

# **Is creativity a virtue?**

## **Introduction**

In this essay, I will consider the question of whether creativity can be considered a virtue, where creativity is defined as a disposition to produce things which are original and valuable, and virtue is defined as an excellence of character which is dispositional and intrinsically motivated. I will begin by outlining the nature of virtue in the intellectual sense and explaining why a disposition must meet certain criteria specified by Baehr in order to be an intellectual virtue. I will then briefly explain the motivation for thinking of creativity as a virtue and argue that creativity plausibly meets two of Baehr's constraints: the motivational and competence constraint. I will then explain and motivate the objection from affective irrationality which shows that creativity does not meet Baehr's affective and judgment constraints and therefore cannot be a virtue. I will first explain the objection from mental illness, but then argue that this is not sufficient to show creativity not to be a virtue; I will then motivate a stronger objection from the causal connection between creativity and certain personality types that predispose agents towards affective irrationality and argue that this objection ultimately shows creativity not to be a virtue.

## **1. Creativity as Virtue**

### **1.1 The Nature of Virtue**

A virtue, ethical or intellectual, is defined as an acquired excellence of a person which is dispositional and intrinsically motivated. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle rules out that virtues can be feelings or capacities, since the possession of virtues or vices is seen as praise- or blameworthy; they are therefore connected to actions and so are understood as dispositions (Aristotle, 340 BC, pp. 29, 1106). Furthermore, virtues can be understood as personal excellences because their exercise makes their possessor good *qua* possessor; a virtue "causes that of which it is a virtue to be in a good state, and to perform its characteristic activity well" (Aristotle, 340 BC, pp. 29, 1106). Finally, a virtue must be exercised for its own sake (intrinsically motivated) rather than merely as a means to some other end. Someone who is kind to others purely in order to win favours from them, for example, does not act virtuously, whereas someone who performs kind acts because they are kind is acting virtuously. Zagzebski explains this need for intrinsic motivation as following from the nature of

virtues as a personal excellence; being an excellence means they are desirable and are therefore connected intrinsically to the idea of the good in the general sense (Zagzebski, 1996, p. 89).

Aristotle mentions two kinds of virtue: “that of the intellect and that of character” (Aristotle, 340 BC, pp. 23, 1103). This distinction is best understood in terms of aiming at different ends. Whilst virtues of character are constitutive of and aim at the moral end of achieving eudaimonia, intellectual virtues aim at achieving epistemic goods (Turri, et al., 2021); Zagzebski defines intellectual virtue as reliably aiming at and being successful in producing truth-conducive ends (Zagzebski, 1996, p. 137). Within virtue epistemology, there are two competing conceptions of intellectual virtue: the responsibilist conception, according to which virtues are understood as traits, such as conscientiousness and open-mindedness, and the reliabilist conception, according to which intellectual virtues are understood as faculties, such as perception (Turri, et al., 2021). For the purposes of this essay, I will assume a responsibilist approach, since the supposed intellectual virtue in question – creativity – is typically understood as a trait rather than a faculty.

## **1.2 Baehr’s Criteria of an Intellectual Virtue**

According to Jason Baehr, there are four components of an intellectual virtue:

- 1) Motivational: it must be at least partly intrinsically motivational.
- 2) Affective: the possessor should enjoy the exercise of the virtue.
- 3) Competence: it must be a skill or ability.
- 4) Judgement: it must be rationally regulated.

(Baehr, 2015, p. 1)

There are good reasons in favour of the soundness of these criteria. The first three seem to follow from Aristotle’s definition of a virtue as a personal excellence that is intrinsically motivated and dispositional. The final criterion derives from the need to exercise practical wisdom in determining where an application of a virtue is appropriate and in determining the mean between virtue and vice; Aristotle emphasizes how vices arise from excesses or deficiencies, and therefore that virtue is a mean between the two (Aristotle, 340 BC, pp. 31, 1107). The role of practical wisdom in determining virtue therefore implies that “virtue [...] is a state involving rational choice” (Aristotle, 340 BC, pp. 31, 1107).

### **1.3 Motivation for Creativity as Virtue**

One of the main reasons in favour of thinking of creativity as a virtue is its seeming aptness for praise- and blameworthiness. Not all dispositions are praise- or blameworthy, even if they are beneficial or harmful to us; for example, whilst we might recognise the advantage a tall athlete has over a short one, it would be inconsistent with our moral and linguistic practices to praise or blame someone for their height. In contrast, as Matthew Kieran points out, “We praise and admire creative people in virtually every domain [...] We also sometimes blame, condemn or withhold praise from those who fail creatively” (Kieran, 2014, p. 203)

Kieran argues for a robust sense of creativity as virtue which depends on an agent’s “responsiveness to reasons that grounds her judgments and actions in recognizing what is new and valuable in the relevant domain (Kieran, 2014, p. 127).” To illustrate this, he gives the example of a stroke victim who, in trying to learn how to write again, accidentally produces beautiful patterns (Kieran, 2014, p. 126); while such an agent might be creative in a minimal sense, they are not responding to the appropriate reasons and therefore are not being creative in this robust sense.

Kieran points out that creativity is most enhanced when motivated by factors intrinsic to the domain, such as self-expression (Kieran, 2014, p. 129); studies have shown that subjects motivated by intrinsic reasons tend to be more productive in terms of creativity (Kieran, 2014, p. 129) such as a study in which creative writers produced more creative work when motivated by intrinsic rather than extrinsic factors (Amabile, 1985, p. 393). Kieran terms this robust creativity “exemplary creativity” (Kieran, 2014, p. 135).

Furthermore, Kieran argues that having this intrinsic motivation makes the creative person more disposed to produce new and valuable objects in a reliable way, because “the more deeply embedded the intrinsic motivation, the more creative someone will be in a given domain across different situations” (Kieran, 2014, p. 131). It can thereby be inferred from Kieran’s account that creativity is a kind of skill or ability that can be realised across multiple domains.

For the purposes of this essay, I will grant that (exemplary) creativity therefore satisfies both the motivational and competence criteria specified by Baehr (Baehr, 2015, p. 1). The two criteria I will now focus on are the affective and judgment criteria; I will argue that creativity satisfies neither of these because it is sometimes enhanced by affective irrationality.

## **2. Against Creativity as Virtue: The Argument from Affective Irrationality**

### **2.1 Affective Rationality Defined**

Broadly speaking, an agent, A, is rational just in case A is appropriately responsive to the relevant reasons. There are several types of reasons: cognitive reasons are reasons for belief; practical reasons are reasons to act; affective reasons are reasons to feel. Failure to respond appropriately to each kind of reason is sufficient to render an agent's responses irrational. In this section, I will focus on affective rationality and what it means to fail to respond appropriately to affective reasons.

Scarantino and de Sousa specify three ways in which emotions can be subject to rationality:

- 1) Fittingness: emotion is directed towards an appropriate object/is apt in the circumstances. E.g., fear of a shark is rational; fear of beards (pogonophobia) is not.
- 2) Warrant: emotion is directed towards something which manifests the relevant evidential cues of an appropriate object, even if it turns out not to be that object. E.g., fear of a realistic model of a shark.
- 3) Coherence: consistency of emotions with what other representations of the world are like. E.g., someone experiences a fear of flying and simultaneously believes flying is dangerous (even if this belief is not true, it is coherent with the feeling).

(Scarantino & de Sousa, 2021)

Having provided an account of affective rationality, I will argue that since creativity involves both affective irrationality and negative affects, it fails both the judgment and affective criteria of an intellectual virtue.

## **2.2 Mental Illness and Creativity**

It is often thought that the possession of certain mental illnesses may enhance creativity. There does appear to be evidence of at least some correlation between mental illness and creativity; Arnold M. Ludwig found that 87% of poets, 77% of fiction writers, 51% of social scientists and 28% of natural scientists suffered from general mental illness (Ludwig, 1995, p. 149). Furthermore, Shelly H. Carson notes that “In the two largest studies of creativity and mental illness, Kyaga and colleagues (2011, 2013) [...] found that individuals in artistic occupations had higher rates of bipolar disorder than those in noncreative professions, while writers had higher rates of unipolar depression” (Carson, 2019, p. 300). If creativity can involve suffering from mental illnesses such as depression or bipolar disorder, then Baehr’s affective constraint is not fulfilled, since these conditions by definition involve negative affects. Furthermore, the enhancement of creativity through mental illness would also entail a failure of the judgment constraint, since mental illness entails affective irrationality; to be mentally ill is to be unresponsive to affective reasons, e.g., depression entails feeling prolonged unhappiness without an appropriate reason.

However, the correlation between incidences of mental illness and high creativity alone is not sufficient to prove a causation. As Kieran points out, the supposed connection between creativity and mental illness is often considered in isolation of other factors which may have been more likely to contribute to the mental illness, such as social isolation and lack of material goods (Kieran, 2014, p. 218).

Furthermore, even if a connection between mental illness and creativity were granted, this alone is not sufficient to prove a connection between being in a negative and irrational affective state caused by mental illness and producing creative objects. Kieran remarks that “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” (Kieran, 2014, p. 221); it is possible that being in a state caused by mental illness is detrimental to creativity, and therefore that even if the agent suffers from negative and irrational affects in a general sense, they are not under the influence of these affects when producing creative work.

What remains, then, is to show that negative and irrational affective states can directly enhance creativity, that is, that creative products can directly result from an agent being in such a state. In the two subsections that follow, I will attempt to sketch an account of such a connection.

### **2.3 Personality Types**

A stronger argument for the link between affective irrationality and creativity is the connection between certain personality types and creativity; this argument has an advantage over the argument from mental illness because it posits a direct causal link rather than a mere correlation that can be better explained through other factors. Furthermore, it also more plausibly connects the negative and irrational affects that result from the personality type of the agent and the creative products that result.

Hans Eysenck's research demonstrated a correlation between creativity in normal populations and the personality trait of psychoticism (Eysenck, 1993, p. 148).

Psychoticism is defined as "characterised by aggression, impulsivity, aloofness, and antisocial behaviour" (American Psychological Association, n.d.). Crucially, Eysenck argues for more than mere correlation; the lack of cognitive inhibition that results from a psychotic personality type is thought to enhance creativity (Eysenck, 1993, p. 148). This observation is supported by Gregory Feist's study of creatives in artistic and scientific domains, which concluded that, "Creative people in art and science tend to be open to new experiences, less conventional and less conscientious, more self-confident, self-accepting, driven, ambitious, dominant, hostile, and impulsive" (Feist, 1998, p. 290); the observed traits of hostility, dominance, and impulsivity are common to the personality trait of psychoticism.

Possession of such personality traits implies affective irrationality as well as experiencing negative affects. Impulsivity, for example, is defined by the American Psychological Association as "characterised by little or no forethought, reflection, or consideration of the consequences of an action" (American Psychological Association, n.d.) and thereby irrational; hostility involves "the overt expression of intense animosity or antagonism in action, feeling, or attitude" (American Psychological Association, n.d.) and thereby involving negative affects. Moreover, since such affects are causally connected with creative production, the objection that

such affects might be irrelevant to the agent's creativity that plausibly succeeds against the mental illness argument, will not succeed against this argument.

In the final subsection, I will present a case study which appears to show a direct causal connection between a negative and irrational affect and an enhancement of creativity.

#### **2.4 Effects of Anger on Idea Production**

Strasbaugh and Connelly see idea generation as an essential component of creativity; furthermore, they see emotions as inseparable from this process, since creativity "involves the interplay of cognition and emotion" (Strasbaugh & Connelly, 2022, p. 529). They point out that studies, such as a 2010 study by van Kleef, have shown that anger may benefit idea generation (van Kleef, 2010) due to "perceptions of high situational control and high certainty motivate individuals to overcome obstacles, and to feel comfortable exploring boundaries in their creative solutions" (Strasbaugh & Connelly, 2022, p. 531).

If anger is beneficial to creativity, then Baehr's affective constraint seems not to be fulfilled, as anger is not a state enjoyed by the agent; furthermore, anger can often lead the subject to act irrationally and therefore means the judgment constraint is not fulfilled. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore more examples of negative or irrational affects enhancing creativity, the purpose of this example is to show how virtue and creativity can come apart due to the affects involved.

#### **Conclusion**

I have provided reasons for thinking that Baehr's four criteria for an intellectual virtue provide a good guide as to what can and cannot be considered an intellectual virtue. I have argued that whilst creativity satisfies two of these criteria, it plausibly fails the affective and judgment constraints and therefore is not a virtue. It is beyond the scope of this paper to give an account of how our linguistic practices of praise and blame around creativity ought to be understood (and perhaps revised) given the implausibility of creativity as virtue, but these practices alone are not sufficient grounds to conceive of creativity as virtue; since it is enhanced by affective rationality, we ought to conceive of it in an according (non-virtue-theoretic) way.





## **Bibliography**

- Amabile, T. M., 1985. *Motivation and Creativity: Effects of Motivational Orientation on Creative Writers*, s.l.: s.n.
- American Psychological Association, n.d. *APA Dictionary of Psychology*. [Online] Available at: <https://dictionary.apa.org/impulsive>
- American Psychological Association, n.d. *APA Dictionary of Psychology*. [Online] Available at: <https://dictionary.apa.org/hostility>
- American Psychological Association, n.d. *APA Dictionary of Psychology*. [Online] Available at: <https://dictionary.apa.org/psychoticism>
- Aristotle, 340 BC. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy, tr. Roger Crisp ed. s.l.:Cambridge University Press.
- Baehr, J., 2015. The Four Dimensions of an Intellectual Virtue. In: M. S. E. S. Chienkuo Mi, ed. *Moral and Intellectual Virtues in Western and Chinese Philosophy*. New York: Routledge, pp. 86-98.
- Carson, S. H., 2019. 'Creativity and Mental Illness' from 'Affective Underpinnings of Creativity'. In: *The Cambridge Handbook of Creativity*. s.l.:Cambridge University Press, pp. 296-318.
- Eysenck, H. J., 1993. Creativity and Personality: Suggestions for a Theory. *Psychological Inquiry*, 4(3), pp. 147-78.
- Feist, G. J., 1998. The Influence of Personality on Artistic and Scientific Creativity. In: R. Sternberg, ed. *Handbook of Creativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 273-296.
- Kieran, M., 2014. Creativity as a Virtue of Character. In: E. S. Paul & S. B. Kaufman, eds. *The Philosophy of Creativity: New Essays*. New York: Oxford Academic.
- Kieran, M., 2014. Creativity, Virtue and the Challenges from Natural Talent, Ill-Being and Immorality. *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*, Volume 75, pp. 203-230.
- Ludwig, A. M., 1995. *The Price of Greatness: Resolving the Creativity and Madness Controversy*. s.l.:The Guilford Press.
- Scarantino, A. & de Sousa, R., 2021. *Emotion: The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. [Online] Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/emotion>

Strasbaugh, K. & Connelly, S., 2022. The influence of anger and anxiety on idea generation: Taking a closer look at integral and incidental emotion effects. In: *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*. s.l.:s.n., pp. 529-543.

Turri, J., Alfano, M. & Greco, J., 2021. *Virtue Epistemology*, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. [Online] Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/epistemology-virtue/>

van Kleef, G. A., 2010. Can Expressions of Anger Enhance Creativity? A Test of the Emotions as Social Information (EASI) Model. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 46(6), pp. 1042-1048.

Zagzebski, L., 1996. *Virtues of the mind: an inquiry into the nature of virtue and the ethical foundations of knowledge*. s.l.:s.n.