Creativity, Virtue and the Challenges from Natural Talent, Ill-Being and Immorality

MATTHEW KIERAN

1. Introduction

We praise and admire creative people in virtually every domain from the worlds of art, fashion and design to the fields of engineering and scientific endeavour. Picasso was one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century, Einstein was a creative scientist and Jonathan Ive is admired the world over as a great designer. We also sometimes blame, condemn or withhold praise from those who fail creatively; hence we might say that someone's work or ideas tend to be rather derivative and uninspired. Institutions and governmental advisory bodies sometimes aspire, claim or exhort us to enable individual creativity, whether this is held to be good for the individual as such or in virtue of promoting wider socio-economic goods. It is at least a common thought that people are more self-fulfilled if they are creative and society more generally is held to be all the better for enabling individual creativity.[1]

In what follows I shall outline a virtue theoretic account of exemplary creativity that makes sense of how and why we think in this way.[2] If we are interested in a robust account of creative excellence we need to look at the underlying psychological mechanisms that enable individuals to be imaginative, surprising or original (and those which undermine them). I will suggest that what it is to be a

[1] See, for example, 'All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education', *Report to the Secretary of State for Education and Employment and the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport*, May 1999, National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education.

[2] See in this light in particular Linda Zagzebski, 'Exemplarist Virtue Theory', *Metaphilosophy* **41** (1–2), 2010, 41–57, as well as Jason Baehr, *The Inquiring Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) and Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood, *Intellectual Virtues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007) for distinct but related conceptions of intellectual virtue.

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creatively excellent person depends – amongst other things – upon certain admirable character traits such as curiosity, courage and perseverance. Creative virtues are admirable character traits that ground creative excellence and contribute to individual flourishing. Once the view is laid out the rest of the paper will be devoted to apparent objections to this view emerging from the psychological and philosophical literature: challenges based on claims concerning natural talent, ill-being and immorality.

2. Creativity and Virtue

It is an intellectual orthodoxy that creativity requires the production of something novel and valuable.[3] How to disambiguate novelty and value is much disputed but virtually everyone agrees that creativity must meet these conditions. According to Boden, psychological creativity involves 'coming up with a surprising, valuable idea that's new to the person who comes up with it.'[4] Thus we can recognize that a 6 year old's drawings or a student's essay are psychologically creative – produce something of value and novel to them – without thereby making any grand claims about historical originality. Historical creativity, Boden argues, just is a special case of psychological creativity. If an idea is historically creative then at its strongest 'that means that (so far as we know) no one else has had it before: it has arisen for the first time in human history.'[5] Moreover a creative person is someone who possesses the agential skills, abilities and dispositions that enable creative thought and action.[6] Thus a psychologically robust characterization of creativity needs to give an account of the kind of mechanisms and traits that enable people to be creative. We are also naturally interested in what constitutes and enables creative excellence. We praise and admire those who excel

[3] See, for example, Margaret Boden, *The Creative Mind: Myths and Mechanisms*, 2nd ed., (London: Routledge, 2004), 1, Berys Gaut, 'Creativity and Imagination' in Berys Gaut and Paisley Livingston (eds.) *The Creation of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003), 151, Richard E. Mayer, 'Fifty Years of Creativity Research', in Robert J. Sternberg (ed.), *Handbook of Creativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 450 and Dustin Stokes, 'Minimally Creative Thought', *Metaphilosophy*, **42**, 2011, 658–681.

[4] Margaret Boden, 'Creativity in a Nutshell', in *Creativity and Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 30.

[5] Op. cit. Boden note 2.

[6] Op. cit. Gaut and Stokes note 2.

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creatively – precisely because so doing is a particular kind of achievement – and many of us strive to be more creative at what we do.

Minimally to be a creative person requires drawing on the kinds of knowledge, capacities and skills that for creatures like us are required to arrive at purposively or realize non-accidentally that which is new and worthwhile in a given domain. At least for creatures such as ourselves certain traits of mind or character are also required in order to a) acquire such knowledge, capacities and skills and b) in order to deploy such knowledge, capacities and skills appropriately in the face of different challenges across many different kinds of situations over time to arrive at or realize that which is new and valuable. The relevant traits include dispositions of mind or character that are admirable or praiseworthy (i.e. virtues).[7]

To take one example Van Gogh was an exemplary creative person to the degree that he persevered at his art despite lack of support, formal training and the challenges he faced in acquiring the technique required to paint as he desired. He was also extremely resilient in coping with indifference and failure, showed courage in persevering despite much criticism and showed great critical self-honesty in identifying his own weaknesses and what he needed to work on. Moreover, Van Gogh's curiosity and open mindedness explain the ways in which he sought out non-orthodox artistic styles, experimenting and exploring their various effects in arriving at his mature style. Had Van Gogh lacked curiosity, critical self-honesty, perseverance and fortitude, amongst other traits, it is hard to see how he could have acquired the skills required to achieve what he did (especially given he showed no great talent to start with). Even given the requisite skills it is hard to see how Van Gogh would have used them to achieve what he did without resilience and courage in the face of critical indifference and derision. Whilst Van Gogh may be an extreme case in his exemplarity, a creative saint if you like, this is no different in kind from less extraordinary cases. At least to the extent someone is creatively ambitious, she should seek to be, amongst other things, critically self honest about where weaknesses in technique or argument lie, resilient in the face of failure, humble enough to take criticism, courageous enough to stand up to contempt or ridicule, curious enough to explore new problems and solutions. Such traits are creative virtues in the sense that they are admirable or praiseworthy excellences of mind or character

[7] See Matthew Kieran, 'Creativity as a Virtue of Character' in Scott Barry Kaufman and Elliot Samuel Paul (eds.), *The Philosophy of Creativity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 125–144.

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that enable creative achievement in the face of different challenges or pressures as one's life unfolds.

It is consistent with the view that people can be creative whilst lacking such virtues. Creativity as such is not a virtue. People can get very lucky, act out of character or the inter-action between someone's non-virtuous character and particular situational pressures may be highly conducive to doing something creatively. We may admire such achievements in all sorts of ways but the creative character manifested will be less than fully exemplary. Moreover, in such cases, it will be the case that the relevant person will not tend to strive for or be able to achieve creative excellence robustly across relevantly different kinds of situations. Hence, at least to the extent one is creatively ambitious, it is best to acquire and strive to realize creative virtues to enable creative achievement. If you can only commit to working on or realizing that which meets with popularity, then it will be difficult, at least in many situations, to do something that is significantly new and worthwhile. Why? Since doing so often meets with criticism, indifference or incredulity given that being creative involves being unconventional, going against that which is fashionable or confounding people's expectations.

Consider Thom Yorke on making Radiohead's breakthrough album:

> [TY] When people rip each other off but don't add anything original to the equation, it's painful because you can hear the anxiety of the creator wanting to be loved. . . everybody goes through that period of imitating other things because you're worried, you want to be liked.
>
> [Interviewer] When do you think you were liberated from that?
>
> [TY] *The Bends*. For the first time ever, we had two months just working on 12 tunes, not seeing anybody, and that was all we did. We went into the studio with John Leckie and the A&Rs and management would turn up, and say, 'Where's the hits?' There was a half-hour period following that where everyone wobbled and then we were like, 'F**k you! You're banned!' and we pulled out all the phones. Then the anxiety was gone. The excitement of it being our choice and the fact that no one else was making songs like us was liberating.[8]

This is no different from other areas of life. Whilst it may be easy to be honest where the environment presents no difficulties and being so

[8] Tim Noakes, 'Splitting Atoms: Thom Yorke Interview', *Dazed and Confused*, February, 2013.

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always leads to approval or social inclusion, it is more difficult to be honest where it meets with rejection. Similarly, whilst fortitude or perseverance may not always be required when everything is going well, nonetheless across a range of situations such traits are required to confront various kinds of challenges (e.g., where we face ridicule, boredom, difficulty, repeated failure, anxiety and self doubt).

What might a taxonomy of the cluster of creative virtues look like? Curiosity is perhaps the master virtue required for creative excellence. Why think this? Due to the role that novelty plays. In general curiosity involves the disposition to learn and understand, to play, to make, experience or master something new in ways which drives the identification of questions worth asking or tasks worth approaching. Amongst other things curiosity motivates people to consider how problems can be conceptualized differently, why things may not be better done otherwise and set new problems or challenges for themselves. Hence curiosity is bound up with the desire to explore, experiment and acquire the mastery that is required to be creative. Perseverance is also required. Curiosity devoid of perseverance would incline someone to give up when the going gets tough. Creative excellence requires hard work and thus the disposition to be steadfast in persisting purposefully in the face of difficulties or discouragement. Idle curiosity does not get anyone very far. A distinct but related creative virtue is courage. Whilst this may be obvious in the face of oppression courage is often required to face up to indifference, ridicule, derision or other pressures in the pursuit of creative vision and goals. Creative failures of nerve are sometimes just a matter of being too afraid to face up to or deal with anticipated negative responses. Resilience too is an important creative virtue given the need to cope with misfortune, hardship, challenges and failure. Self-belief or assurance combined with perseverance, courage and resilience enable curiosity to flourish across the many different challenges and set backs that arise in striving to be creative. Whilst courage and resilience may both be bound up with self-belief such assurance had better not be deluded in ways that block openness or receptivity to criticism. Thus humility is also required in order to be open to the possibility of error, deficiencies or inadequacy. A closely related virtue is critical self-honesty about what one is doing and why. It is one thing, for example, to know that pursuing acclaim for its own sake may be problematic, it is quite another to realize and acknowledge that one has been so motivated.

In addition to creative virtues being admirable and causally enabling creative achievement there is also reason to hold that they contribute toward living a good life. They most obviously enhance

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what an agent can achieve in at least two ways. First, where an agent is driven to question, strive for imaginative approaches and seek new solutions she is more likely to achieve more worthwhile results in a given domain. Second, creative virtues render an agent's creativity more robust across situational differences (for the reasons given above). Putting matters this way gives a rather consequentialist flavour to the role that creative virtue plays in a good life. Creative virtue gets better results and better results give rise to a better life (at least in so far as one values bringing about better results in some given domain). Whilst true enough there is, however, more to the idea than this. The possession and exercise of creative virtue inherently contributes to leading a happier, more fulfilled life.

A very direct route to this claim would be to identify creative activity as pleasurable especially where this is undertaken for its own sake. Csikszentmihalyi argues that creative activity paradigmatically involves what he terms 'flow' experiences where an agent is, amongst other things, maximally absorbed in an activity pursued for its own sake (at least given that the challenges posed are finely balanced in relation to the agent's skill level).[9] This lends itself to the thought that creative virtue does not just lead to better results but gives rise to greater enjoyment in the creative activity itself. A more enjoyable life is, ceteris paribus, a happier, more fulfilling life.

However, whilst significant, the joy to be had in creative activity may rate pretty low down on the hedonic scale – at least for some – given how mundane and frustrating much creative activity is. Moreover the pleasure to be had is often highly dependent upon the recognition of the value of achievement and how one is implicated in it. We take, for example, greater pride in cases where we have come up with an original idea ourselves as opposed, say, to executing another's original idea. We also take pride in activity involving courage, resilience, perseverance or resistance to taking an easy route. It is a familiar point that hypothetical experience machine cases – *Matrix* style simulations of pleasurable experiences and successful lives – are unsatisfactory because the achievements are not real. There is no contact with underlying reality.[10] It is a less familiar though surely equally significant point that what matters is not just that the achievements are real but the extent to which they manifest

[9] See Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996) and his 'Happiness and Creativity', *The Futurist*, September-October, 1997, 8–12.

[10] This is the point of Robert Nozick's experience machine thought experiment in *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books), 42–45.

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our capacities and excellences of character. A good or flourishing human life involves activity that exercises and cultivates human capacities and traits for the right sort of reasons in praiseworthy or admirable ways. In so far as cultivating creative capacities and excellences of character tend toward the production of worthwhile things in good ways they will be conducive to happiness or flourishing. In other words to the extent that someone is creatively excellent they will tend to thrive and be more fulfilled in doing what they do well.

I have briefly sketched a conception of exemplary creativity that yields a psychologically explanatory account of what it is to be a creatively excellent person that speaks to intuitions about why the relevant traits are admirable and praiseworthy. There is also some reason to think that possessing creative virtue partly constitutes and tends toward the realization of a more fulfilled life. In what follows we will look at three distinct challenges that put pressure on conceiving of exemplary creativity in this way.

3. The Natural Talent Attribution Error

Mozart was a composer in childhood, Picasso's drawings at the age of thirteen were truly exceptional and Mary Shelley started writing *Frankenstein* when she was nineteen. Creative excellence can easily seem to be something that only a relative few can achieve because it depends upon exceptional natural gifts or talents. There is, moreover, a strong intellectual tradition that holds natural (or unnatural) talent is the major source of creative genius. Plato's *Ion* characterizes creativity as the upshot of divine inspiration[11], Dryden used 'genius' to denote a 'gift of Nature' that 'must be born, and never can be taught'[12], Immanuel Kant considered genius to be 'the talent (natural endowment) that gives the rule to art'[13] and Francis Galton took his studies to show that genius really is a matter of heredity.[14] Even at the most minimal level natural talent or endowment is standardly taken to explain creative achievements. A widely cited survey of music teachers found that three-quarters of those surveyed believed that children could not do well at music unless they

[11] Plato's *Ion*, 533c9–535a2, has Socrates characterizing poets as being akin to prophets in being non-rationally, divinely inspired.

[12] John Dryden, *Epistle to Congreve*, 1693, l. 60.

[13] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, Section 46.

[14] Francis Galton, *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry Into Its Laws and Consequences* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1869).

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had special, innate gifts (and the teachers selected pupils on this basis).[15] Indeed, the identification of creative excellence with natural talent underlies a wide variety of programmes aimed at picking out naturally gifted children to enhance their creative potential. There is not much point, the challenge goes, in encouraging everyone to be creatively excellent or virtuous, given that, at least for most people, creative potential is naturally somewhat limited. Moreover, if all that is required for creative excellence is talent plus hard work it is unclear what significant role if any the creative virtues as conceived above have to play. In what follows I will argue that the presumption that creative excellence requires exceptional natural talents is flawed. This is not to deny that natural gifts have a role to play. Nonetheless, most possess at least some creative potential that can be cultivated more or less excellently.

One influential line of thought holds that human beings are naturally curious about the world. Even at a basic developmental level we tend to delight in the development and exercise of our intellectual, practical and creative capacities. This provides the platform from which more skillful creative thought and activity can be cultivated. Thus some have argued that the fundamental problem may lie with educational systems that 'teach to test' alongside associated work or organizational practices.[16] According to Sir Ken Robinson teaching to test tends to alienate us from some of the natural pleasures to be had in learning for ourselves, stifle curiosity and undermine the psychological importance of learning being its own reward. Some work in developmental psychology seems to suggest that children would be much more curious and creative were it not for certain pedagogical practices. In other words pedagogy structured toward passing standardized tests that focus on narrow skill and knowledge sets may tend to stifle curiosity. By way of illustration in one experiment children exposed to direct pedagogical demonstration seemed to focus almost exclusively on the illustrated function of an object. By contrast children merely presented with an object tended to engage much more in wider exploration and were thus more likely to discover new information.[17] In a related but distinct experiment one group of children were presented with a recognized knowledgeable teacher

[15] M. Davis, 'Folk Music Psychology', *The Psychologist*, **7** (12), 1994, 537.

[16] See Ken Robinson, *Out of Our Minds: Learning to Be Creative* (Oxford: Capstone, 2001).

[17] Elizabeth Bonawitz, Patrick Shafto, Hyowon Gweon, Noah D. Goodman, Elizabeth Spelke and Laura Schulz, 'The Double-Edged

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who demonstrated action sequences leading to a particular outcome whereas a distinct group were presented with a naïve demonstrator. Those children in the naïve demonstrator condition were far more likely to find new shorter action sequences to the same outcome i.e. find a new solution.[18] It might thus be thought that enhancing people's creativity depends less upon exceptional talent and more upon reforming pedagogical and socio-institutional practices that undermine the creative potential of many.

Whilst there is much to this line of thought we should take care before generalizing from the idea that pedagogical practices may undermine exploratory learning and curiosity at developmental stages to the idea that everyone would otherwise naturally be much more creative than they are. First, the experimental evidence is itself rather mixed.[19] Second, even if in developmental terms creativity naturally seems to emerge as an upshot of curiosity, playfulness and problem solving, nonetheless exploratory play and curiosity are costly. Once we know how to meet our needs and take on projects that cost time, energy and commitment, it might be quite natural for open-ended curiosity and playfulness to diminish.[20] For many purposes it is often easier to seek out the testimony or know-how of others. We quite rightly value predictability and good enough competence (as opposed to originality and excellence) in many things. Hence, above a certain level of competence, creative apathy – at least with respect to most things – may be a very natural state of affairs indeed.

What this points to is a need to distinguish natural (or the natural basis for) creativity from acquired creative virtue. Natural creativity may emerge as an upshot of development that enables us to master

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Sword of Pedagogy: Instruction Limits Spontaneous Exploration and Discovery', *Cognition*, **120** (3), September, 2011, 322–330.

[18] Daphna Buchsbaum, Alison Gopnik, Thomas L. Griffiths, Patrick Shafto, 'Children's Imitation of Causal Action Sequences is Influenced by Statistical and Pedagogical Evidence', *Cognition*, **120** (3), September 2011, 331–340.

[19] See Angeline S. Lillard, Matthew D. Lerner, Emily J. Hopkins, Rebecca A. Dore, Eric D. Smith and Carolyn M. Palmquist, 'The Impact of Pretend Play on Children's Development: A Review of the Evidence', *Psychological Bulletin*, **139** (1), 2013, 1–34.

[20] See Alison Gopnik, *The Philosophical Baby* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009) for the idea that our adult minds tend to become comparatively more attention focused, project driven, inhibited and conservative.

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our physical and social environment. Acquired creativity – the kind of creativity upon which creative excellence depends - involves cultivating the expertise and traits required to excel in a given domain. Perhaps acquired creativity only speaks to the desires of a minority (though I suspect many if not most people would desire to be more creative given the right kind of opportunities). If this is right, then the claim that everyone would be more creative were it not for certain pedagogical and organizational practices might be too strong. Nonetheless, even if that claim is too strong, creative achievement, as we shall see, is non-accidentally tied to the cultivation of virtues and need not require exceptional talent.

Whilst Van Gogh is acknowledged as a master of twentieth century art, going from mere novice to greatness in ten years flat, what is less remarked upon is the fact that he was not particularly talented to start with. A felicity for calligraphic ink drawing apart, Van Gogh's initial work was extremely crude, clumsy and flat. As the art critic Robert Hughes puts it:

> Anyone could have been forgiven for looking at his early work and passing it by. Perhaps no artist who got as good as Vincent has ever started out so bad. Not just bad, but worthy bad, which is (if anything) worse. Even today, you'd hardly want one as a present, unless it was from someone you didn't want to offend. Those dogged, I-share-your-suffering images of ground-down peasant women and Dutch cloggies grouped around the sacramental potato, done in glum, awkward homage to Jean-François Millet and English social-consciousness painters such as Luke Fildes, all testify that sincerity, on its own, is not an artistic virtue. Gazing at early Van Gogh, at that murky stuff from the mid-1880s, you thirst for some signs of style - and there are none, or none that count.[21]

Van Gogh is far from being an aberration. To cite a few artistic case studies, Francis Bacon's naturalistic figuration was poor, much of Jackson Pollock's career consisted in underwhelming pastiches of others and Mark Rothko's early work suggested a modest talent at best. Closer to home, in a period of four years the Sistema Scotland project took Raploch in Scotland, one of the most deprived council estates in the U.K., from a position where one child on the estate was learning a musical instrument to a full blown orchestra consisting of 450 children (80% of the primary age youngsters on the estate).

[21] Robert Hughes, 'The Genius of Crazy Vinnie', *The Guardian*, Thursday, 27 October, 2005.

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Indeed the children's orchestra attained what might seem intuitively to be an unbelievably high level as demonstrated by its various public performances, including the opening public performance of the London 2012 Olympics festival with the Simón Bolívar Symphony Orchestra of Venezuela.[22] The phenomenon of great creative achievement emerging from unpromising or naturally modest beginnings is far from restricted to the artistic domain. Darwin was thought by his family and teachers to be 'a very ordinary boy, rather below the common standard in intellect'[23], Edison was famously considered stupid by his teacher, the young Einstein was thought to be slow, later being rejected by the Zurich Polytechnic School, and the Nobel laureates Luis Alvarez and William Shockley were both turned down, at different times, from the same research programme because their IQ scores were too low for them to count as gifted.

What enables those who aren't especially naturally gifted to become exemplars of creativity? A wide ranging in depth interview study of 120 highly achieving individuals in music, art, academics and sport foregrounds several factors including introduction in a playful manner at a young age alongside significant practical and emotional support.[24] Immersion at a time when individuals develop a love or passion for the chosen domain is key. This foundation enables individuals to go on to the precision and integration stages crucial for excellence.[25] The study provides 'strong evidence that no matter what the initial characteristics (or gifts) of the individuals, unless there is a long and intensive period of encouragement, nurturance, education, and training, the individuals will not attain extreme levels of capability in these particular fields.'[26]

Consonant with this work empirical studies on the acquisition of high levels of expertise from music to chess suggest that extensive experience is required to attain reliably superior performance. The initial phase of the Sistema Scotland project, Raploch, started children playing string instruments five mornings a week at summer school and built from there. Thousands of hours of practice,

[22] Charlotte Higgins, 'Big Noise Orchestra's Classical Music Proves Instrumental in Social Change', *The Guardian*, Wednesday, 20th June, 2012, p. 1.

[23] *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin 1809–1882* (London: Collins, 1958), p. 28.

[24] Benjamin Bloom (ed.), *Developing Talent in Young People* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985).

[25] Lauren A. Sosniak, 'Phases of Learning' in op. cit. note 19, 409–438.

[26] Op. cit. note 19, 3.

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development and refinement are required to attain the level of expertise needed to be creatively excellent in most domains. Yet it is not just the sheer number of hours and dedication that matters. Only certain types of experience count toward significantly improved performance and creative excellence. The highest achieving performers spend the highest number of hours on *deliberate* practice.[27]

Why is deliberate practice required? Addressing tasks or challenges leads agents to focus on consciously attempting to generate and co-ordinate actions. Increased experience gives rise to increased automaticity that also brings a concomitant loss of conscious control and a hardened inability to adjust intentionally. The advantage of this process is that it yields enhanced automatic performance up to a certain level. The disadvantage is that once such processes are automatized further extensive experience fails to yield any significant improvement in performance above the level attained. *Deliberate* practice involves seeking out demanding tasks that require problem solving to combat the effects of automaticity and thus involve refining the cognitive and motor mechanisms required for continued improvement. Deliberate practice is required to acquire the independent motor and cognitive representational capacities for controlling, monitoring and evaluating creative performance. Indeed such improvements are associated with changes in the cortical mapping of musicians, enhanced finger flexibility, greater memory capacity, increased speed in the 'instinctive' representation of moves and skilled anticipation:

> Improvements are caused by changes in cognitive mechanisms mediating how the brain and nervous systems control performance and in the degree of adaptation of physiological systems of the body. . . Continued attempts for mastery require that the performer always try stretching performance beyond its current capabilities, to correct some specific weakness while preserving other successful aspects of function.[28]

Creative excellence is much more a function of immersion and the right kind of hard work than is commonly presumed. Furthermore,

[27] K. A. Ericsson, R. Th. Krampe and C. Tesch-Römer, 'The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance', *Psychological Review*, **100**, 1993, 363–406.

[28] K. A. Ericsson, 'The Influence of Experience and Deliberate Practice on the Development of Superior Expert Performance', in K. A. Ericsson, N. Charness, P. J. Feltovitch and R. R. Hoffman (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 700.

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working hard in the right kinds of ways and acquiring the kind of expertise required for developing creative excellence, which involves pushing at the limits of whatever creative stage one is at, requires the cultivation or possession of persistence, patience, curiosity, the desire to experiment, the courage to be open to failure, resilience, critical self honesty about where one's weaknesses lie and so on. It is no accident that Van Gogh, Darwin and Edison were, amongst other things, passionate, curious, courageous, critically self-honest, persistent and resilient, or that the Raploch children were immersed in a disciplined yet playful environment that cultivated passion, enjoyment in the activity for its own sake, persistence, resilience, aspiration, self-reliance and self-confidence.[29] The natural talent attribution error is the tendency to over attribute the role that natural talent plays in creative achievement and under attribute the role that immersion, the right kinds of deliberate practice and cultivating virtues plays in acquiring the abilities to be creatively excellent. Hence it is sometimes all too easy to underestimate people's creative potential and the extent to which they can be creative in some particular domain.

4. Creativity and Ill-Being

A distinct challenge arises from thinking that certain psychological disorders may be a 'price to be paid' for creative excellence. The association of creativity with depression, madness or melancholia reaches as far back as Aristotle and is most strongly identified with the Romantics. Contemporary culture draws upon and reinforces folk assumptions about the mad scientist or tortured artist whilst biographies of figures such as Van Gogh, Sylvia Plath or Alan Turing speculate about the links between the subject's mental condition and creativity. If creative excellence often non-accidentally depends upon psychological disorders, then it looks like creative achievement can be the workings of involuntary capacities and conditions that seem constitutive of ill-being. At least indirectly this may seem to put pressure on a virtue account of exemplary creativity given that a) the workings of such conditions and the capacities thereby enabled do not seem to be tied up with virtues of mind or character and b) such seem to undermine rather than promote well-being.

[29] See the Scottish Government Social Research Report, 'Evaluation of Big Noise, Sistema Scotland' (Edinburgh: Crown Copyright, Queen's Printer for Scotland, 2011).

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Why think there is such an interesting relation? The literature positing such relationships is vast so we will look at three of the most cited classic sources with respect to depression (given the most robust evidence for an association is taken to be between creativity and in particular bipolar depression).

The psychiatrist Arnold M. Ludwig studied 1004 biographies of historically eminent figures in various domains from the arts and sciences to business (identified via reviews from the *New York Times Book Review* 1960 – 1990).[30] As diagnosed the percentages of those suffering from some kind of mental disorder included 87% of poets, 77% of fiction writers, 51% of social scientists and 28% of natural scientists. The clinical psychologist Kay Jamison studied 36 major poets from Britain and Ireland in the period 1705–1805 including figures such as Blake, Byron, Shelley and Keats. Jamison retrospectively diagnosed over 50% of the poets identified as having suffered from mood disorders with thirteen (over 33%) probably suffering from manic depression. Six poets, including Clare and Cowper, were committed to madhouses or the lunatic asylum, ostensibly at least twenty times the committal rate of the general populace at the time.[31] In a separate study of forty-seven contemporary British writers and artists who had won major prizes in their fields, Jamison found 38% of the total sample had been treated for mood disorders with 63% of playwrights requiring some kind of treatment for depression and 33% of poets having been given medical treatment for depression (and the only ones requiring medical intervention for mania).[32] This study seems consonant with an earlier study by Nancy Andreason that found 80% of 30 creative writers identified had experienced significant depressive episodes compared with only 30% of 30 matched control subjects with similar IQs from normal jobs.[33]

There are grounds for skepticism. Retrospectively diagnosing historical figures with varying mental illnesses is a subfield in its own right (Van Gogh, for example, has been the subject of at least 30 differential diagnoses).[34] Yet we should be extremely cautious,

[30] Arnold M. Ludwig, *The Price of Greatness: Resolving the Creativity and Madness Controversy* (New York: Guildford Press, 1995), 149.

[31] Kay Redfield Jamison, *Touched with Fire: Manic Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament* (New York: Free Press, 1993), 61–72.

[32] Op. cit., 76.

[33] Nancy C. Andreasen, 'Creativity and Mental Illness: Prevalence Rates in Writers and Their First-Degree Relatives,' *American Journal of Psychiatry*, **144** (10), 1987, 1288–92.

[34] Dietrich Blumer, 'The Illness of Vincent Van Gogh', *American Journal of Psychiatry*, **159** (4), 2002, 519–526.

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especially in the realm of mental illness. Consider how difficult it is even in normal circumstances to reach diagnoses of mental illness. Clinical observation, exploratory therapy, background medical histories and a range of physical or psychological tests are often needed to arrive at initial diagnoses. A patient's response to initial treatment then provides the basis for diagnostic revision or refinement. Contrast this with the paucity of the right kind of information we typically have with respect to historical figures. Even with respect to more contemporaneous people, where there are often journals, more detailed records and the testimony of various friends or enemies, many clinicians would often be wary about identifying behaviour patterns as symptomatic of particular mental illness' on such a basis. Perhaps, to take the case cited, Van Gogh was just a particularly irascible, moody person driven by a passion for art, subject to poverty and the onset of disordered episodes prompted by drinking far too much absinthe.[35] In historical cases it can be hard to tell what condition someone really suffered from or indeed what constitutes cause and effect.

The sample for many such studies based on biographical materials are also subject to various kinds of selectional and informational biases.[36] One such is what I will term the 'Elizabeth Taylor effect'. Elizabeth Taylor the actress had eight marriages, suffered alcoholism, mental illness and was subject to religious conversion. Biographies, journalistic and television pieces on her life seem innumerable despite hardly anyone watching her movies any more. By contrast when the husband of Elizabeth Taylor the novelist, compared by Anne Tyler to Jane Austen and considered one of the best English novelists of the twentieth century by Kingsley Amis[37], approached a friend, the writer Elizabeth Jane Howard, to write a biography, Howard declined the offer since 'she led a life that contained very little incident.'[38] With respect to figures of comparative stature in the same field there is a natural tendency to cover and constantly return to the lives of those with highly dramatic personalities, relationships and events. This perhaps explains why the number of

[35] Ibid.

[36] Jonathan Hurlow and James H. MacCabe, 'Paradoxes in Creativity and Psychiatric Conditions', in N. Kapur (ed.), *The Paradoxical Brain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 289–300.

[37] Benjamin Schwarz, 'The Other Elizabeth Taylor', Books Section, Editor's Choice Column, *The Atlantic*, September 2007, http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2007/09/the-other-elizabeth-taylor/306125/.

[38] Neel Mukherjee, 'A Fiendish Mood: The Mid-Century Novels of 'the other Elizabeth Taylor', *Boston Review*, Jan/Feb 2008, Fiction Section, http://bostonreview.net/BR33.1/mukherjee.php.

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books covering Picasso's life far outweighs those covering the more straightforward Matisse. Creatively excellent but mundane lives tend to get far less attention than the wildly dramatic. Identifying achievers and their mental conditions via biographies or renowned stories may skew the sample toward dramatic lives rather than creatively excellent ones as such. Moreover, interviews and self-reports may be subject to worries about evidence distortion given that creative subjects' self-conception may be bound up with a rather romanticized notion of tortured, suffering artists. In different ages artists were often expected to behave as guildsmen or gentlemen scholars and may thus perhaps have conceived of themselves and acted rather differently. It could also be that behaviour taken to be indicative of mental illness might just be symptomatic of what is involved in striving for high achievement, breaking with social norms or being open to experience and a sensation seeker. Artists in contemporary society often work in far greater isolation than scientists, take greater risks, experiment with life more and are often expected to be romantic and moody. Many of these factors, rather than creativity as such, may show up directly or indirectly as exhibiting or resulting in behavior often associated with depressive illness. We also know that the poverty stricken tend to be disproportionately afflicted with mental illness and differential results from those in natural science through to poets may reflect such underlying life conditions i.e. perhaps poets tended to be poorer or less socio-economically secure. A higher incidence of mental illness in creative artists may be due to greater exposure to life conditions that precipitate mental illness rather than a function of any deeper intrinsic connection between mental illness and creativity. Alternatively perhaps writers are often drawn towards fiction or poetry in order to work through and ameliorate underlying psychological conditions or for reasons unrelated to what makes them creative.[39]

Whilst the above is hardly an exhaustive review of the evidence available it should give us pause for thought. On the evidence cited from some of the classic studies in the field there are good reasons to doubt there is a significant link between creativity and mental illness. Perhaps the idea that there is such a link taps into a socio-historically contingent conception of the artist as tortured genius but this may well be a damaging myth rather than reality.

[39] See Berys Gaut, 'Creativity and Rationality', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, **70** (3), 2012, 264–265 which makes many of these points and gives an extended treatment of this point in a closely related though perhaps less sceptical discussion of much of the same evidence.

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Nonetheless it does not follow that there is no reason to think there might be such a link. A recent investigation into scholastic achievement (not straightforwardly to be identified with creativity) and susceptibility to bipolar disorder used prospective data in a whole population cohort study.[40] The grades of all individuals who finished compulsory school in Sweden, aged 15–16 (class 9), from 1988 – 1997, were taken as a measure of scholastic achievement and were compared with hospital admission data for the individuals for psychosis from the ages of 17–31. Amongst the study's findings it turned out that those with excellent school performance were virtually four times more likely to be at risk from bipolar disorder than those with average grades (interestingly this was male specific). Let us, for the sake of argument, assume that, as with academic performance, something similar might show up with respect to creative achievement in this kind of study. If aspects intrinsic to mental illness are held to enhance rather than diminish people's creative capacities, then creative excellence may appear to be – at least sometimes – independent of virtue. Moreover, at least to the extent that creative achievement is enabled by conditions of ill-being then creative excellence might thus be the enemy of happiness rather than its hand servant.

So let us assume for the sake of argument that there is some link between creativity and mental illness. But in virtue of what we might ask? How might conditions of ill-being have psychological effects that promote creativity? A brief and non-exhaustive typology of mechanisms and benefits that may accrue might include:

i) Capacity enhancement. The workings of the imagination, pattern recognition and the capacity to generate associations often go into overdrive in mania phases of depression and schizophrenia. Jamison argues that the creative capacity of writers is enhanced due to mania's fluency, flexibility and connectivity of thought whilst mild depressive phases are suitable for critical editorial development.[41] In addition it could be that certain cognitive distortions associated with depression lend themselves to more creative conceptualization or expression.[42]

[40] James H. MacCabe, Mats P. Lambe, Sven Cnattingius, Pak C. Sham, Anthony S. David, Abraham Reichenberg, Robin M. Murray and Christina M. Hultman, 'Excellent School Performance at Age 16 and Risk of Bipolar Disorder', *British Journal of Psychiatry*, **196**, 2010, 109–15.

[41] Jamison op. cit., 105–118.

[42] Gaut op. cit., 265, and K. M. Thomas and M. Duke, 'Depressed Writing: Cognitive Distortions on the Work of Depressed and Non-

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ii) Framing enhancement conditions. Differences in negative background psychological states and vulnerabilities framing an agent's imaginative activity may lead to enhanced creativity. There is some evidence to suggest that just as social rejection may enhance creativity so too might dispositional vulnerability to negative emotions.[43] Whilst there are various competing explanations available at least one possibility might be that background negative emotional states may enhance alertness, focus and perception (as might be expected if negative emotional states are associated with threat identification).

iii) Enhanced rumination. Self-focused recursive thinking is associated with mania and depression.[44] It could be that self-concerned rumination aids creativity in certain circumstances, especially in domains such as art, literature or music where self-expression or psychological states are themselves often part of the subject matter.[45] By contrast we might add that ruminative self-concern might prove to be a distraction rather than a benefit in contrasting domains or activity. Rumination on one's sadness may enhance musical expression or the literary articulation of such in lyric poetry, whilst it may do nothing for one's ability to construct logical theorems or perform calculations.

iv) Enhanced motivation. Depression – at least in its milder forms or as someone comes out of a depressive state – may prompt people to address problems, dissatisfactions or underlying unhappiness and thus ultimately lead to more creative activity. Aversion to depressive states may,

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Depressed Poets and Writers', *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity and the Arts* **1** (4), 2007, 204–218.

[43] M. Akinola and W. B. Mendes, 'The Dark Side of Creativity: Biological Vulnerability and Negative Emotions lead to Greater Artistic Creativity', *Personality and Psychology Bulletin*, **34** (12), 2008, 1677–1686.

[44] Sharmin Ghaznavi and Thilo Deckersbach, 'Rumination in Bipolar Disorder: Evidence for an Unquiet Mind', *Biology of Mood and Anxiety Disorders*, 2012, **2** (2), 1–11.

[45] P. Verhaeghen, J. Joormann and R. Khan, 'Why We Sing the Blues: The Relation Between Self-Reflective Rumination, Mood and Creativity', *Emotion* **5**, 2005, 226–232.

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> at least where the cause is not perceived as being hopeless, prompt greater exertion to avoid staying in or sliding back into painful emotions. Thus depression may under certain circumstances lead people toward becoming more creative. By contrast mania is more particularly associated with excitability and a drive for novelty seeking which may enhance creative activity.[46]

However, even if there are such interesting links between creativity and mental illness note that the kind of connections as spelt out are indirect. It is not mental illness as such that enhances creativity but, putatively, certain underlying capacities or psychological states associated with mental illness. Moreover, depression and bipolar depression typically seem to be extremely bad for creativity (given depressed people tend to be aversive rather than approach orientated and distrust their judgement, capacities or worth). Virginia Woolf could barely write when depressed, Van Gogh was unable to paint when in seemingly similar states and Coleridge suffered a deeply paralyzing writer's block for years due to anxiety. Depression is associated with low self-worth and a marked tendency to jump to conclusions about the uselessness or futility of what one is doing. Such a state is hardly conducive to good judgement, perseverance or resilience in creative activity. Moreover in bipolar depression the depressive state oscillates with mania whilst being associated with high self-regard, systematic over-estimation about what is achievable and future orientated fantasizing. Such a state makes it much harder to judge what is worthwhile and tends toward the uptake of large numbers of tasks that typically remain incomplete. A manic phase in bipolar depression may tend to generate all sorts of wild ideas only a few of which may have anything worth developing. Even then, the generation of an idea is one thing, but working out which one to develop, having the perseverance to do so, the resilience to overcome set backs and the courage to expose the idea to peer or public evaluation is quite another. Neither the depressive or manic state typically seems conducive to the kind of judgement or perseverance tied up with creative excellence. There are particular points where milder episodes or manic phases on the rise to full blown mania may facilitate productivity through quicker information

[46] Alice W. Flaherty, 'Frontotemporal and Dopaminergic Control of Idea Generation and Creative Drive', *Journal of Comparative Neurology*, **493** (1), 2005, 147–153.

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processing or less need for sleep.[47] Yet it should be emphasized that the psychological conditions identified tend to undermine the ability to realize creative excellence with much stability or reliability, if at all, unless the conditions are manageable (which will itself be individually variable and often a huge achievement). Manic episodes are followed by depressive crashes and in clinical terms the aim is to prevent the mania in the first place (especially given the lack of responsiveness to anti-depressants). The point is that where someone's condition is not manageable – and such conditions tend to be deeply disordering and undermining of good functioning - then a disorder's contribution to someone's creative achievement will tend to be negative whilst any positive contribution will be extremely fragile and intermittent at best.

Creative excellence neither requires the possession of psychologically destabilizing conditions nor is guaranteed by such, especially given that such conditions typically undermine creative achievement. Moreover, making use of the benefits of any associated creative enhancements will typically require mastery, the right kind of motivation, curiosity, courage, perseverance and resilience amongst other things. In other words creative virtues have a crucial role to play in the exercise of judgement, deployment of skill, evaluation, purposiveness, exploration and development of an idea identified as worthwhile in order for the idea to be realized creatively. Doing so well depends upon and is facilitated by traits of mind and character such as persistence, the courage to overcome anxiety, the curiosity to experiment with and try out the idea in various ways and so on (indeed some of the virtues may be required to a greater degree than by normal subjects in particular cases where, for example, someone's depression is tied up with say anxiety and fear of failure).

We should not over romanticize the relationship between creativity and ill-being. If there is a significant link, which we have some reason to doubt, then it is a misfortune that creative capacities, where manageable, may be enhanced at particular times by conditions that synchronically tend to undermine psychological functioning and creative activity. This does not refute the idea that creative virtue tends towards a happier, more fulfilled life. It would, however, compromise or at least require refinement of the simple claim and should push us to think through matters in more detail. If the connection is a strong one then we might expect that, on the whole, creative people (or a

[47] Jonathan Hurlow and James H. MacCabe, 'Paradoxes in Creativity and Psychiatric Conditions', in N. Kapur (ed.), *The Paradoxical Brain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 291–3.

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significant sub section thereof) will tend to be less happy than those who are not. Nonetheless, this is consistent with creative people being more fulfilled to the extent that, other things being equal, they pursue and achieve something novel and worthwhile with their lives. Thus perhaps the kind of fulfillment that creativity aims for should come with a health warning. The successful pursuit of creative fulfillment may leave us prone to a potentially significant cost to happiness. Yet this remains consistent with the claim that a life of creative virtue still tends toward a more fulfilling life than many others. An unqualifiedly happy, flourishing creative life may require not just excellence but also good fortune.

5. The Challenge from Immorality

Creative excellence often seems closely tied to morally defective character traits. Infamously Bob Dylan stole extremely rare folk records from a friend, claiming he needed them for his musical development, and John Lennon once said 'you have to be a bastard to make it man and the Beatles were the biggest bastards on earth.'[48] More generally Feist's meta-analysis of empirical studies on personality and creative achievement from 1950–1995 found that

> Creative people are more autonomous, introverted, open to new experiences, norm-doubting, self-confident, self-accepting, driven, ambitious, hostile, and impulsive . . . [the] largest effect sizes are on openness, conscientiousness [negatively correlated], self-acceptance, hostility, and impulsivity.[49]

By far the most significant effect sizes are openness to experience, which seems consonant with the virtue account of exemplary creativity, and lack of conscientiousness, which seems in tension with it. Interestingly creative scientists came out with a stronger negative correlation to conscientiousness than non-creative scientists and creative people in the arts were found to be even less conscientious than creative scientists.

Now we should be rather wary of what exactly is being measured here. Conscientiousness measures range over indicators taken to

[48] As excerpted from a radio documentary on The Beatles, *Feedback*, Radio 4, BBC Radio 4, 20th August 2010.

[49] Gregory J. Feist, 'A Meta-Analysis of Personality and Scientific and Artistic Creativity', *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, **2** (4), 1998, 299.

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manifest a lack of honesty, disorganization, tendency to meet agreed deadlines and turning up to work. It is not obvious that such behaviours relate to the same trait. Why presume that disorganization is related to dishonesty? Moreover, perhaps some creative people score negatively on certain dimensions of conscientiousness due to a range of characteristics including achievement orientation, perfectionism, autonomy and norm variation. Plumbers or builders might tend to score just as negatively given they too tend to be autonomous, self-organized and operate under looser punctuality conventions (without thereby being dishonest).

However in a series of recent studies Gino and Ariely focus specifically on honesty.[50] Subjects were identified as more or less creative using a wide variety of measures such as self-description, self-report activities, accomplishments and self-report cognitive styles. The first study involved a visual perception task, a problem solving task and a multiple choice task where subjects could earn more by cheating. In the visual perception task, for example, subjects were shown 100 slides with squares divided diagonally with red dots either side. There were always more dots on the left side but in 50 slides (the measure of dishonesty) matters were more ambiguous thus affording opportunity for creative misinterpretation to yield greater pay off. The study found that 'the measures of creative personality were positively and significantly correlated with the level of dishonesty on each of the three tasks. . . We did not find evidence of a link between creativity and intelligence or a link between intelligence and dishonesty.'[51] The second study found that subjects subconsciously primed for creative thinking tended to cheat more in word tasks accruing small amounts of money. The third and fourth studies used creatively primed and non-primed subjects rolling dice where self-reported results accrued monetary rewards. Non-primed subjects reported an average dice roll of 3.5 whereas primed subjects reported an average of 5. In the fifth study subjects identified as more dispositionally creative were not significantly affected by creative primes with respect to either creative performance or dishonest behaviour. Thus, the authors argue, dispositionally creative people do not need a creative prime to be more creative or dishonest than normal subjects. Exactly what is going on remains unclear. It could be that creativity in such a scenario is bound up with imaginativeness,

[50] Francesca Gino and Dan Ariely, 'The Dark Side of Creativity: Original Thinkers Can Be More Dishonest', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **102** (3), 2012, 445–459.

[51] op. cit., 449.

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risk taking, competitiveness, self-interest or some admixture thereof whilst apparent dishonesty is construed as legitimate in such game playing situations. Nonetheless the studies are strongly suggestive so for the sake of argument let us assume the studies identify a significant, general correlation between the lack of an aspect of conscientiousness, specifically genuine dishonesty, and creativity. Gino and Ariely hypothesize that greater creativity 'may lead people to take unethical routes when searching for solutions' and 'lead to greater dishonesty by increasing individuals' ability to justify their immoral actions'.[52] Creativity thus seems to pull away from or at least be in tension with ethical behaviour.

We should ask ourselves just how much of a challenge this really is though. Would we be surprised, for example, if traits that tend toward courage such as resilience, risk taking and self-assurance, facilitate lying? If so, would we think this shows courage is at odds with honesty? Surely it is only a deep psychological challenge if the traits that tend toward the appropriate acquisition of or acting from one virtue are psychologically inconsistent with doing so with respect to another. There is no obvious reason to think this is the case with respect to creativity and honesty. Children enjoy imaginative play and are often motivated to make stories up to avoid punishment or accrue gains. But we do not take this to show anything deep about the incompatibility of imaginativeness versus honesty as opposed to the importance of a good developmental environment for children. Moreover, we need to distinguish the basis for what we might think of as a natural or rough basis for virtue from acquired virtue or virtue proper. In isolation certain natural or rough trait tendencies may help ground intellectual, moral or creative achievements. However, unlike virtue proper, such tendencies are prone to certain kinds of errors either in isolation or in combination. Someone who always tells the truth might naturally tend to ride roughshod over the feelings of others, sometimes inappropriately, just as someone who is always compassionate may sometimes act unjustly. Similarly, someone who is very creative might tend to be rather imaginative with respect to truth telling, again sometimes inappropriately. All this shows is that certain trait tendencies (like temperaments) may form the raw material out of which we acquire or refine virtue even though such tendencies are not the same as full or proper virtue.[53]

[52] op. cit., 454–55.

[53] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI, 1144 b 4–6 makes something like this distinction. For contrasting elaborations as to what this distinction amounts to see Susan Wolf, 'Moral Psychology and the Unity of the

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Virtue generally consists in seeing where, when and why certain kinds of thoughts, responses or actions are appropriate for the right kinds of reasons. Exemplary creativity thus partly consists in seeing where being creative and how so is appropriate and thus seems to depend upon a cluster of virtues which are an admixture of virtues of mind and virtues of character. This is to deny what we might term an independence thesis i.e. the possession of any one virtue is independent of any other. It also involves a stronger claim than the consistency claim made above i.e. possession of some one virtue tied up with creative excellence is consistent with the possession of any other virtue such as honesty. It is to claim that possession of a given virtue will be inter-related to and depend upon the possession of some others.

Whilst most philosophers who appeal to some account of virtue, such as Aristotle, Aquinas or Hume[54], hold to some version of an inter-dependence claim, albeit in systematically distinct ways, it is not obvious that everyone does. Positive psychology sometimes proceeds on the basis that one virtue or positive psychological character trait can be studied independently of others (or in relation to one contrast trait). Yet there seems to be good reason to hold that the independence thesis is false and that this must be so in particular with respect to exemplary creativity.

As we saw above, amongst other virtues, creative excellence depends upon curiosity, perseverance, courage, self-assurance, resilience, self-honesty and humility. If someone lacks curiosity then there will tend to be a marked disinterest in the kind of exploration subserving creative excellence. Where someone lacks courage there will tend to be an aversion to exposing the self, thoughts or work to critical exposure. Curiosity partially enhances the possession of courage in giving an interest in and motivation to seek critical exposure. By the same token self-honesty is required for creative excellence and is closely intertwined with humility. Clear-sightedness about our weaknesses or lacks enables us to identify what we need to work on and why. Yet admitting to being mistaken or inadequate can be

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Virtues', *Ratio* **20**, 2007, pp. 145–167 and Gopal Sreenivasan, 'Disunity of Virtue', *Journal of Ethics* **13** (2/3), 2009, esp. pp. 198–200.

[54] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI, 1144 b 30 – 1145 and Thomas Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on Virtue*, On the Cardinal Virtues, Article 2, Hause and Murphy edition (New York: Hackett, 2010), 232–241, Marie A. Martin, 'Hume on Human Excellence', *Hume Studies*, **XVIII** (2), pp. 383–400.

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difficult given that we naturally like to think highly of ourselves. Hence humility is required to be open to the possibility of mistakes or error which is itself tied up with self-honesty about the state of one's work or what needs to be worked on in order to get better. What it is to be a creatively excellent person partly depends upon and is constituted by the possession of inter-related clusters of virtues. Note that whilst the inter-dependency claim commits us to clusters of virtues it does not entail the unity of the virtues (though it is consistent with it). Whilst Aristotle and Aquinas held that none of the virtues are strictly speaking possible for an individual without possessing the others, subscribing to the interdependence claim does not entail commitment to the unity thesis. In other words possessing some cluster of virtues, such as those required for exemplary creativity, *may* require only the possession of certain virtues or types of virtues as distinct from the possession of all. It could be, for example, that creative excellence does not require or depend on the possession of kindness, charity or other particular moral traits. Whilst creative excellence partly depends upon critical self-honesty, it may not require the kind of honesty tied up with respecting the niceties of property rights. This may give a rather different inflection to the phrase 'good artists borrow, great artists steal'.

Putting matters thus refines the challenge from immorality. Perhaps, the challenge now goes, there is some reason to think that creative excellence might be *in principle* at odds with (at least certain aspects of) moral excellence. In other words perhaps there are clusters of virtues that are disordered in relation to one another. Co-opting Williams's fictional simplification of Gaugin's life brings this out (the following is not the purpose to which Williams puts the case).[55] Williams' Gaugin is characterized as prioritizing his creative drive above the demands of morality by abandoning his wife in France for the artistic life in Tahiti. It is common to hold that the dictates of morality should trump other interests so, presumably, a morally good person would neither be morally praiseworthy nor happy in abandoning his wife. Yet in the scenario as characterized the pursuit of exemplary creative excellence seemingly must come at the expense of moral excellence (or vice versa). The pursuit of creative excellence may thus seem to be in principle at odds with the pursuit of moral excellence.

Even as refined the challenge remains overstated. There are many ways suppressed premises or assumptions built into the scenario may

[55] Bernard Williams, 'Moral Luck' in his *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 20–39.

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be disambiguated. Whilst Williams' Gaugin may judge the situation is such that he has to choose between his wife and artistic development it could be that there is no such in principle conflict. Rather than jettison his wife perhaps the fictional Gaugin would have done better to try and work things out with his wife so that both aims could be pursued. Alternatively if Gaugin really would have been so unhappy staying with his wife perhaps it was morally better for him to go (rather than stay and ruin his wife's life as well as his own). More fundamentally what is the nature of the putative conflict here? If the point is that there are some circumstances where pursuing different virtues or excellences may conflict then it is unclear why this is a challenge for a virtue theoretic account of exemplary creativity. Life is often such that due to circumstance there is not enough time or opportunity to pursue all the excellences one desires. Why think the Gaugin case points to anything more fundamental than this? The pursuit of creative excellence as such does not preclude marital fidelity or adherence to moral excellence more generally. Perhaps one or both parties to the marriage were ignorant, foolish or made a mistake. We all make mistakes and circumstances sometimes do not favour us. All this points to is the fact that previous mistakes or some circumstances are such that pursuing certain excellences sometimes comes at the cost of forgoing others (and this is just as true within the moral domain as it is across domains). Fair enough. What this does not yet show is that there is a deep in principle conflict between exemplary creativity and moral excellence (though it may tend to make pursuing them conjointly much more difficult in various circumstances).

Gaugin's artistic aims were praiseworthy and valuable. What about more radical cases where someone apparently manifests creative excellence whilst serving ignoble ends? Terrorists, torturers or certain city financiers, for example, might possess the creative virtues sketched above whilst realizing them in bringing about physically, economically and morally destructive ends. If someone can possess creative virtues in unjustifiably wiping out human lives or the illicit distribution of financial risk and capital then surely something has gone wrong in conceiving of exemplary creativity as being bound up with virtue? Virtue in general surely precludes malevolence and the pursuit of immoral ends.

There are various possible moves open here. A modest position would be to hold that the possibility of the ethically vicious yet creatively virtuous person is compatible with the inter-dependency and consistency claims made above. The devil may or may not have all the best tunes, but perhaps he can possess exemplary creative virtue in the service of evil. There is only a significant challenge, the

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defender of such a modest position might suggest, on the assumption that a virtue theoretic approach must be committed to the unity of the virtues. As we have seen above this need not necessarily be the case. Indeed, the defender of the modest position might suggest that disavowing the unity thesis whilst holding onto some version of the consistency and inter-dependency claims may help to explain why we feel torn about such cases. A more robust position would hold that what is praiseworthy in the creative terrorist or dubious financier case is the creative excellence manifest *given* the evaluatively problematic ends. Nonetheless, at least to the extent that the agent is purposively devoted towards ends that are themselves morally problematic, the value of what is achieved is marred or defective. Thus the overall excellence of creative character shown in achieving those ends may thereby be defective or diminished. We may judge that a research scientist such as Diederik Stapel was creative in various respects. His ideas for experimental studies were very often novel, interesting and worthwhile. Yet to the extent Stapel systematically made up results, publishing large numbers of 'top tier' psychology papers with fictitious evidence, he manifested creative vice rather than virtue.[56] Similarly the financier or entrepreneur who knowingly creates and sells dud financial instruments or products may display all sorts of creative excellences along various dimensions but can only be praiseworthy at best in some qualified sense and certainly remains less than exemplary in terms of full creative virtue. The robust position holds that full creative virtues must be cognizant of and directed toward good ends and values that really are worthwhile in the right sorts of ways. Whichever way one goes here, the modest and more robust positions involve cashing out virtue approaches to creative excellence in distinct ways. The former involves adhering to a virtue conception of exemplary creativity whilst holding that human virtues generally may be disordered whilst the latter involves holding to a conception in which creative virtues in principle fit with (and in the extreme case are bound up with) the virtues more generally involved in leading a good human life.

6. Conclusion

I started out by sketching a general virtue theoretic approach to traits of mind and character as psychological mechanisms that underwrite and partly constitute creative excellence. Creative virtues were

[56] Yudhijit Bhattacharjee, 'The Mind of a Con Man', *New York Times*, Magazine, April 26, 2013.

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taken to be a cluster of inter-related admirable traits such as curiosity, courage, self-honesty, humility and perseverance. Three empirically motivated indirect challenges to such a virtue theoretic conception of creative excellence were then articulated, based on claims concerning natural talent, ill-being and immorality. I have argued that the first two challenges rested on over stated assumptions concerning the role that natural talent and mental illness play in the constitution or promotion of creative excellence. The third challenge projected tensions between isolatable trait tendencies or circumstances, falsely, onto putatively fundamental conflicts between moral and creative excellence. Nonetheless, working through these challenges forced us to refine our understanding of the nature, commitments and shape virtue approaches to creative excellence might or should take.[57]

University of Leeds
m.l.kieran@leeds.ac.uk

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