demonstrate a crucial point: much of what we take for granted as original thought or invention has taken influence from what came before. As Klee also said, 'Art is like a tree. Nature is the root and the artist is the trunk who takes what the root offers and produces the treetop or work of art. They all are not the same but are part of the same thing' (1964). He analogises the recycling process that is responsible for one's own display of creativity in terms of nature, particularly apt when one considers that this process, like the biological activity of growth he likens it to, is inevitable, an unconscious act of human intuition. It is unfair, then, to declare that all reproduced materials are representative of a lesser order of creativity, especially when in many cultures it is considered a far greater skill to hone and revise existing ideas than to produce work of profound novelty.

In his book *Language and Creativity*, Carter (2004) emphasises the significance of culture on one's understanding of creativity, predominantly the division between individualist and collectivist cultures, or more specifically Western and Eastern locations. Carter establishes that in Eastern cultures, 'the skilled creator is thus as much an imitator as a creator' (Carter, 2004: 30) and describes how in some societies, 'conceptions of creativity are less focused on innovation and originality…and much more focused on the revisioning or remembering of existing ideas' (Carter, 2004: 30). Contrasting to these 'circular and restorative' (Carter, 2004: 30) movements, Western perceptions of creativity seem to predominantly involve progression: 'creative innovations constituting a new point of departure' (Carter, 2004: 30). This is perhaps because in Western cultures such as here in the UK, the concept of creativity is an almost selfish endeavour, placing emphasis on the self and personal glory, whereas the creativity valued in many non-Western contexts focuses on expressing 'mutuality and convergence' (Carter, 2004: 30). There are, of course, many exceptions to this rule, as there are with any over-generalisation of a group, and the intra-cultural variation in individualist versus collectivist values largely rejects this theory. Nonetheless, in the case of my discussion, it is a useful point for consideration that the definition of creativity might change this drastically based on personal values. In some instances, the originality, that is to say the perfect novelty, of something is not the deciding factor in its creative worth.

In my research I have found countless examples to support the theory that almost all creation — bar the possibly Divine creation of the universe — is in actuality recreation. Initially, of course, there is the most obvious example of unoriginality in creative circumstances: the reuse of plotlines. I decided to look at the adaptation of play to film recreations when investigating this area, selecting Shakespearean tales as prime candidates for this type of plagiaristic activity. Of the various examples available, the reuse of *Romeo and Juliet* (c.1597) and *Hamlet* (c.1603) were summoned within moments. The story of Hamlet is famously utilised in Walt Disney's animation *The Lion King* (1994) and the Romeo and Juliet-esque love affair is so familiar and commonplace it may as well be in the dictionary. In fact, it is: the New Collins Concise English Dictionary provides the following translation of '*Romeo — an ardent male lover [the hero of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet]*' (see bib.), coined as a direct consequence of what is arguably Shakespeare's most famous play. Disney's sequel animation *The Lion King II: Simba's Pride* (1998) utilises *Romeo and Juliet*'s plotline of lovers thwarted by their belonging to opposing sides, just as Jerome Robbins' 1961 play, and later film, *West Side Story* does, too. When pondering the merits of reinvigorating plotlines second-hand it is worth noting that people enjoy familiarity; it is deeply satisfying in comparison to novelty regardless that it may not be a ground-breaking example of ingenuity. However, given the plagiaristic origins of these creations, might we

question whether they, despite their popularity and fame, belong to a lesser order of creativity than the Shakespeare plays that preceded them? On this note, it is of great importance to consider Shakespeare's own inspiration for his acclaimed works of mastery. Crucially, and unbeknown to most, Shakespeare himself is a criminal of plagiarism, said of *Romeo and Juliet* to have actually based the play 'on other material, particularly a narrative poem by Arthur Brooke entitled The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet (1562)' (Gottlieb, 2001). The famous theme of predestined lovers can in fact be traced back to its origins in 'Western legend: Troilus and Cressida, Tristan and Isolde, to name only two such pairs' (Gottlieb, 2001). Given the *Oxford Dictionaries* definition of originality as 'the quality of being novel or unusual' (see bib.), we are then forced at a technical level to reject the originality of one of the greatest writers of the literary canon, but are we forced also to question his creativity? I personally do not believe so, nor do I believe that Shakespeare's works are any less deserving of their enduring and unfailing acclaim and popularity. What Shakespeare, Disney and Robbins do — just like most writers, artists and inventors — is reinvigorate existing ideas, absorb and remould what is known to produce something that we might perceive as unknown. This concept parallels precisely with the allegory that Klee proposes: in the way a tree transforms with the nourishment of its soil, so too the fruits of our knowledge ripen, we become wiser and this wisdom has a practical application in our creative endeavours. Creators like the aforementioned use their imagination, another vital component in the measure of creativity, taking inspiration from the world around them. Artist and author Shaun Tan demystifies his process of writing utilising this interpretation of originality as a process of transformation rather than invention, asserting 'What is original is not the ideas themselves, but the way they are put together. The fact that we recognise anything at all would seem to indicate that this is the case — a truly original ideal would probably be so unfamiliar as to be unreadable, an impenetrably alien artefact.' (Tan, 2001: 4).

What Tan delicately alludes to is the necessity of pre-existing schematic knowledge — such that might effect unoriginality — to our understanding and appreciation of all creative works respectively, also referred to as the Cognitive Approach to creativity. This approach comprises a large proportion of my questioning if originality is fundamental to creativity for precisely the reason that Tan elucidates: schemata are vital to the recognition of creativity. When we watch, read or experience something we retrieve the relevant schemata to facilitate our understanding. If we are able to do this then parts of what we are attempting to understand must have been cognised and stored on a previous occasion and therefore cannot be considered truly original to us. The chances that a person would be unable to access some existing knowledge on a 'new' creation presented to them are about as likely as that person having lived in total darkness, solitary confinement and never having mastered the human language — it is expected and usual that we are able to make these kind of connections. Metaphorically speaking, if the knowledge we acquire is considered to be puzzle pieces, and the more we learn the more pieces we possess, then when we come to create something, or put a puzzle together, it can only be using the pieces we have. We might come up with any number of possible arrangements and yield innumerable puzzles, but ultimately we are using the same building blocks, or rather puzzle pieces, to get there. This is the very phenomenon I indicate in my suggestion that all creation is, realistically speaking, recreation and it is my grounds for disputing the importance of originality in the perception of creativity. Originality in its most genuine sense is something rare to behold; as Fran Lebowitz (1994: 192) says, 'Original thought is like original sin: both happened before you were born to people you could not possibly have met.' Thus, the suggestion that we have ever been witness to true originality is akin to suggesting that we were present for the creation of the world. We are, however, well acquainted with creativity, as I will go on to demonstrate.

Continuing with the aforementioned puzzle analogy, I turn to the field of musical creation and Johann Pachelbel's Canon in D Major in particular. In musician and comedian Rob Paravonian's enlightening YouTube video 'Pachelbel Rant' (see bib.), he exposes the plagiaristic truth of the majority of the music we know and love. Pachelbel's Canon consists of a three chord progression in a very repetitive cycle: DABF#GDGA, and as Rob demonstrates, innumerable songs use these very same chords in this exact order, exemplifying the puzzle-making technique I described, whereby creation is a process of transformation, or even rearrangement, of existing knowledge. Rob begins to play Pachelbel's famous composition and hums the tune, continuing to play the same melody as he switches orally from song to song, producing a compilation including 'Let it Be' by The Beatles, 'No Woman No Cry' by Bob Marley, 'With or Without You' by U2 and 'Sk8er Boy' by Avril Lavigne, to name but a few. What he does is contest the individuality that we blithely attribute to of all these songs: they all *sound* different, are *about* different things, *written* by different people, so they are all unique, right? Wrong. The tried and tested DABF#GDGA reappears over and over again because it works; it is melodic and people like it. Would we question the creativity of The Beatles or Bob Marley simply because we can trace back the origins of the chord-structure of their music? Doubtful. Borrowing in this way is like starting with the edge pieces of the puzzle; you might know to do this (representative of the existing schemata) but how you fill in the middle is representative of your own intelligence and creativity, the true evidence of your imagination. This is not cheating any more than it is to use the picture on the front of the puzzle box as a guide in putting it together: with no initial idea of the finished product how, realistically, do you go about putting it together?

Like the undetected monotony of a surprising proportion of music, the concept of a parody is a particularly apt way to demonstrate not just creativity in *spite* of pre-existing knowledge but as a direct consequence of it. To continue with the subject of Divine creation, which I touched upon earlier, Monty Python's *The Life of Brian* (1979) is a religious satire retelling the story of Christ and the crucifixion that relies heavily on the viewer's foreknowledge of the biblical story in order to manipulate this to comical effect. The deviation present in the film that establishes it as a parody occurs due to the viewer's retrieval of the appropriate schemas and the subsequent schema refreshment, whereby 'the schema itself is radically reconceptualised' (Mullany & Stockwell, 2010: 91). Thus the comedic product, whilst achieved in a fashion that deviates from the norm, is still reliant on a common understanding of norms to be successful in its intentions. Despite the parody's reliance on a derivative plot, they are still highly inventive compositions regardless of this plagiaristic quality. Consider, for example, the famous crucifixion scene in *The Life of Brian* when Brian breaks into a morbid yet amusing debut performance of 'Always look on the bright side of life' (Idle, 1979). To grasp the irony of this scene you do need to appreciate the original story of the crucifixion and the distressing cruelty of the event, but the idea to totally capsize the emotion evoked by that moment, and the song written to achieve this, were ideas born entirely of creativity and not in the least relegated by their association with the Christian Story: on the contrary, this deviation only serves to enhance the creative yield.

Further to the necessity of existing knowledge in the appreciation of creativity, it becomes highly relevant to introduce the work of Leonardo Da Vinci, among countless other innovators like Galileo, whose genius was celebrated only posthumously when it could finally be appreciated. Da Vinci's greatest contributions to science and astrology went largely undervalued or altogether rejected due to ignorance and unfamiliarity surrounding his ideas at the time they were conceived and the originality of his ideas were largely to blame for this grave disregard of his brilliance. Despite being a scientist, mathematician, and astronomer, Da Vinci was and is primarily regarded as an artist, his most famous works including the

Mona Lisa and The Sistine Chapel. In actuality his legacy is that of a pioneer in science: Da Vinci made discoveries in anatomy, astronomy (proving correct Copernicus' theory that the Earth orbits the Sun), flight and gravity. In fact, given the significance of his findings, he is considered to have 'invented' the bicycle, aeroplane, helicopter, and parachute some five hundred years before their time. His validation of the heliocentric theory of the solar system was rejected because until that time, people had believed the earth to be of a fixed position in space whilst the sun orbited around and the church also discarded his findings on a count of heresy. To use Tan's words, Da Vinci's discoveries were 'impenetrable' thanks to their completely novel quality. No one could appreciate his creative genius in anything other than his artwork — something familiar and thus easily appreciated — until a time when additional knowledge illuminated the intellectual brilliance of his findings. For example, when modern aviation was born in December 1903 and transformed travel and communication, the Wright brothers took a bow but the concept, at an elemental level, had been Da Vinci's. This is not to say the event was any less of a revolution or indeed innovation but that the seed had been planted by Da Vinci long before in a time when nobody believed air travel possible. Once the appropriate means and materials had been established some four hundred years later, the idea could evolve. The Wright brothers deserve to be credited with no less genius than they were simply because the concept was not born of impeccable originality; this would be quite ridiculous. Indeed, 'many machine elements in modern motorized toothbrushes can be found in Leonardo's manuscripts. But no one will claim Leonardo invented these toothbrushes' (Moon, 2007: 279). Simply put, when Da Vinci's ideas were original they were utterly incomprehensible to people without the aid of knowledge schemas to fathom them, but once originality had been overcome the way to appreciating his creativity was clear.

We are beginning to see how originality and creativity — despite their intimate relationship in dictionary domains — are not an inseparable couple after all. In fact, it is suggested by Krausz et al. (2009) that neither are vital aspects of artistic value; instead, 'Where an artist's creativity results in a valuable innovation…assessing the value of the work itself depends only on grasping the artistic qualities realised through the innovation and neither on the originality nor the creativity of the artistic activity that brought that innovation about' (Krausz et al., 2009: 230). Krausz et al. argue that neither originality nor creativity are the crucial factors in artistic creation but are merely facilitative tools utilised by the recipient to realise the subject's true artistic merits. Figuratively speaking, originality and creativity are both small constituents of a much bigger picture; neither is the picture itself — they simply help to illuminate it.

Personally, whilst I appreciate their perspective, I believe both creativity and originality are a merit, and a significant one at that, that we are always contemplating when regarding a work of invention, whether that be a book, a painting or the latest advance in technology. Creativity does not just occur in spite of pre-existing knowledge, it frequently *necessitates* it; as Tan asserts, something of which we have absolutely no prior knowledge or understanding would be entirely impenetrable to us and thus true originality would actually seem to obstruct the appreciation of creativity, as we have seen in the case of Leonardo Da Vinci. Though computer software, the internet and dictionaries alike inevitably generate originality as a synonym for creativity when this search is instructed, I would argue that my discussion has indicated that the two are far from synonymous and cannot accurately be used to define one another. The relationship between them seems at best to be unreciprocated; whilst the incidence of originality almost intrinsically implicates the act of creativity, the same cannot be said of the incidence of creativity.

In conclusion, I must concur with Tan that when endeavouring to produce work of creativity, 'It's not about the colonisation of new territory, it's about exploring inwards, examining your existing presumptions, squinting at the archive of experience from new

angles, and hoping for some sort of revelation' (Tan, 2001: 9). Not only is originality not crucial to creativity but my investigation into the sources of technological, literary, musical and comical invention would suggest that all of what we perceive as novel creation has actually, in however minute a sense, been influenced by the preceding work of others. We do not consider parody, song, technology or film any less a creative contribution for their utilisation of schemas of pre-existing knowledge, as we ourselves must access these very schemas in the process of comprehension, demystification and, fundamentally, of enjoyment. In the spirit of Klee, therefore, I conclude that in the act of creating we are all in some sense 'taking a line for a walk'; it just happens that we all select different routes and, though we might cross paths along the way, we all terminate in different locations.

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