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Creativity And Inspiration

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ABSTRACT

While one version of belief in inspiration, for which the inspired human passively receives inspired deliverances, precludes human creativity, another, for which inspired compositions reflect human agency and ingenuity, presupposes it. Margaret Boden, however, suggests (in The Creative Mind: Myths and Mechanisms (2004)) that creativity is continuous with generic human powers, and also arises through infringing recognised rules. While the former suggestion (about continuity) is argued to be readily acceptable, problems are raised for the rule-breaking account of creativity. Accounts of creativity need to be supplemented with awareness that creativity commonly involves participation in traditions of skill or craftsmanship, and in a creative community, whether rules are broken or not. Further, the continuity approach is argued to be consistent with at least one particular variant of belief in inspiration, according to which God, as the universal Creator, can communicate through the imagination of receptive minds that reflect his/her creative imagination, as suggested by Austin Farrer in 'Inspiration: Poetical and Divine' (1963). Other faculties as well as the imagination are held to be involved, in a manner consistent with the continuity approach: perception, memory, reflectiveness, historical awareness and artistic ingenuity.

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Intruduction

There are at least two different concepts of 'inspiration', and they have quite divergent relations with human creativity. One, discussed in Plato's dialogue *Ion*, represents the human being receiving inspiration as a passive recipient, transmitting deliverances from a divine source in the manner of a flute or other musical instrument, which barely contributes to the inspired output, but is taken over and breathed through by a deity or Muse. Some theologians have similarly envisaged the scriptures as being virtually dictated by God, with the scriptural authors playing a minimal role, if an indispensable one.

A very different concept of inspiration involves the human being using awareness of musical, poetic, literary or craft-related traditions and deploying artistic ingenuity. Invoking a Muse is permissible but optional, but when this is done (as when John Milton invoked a 'heavenly Muse' in composing *Paradise Lost*) the request is for assistance and illumination, but not for one's powers to be superseded, or to compose in a trance, with the words or music flowing through the human 'author' unbidden and irresistible. For this second conception, inspiration does not supersede the powers of the human agent; instead, inspired and creative composition presupposes unabated human agency and ingenuity, with writers such as Milton consciously working in the tradition of predecessors such as Dante and of Virgil, deploying iambic verse with dexterity, and ingeniously coining new words like 'pandemonium' (a term coined by Milton).

It has been suggested by writers such as Umberto Eco that human creativity is a product of madness, and that this explains the way in which it sometimes involves the presence of genius; Aristotle seems to have anticipated this view many centuries earlier (Boden, 2004, 37). This approach appears to make sense in connection with the first concept of 'inspiration', as the human author (or vehicle) of inspiration could be imagined to be wholly or partially 'out-of-their-mind' when caught up in the kind of creativity in question. But if we think about the products of creativity from bygone ages and the kind of inspiration that they must have involved, products such as houses, ships, hammers and shields, the theory that inspiration is to be associated with madness loses much of its appeal.

For the inventors of these products must have been seeking rational solutions to practical problems (such as safe places to live and sleep, and safe vehicles to cross seas and oceans), and their inspired solutions to these problems suggest well-focused intelligence, as opposed to eccentricity, and mindful application of ingenuity, as opposed to madness. It is perhaps because of their manifest sanity that they are (in nearly all cases) uncelebrated and unremembered; matters might well have been different if they had been mad or crazy, and thus more memorable. Besides, granted that some creativity must be understood as sane and rational, the theory that it is generally or even often grounded in madness becomes difficult to sustain, in view of the evidence to the contrary, and the comparative lack of evidence of a supportive character. As Boden affirms, there is a dividing-line between creativity and madness, which is very often readily discernible (Boden, 2004, 37).

Meanwhile, a little more can be said about inspiration (in the second of the above senses), as this term is used in current discourse. When a writer or musician or craftsman is said to be 'inspired', what is being said is often that they have been inspired by a person (or a movement). In contexts such as these, what is meant by someone being 'inspired by (someone or something)' varies between the encouragement supplied by a family-member, a mentor or a supportive friend (whose support can make all the difference to the morale and motivation of the person said to be 'inspired'), and the more direct inspiration deriving from learning one's skill or craft in the manner of an apprentice from an apprentice-master or a role-model who has exercised a direct influence on the person 'inspired'. These contrasting forms of inspiration could be called 'external' and internal' inspiration respectively.

This is because the encouragement of family members and friends need not involve any knowledge of or participation in the skill or craft that the person whom they inspire becomes able to practise. By contrast, the learner who is taught a skill or craft by an experienced practitioner (for example, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart learning much of his craft from Joseph Haydn) receives inspiration of a more direct kind. That is why these two kinds of inspiration can respectively be labeled 'external' and 'internal'.

Inspiration is also liable to vary along a different continuum. Thus, the Roman poet Virgil was (in a sense) inspired by the earlier Roman poet Ennius in celebrating heroic figures from earlier Roman history. In the case of Fabius Maximus, whose delaying tactics against the Carthaginian general Hannibal were held, not least by Ennius, to have saved the Roman state from ruination, Virgil pays tribute to Ennius by adopting a Latin line of Ennius and adjusting it. The hexameter line of Ennius had run:

> Unus homo nobis cunctando restituit rem
> (or) 'One man, by delaying, restored for us our state'.

In his poem *Aeneid*, Virgil refines this line, leaving the adjusted version recognisable to readers able to discern his deliberate echo of Ennius, and produces the following line (employing the second person rather than the third, and the present tense rather than the past or perfect tense):

> Unus qui nobis cunctando restituis rem (Virgil, 1900, *Aeneid* 6, 846)
> (or 'You, the one man who, by delaying, do restore for us our state'),

A line of greater polish but which at the same time acknowledges Virgil's debt to Ennius. Here Virgil could readily be said to be inspired by Ennius to write as he did. But to say this would not be to suggest that the inspiration of Ennius was comprehensive or pervasive; instead, it affected a fairly small proportion of Virgil's twelve-book epic poem.

By contrast, people who comment on the influence on Virgil of Homer and the Homeric poems could claim that the inspiration derived by Virgil from Homer was fundamental, moulding both the verse-rhythm selected (hexameters), the type of subject matter (heroes returning from a war and/or fighting another war: in Virgil's case the first half of his poem

could be held to resemble Homer's *Odyssey* and the second part Homer's *Iliad*), the use of lengthy evocative similes, and the overall heroic treatment of the characters of the poem in question (including, both in Homer and in Virgil, a visit to the underworld to learn about both the past and the future). Thus, the inspiration received by Virgil from Homer could be held to be sustained and major, whereas that received by Virgil from Ennius could be held to be comparatively light, while still significant.

To return to issues around creativity, theories of creativity, while not mapping precisely onto the distinction presented at the very beginning of this article, exhibit a contrast between creativity as involving creative writers being an elite band of geniuses, set apart from the common run of humanity, and producing supposedly inspired theories or music or art discontinuous from that available to the rest of us, and creativity as being continuous with familiar human faculties of skill, invention, discovery or detection, and with such familiar activities as story-telling, reflecting, imagining or jesting. Margaret Boden, in her book *The Creative Mind: Myths and Mechanisms* (2004), shows a clear preference for the continuity theory of creativity, which makes room for everyone or nearly everyone to be creative, and interprets the creativity of the great scientists, composers and poets as involving a heightened expression of what ordinary people can achieve in drafting diverting memos, in witty conversation in cafés and at bus-stops, or in humming tunes to themselves while waiting at the launderette.

The preferability of Boden's continuity theory comes across most graphically when applied to the case of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan', sometimes thought to have been composed spontaneously in a drug-induced trance, and cut short when the trance was interrupted. Yet, while drugs did enter Coleridge's biography, it was not just then. Also, the researches of J. Livingstone Lowes disclose that just before entering the reverie (Coleridge later admitted that it was more like a reverie than a dream) in which Kubla Khan was composed, Coleridge had been reading a sixteenth-century narrative which opens with the less-than-poetic sentence:

> In Xamdu did Cublai Can build a stately Palace, encompassing sixteene miles of plaine ground with a wall, wherein are fertile Meaddowes, pleasant springs, delightful Streames, and all sorts of beasts of chase and game, and in the middest thereof a sumptuous house of pleasure (Lowes, 1951, 358).

So, rather than devising his famous poem from scratch, Coleridge imaginatively and skillfully adapted these words into iambic verse and an appropriate rhyme-scheme, adjusting his prosaic source into couplets such as:

> So twice five miles of fertile ground
> With walls and towers were girdled round.

Boden is not suggesting that Kubla Khan was composed through conscious processes alone; for his part, Coleridge had a strong interest in the associative powers of memory, which is

why he recorded the sentence that he had been reading before writing of Xanadu. But she is suggesting that the poem reflects familiar psychological processes such as memory and the associations that it can generate, albeit harnessed to poetic insight to an impressive and unusual degree. Accordingly, the arresting case of Kubla Khan, which at first sight appears to illustrate the elite-genius theory of creativity, turns out to be compatible after all with the theory of continuity between spectacular creativity and the familiar range of human capacities and powers. In the light of this and other examples, the elitist theory turns out to be superfluous, and the continuity theory appears far superior.

Boden further supplies an important distinction between 'psychological creativity' and 'historical creativity', or between 'P-creativity and H-creativity for short' (Boden, 2004, 2). As Boden relates, 'P-creativity involves coming up with a surprising, valuable idea' that's new to the person who comes up with it' (Boden, 2004, 2). Here, to 'surprising, valuable idea' we might well add 'or achievement' so as to include artistic performances and/or feats of skill which the person in question has never performed before, as well as ideas. By contrast, 'if a new idea' (here we might add 'or achievement') 'is H-creative, that means that (so far as we know) no one else has had it before' (or, we might add, has achieved it before): 'it has arisen for the first time in human history' (Boden, 2004, 2).

It can be added that, while H-creativity is the key concept for historians of art, science and technology, P-creativity is just as important for those reflecting on how a particular person could manage to come up with an arresting idea (or achievement), even if they are not the first person to do so (Boden, 2004, 2). If a schoolchild comes up with a proof of Pythagoras's theorem without having been taught such a proof, that is a creative achievement, even though many others have in fact presented much the same proof at earlier stages in history.

Subsequently, Boden goes on to ask what is meant when we say that a creative person could not have come up with their creative idea (or achievement) before they did (Boden 2004, 42). Her suggestion is that the assumptions or the rules they had adopted had previously prevented them coming up with the creative ideas (or achievements) that they actually came up with (Boden 2004, 52). If so, then creativity, or at least P-creativity, is facilitated by changing assumptions or by breaking at least one of a set of rules that had been taken as established (Boden 2004, 58).

However, if we include creative achievements, such as the delivery of resounding speeches, we can recognise that there are other factors that could prevent these achievements up to a particular time, and thus frustrate P-creativity. For example, the great orator Demosthenes is said to have been impeded by a stammer, and to have been unable to deliver continuous sentences, let alone speeches, as a result. It is also held that he overcame his stammer through practising speaking by placing pebbles from the sea-shore in his mouth, managing to overcome this problem, and thus attaining fluency in the delivery of speeches, which became famous. In any case, obstacles like a stammer could be enough to prevent certain kinds of P-creativity, and overcoming such obstacles could prove crucial in unlocking and unleashing powers of rhetoric. (Another such case was that of the British

King George VI, whose stammer seemed likely to prevent him addressing his people; after some therapy, he overcame the stammer and was able to make significant wartime speeches, which were themselves acts of creativity.)

The example of a stammer is one of many obstacles that prevent P-creativity. Thus, the inability to play a piano could be enough to prevent a person of great musical potential from playing the sonatas of Beethoven; and being given some lessons at piano playing could make possible a career in musical performances. Or, to turn to quite a different field of achievement, inability to swim could frustrate achievements such as swimming across the English Channel from England to France or from France to England, or across the Hellespont from Asia to Europe or Europe to Asia, whereas learning to swim, and then to swim using particular swimming strokes, could open up all kinds of swimming exploits and achievements (some of them creative) that could not have been undertaken by the swimmer at earlier times. This suggests that there are more kinds of blocks and barriers to P-creativity than Boden envisages.

A further example brings to light the fact that even H-creativity may be blocked until hitherto undeciphered scripts and texts are first deciphered, and that it may take a particular creative achievement of decipherment to facilitate further creative achievements that rest on decipherings such as the original one. I have in mind the decipherment of cuneiform scripts, and the successful decipherment that this made possible of further texts that employed other related scripts.

The deciphering the Old Persian alphabet was achieved by Henry Creswicke Rawlinson (1810–1895), who managed to copy down the immense trilingual inscription of Darius I at Behistun, and then, around 1834, deciphered the Old Persian script. This allowed him subsequently to decipher the proper nouns of the Akkadian script, and made it possible for others to decipher the rest of the Akkadian parts of the Behistun inscriptions in 1857, when four scholars, each working independently, produced closely matching translations. Later still, the third of the scripts of the Behistun inscriptions, Elamite, was also deciphered, on the basis of the previous decipherings. All this work led to the eventual decipherment of some related scripts in the Sumerian language during the early part of the twentieth century (Universität Hamburg, 2015).

If Rawlinson had not deciphered Old Persian, the further creative achievements of those who decoded the other cuneiform languages would not have been possible (neither by those who achieved this nor by anyone else). So, these further decipherings were instances of H-creativity, which could not have been achieved without the prior work of Rawlinson. Yet for each of the decipherers there will have been further factors without which they individually could not have achieved what they did, as when each of them learned a language that was not their mother-tongue for the first time. They also had to learn to extrapolate from linguistic equivalences already discovered, so as to discover further linguistic equivalences between the languages of scripts not yet deciphered and the languages into which earlier decipherers such as Rawlinson had translated scripts such as Old Persian. All these achievements were creative accomplishments; and the blockages that

had earlier prevented their completion concerned not adherence to unhelpful rules or assumptions, but the lack of both access to the scripts and to the clues that eventually made decipherment possible. In the end the Behistun inscriptions served much the same role as had the Rosetta Stone in the decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphics.

It is time to move on to appraising Boden's theory that the key element of creativity lies centrally in the breaking of rules, and in particular rules that have prevented discoveries or compositions of the kind achieved from seeming as much as possible. Here her key example is that of Friedrich von Kekulé, whose problem was the chemical composition of benzene. The prevailing assumption or rule was that the structure of such compounds must be string-like, but no such model proved to work, until von Kekulé had a dream of a snake biting its own tale. On waking he conceived what proved to be the correct theory, that the structure of benzene is, like the snake in his dream, ring-like. So, his creativity depended on rejecting the standard rule. Boden remarks that his achievement was a case of both P-creativity and of H-creativity, and maintains that the way in which his creativity depended on the infringement of rules holds good for creativity in general (Boden, 2004, 25-28 and 62-71).

But this generalization hardly works for Sergei Prokofiev's First or Classical Symphony, a creative work based not on the infringement of current rules, but on re-adopting the rules or conventions of the classical music of Haydn. Also, it hardly fits the symphonies of Beethoven. Although the creativity of Beethoven's Third Symphony fits his discarding the conventions of the classical period, the theory hardly fits his Fifth, Seventh and Ninth Symphonies, because by then these conventions had been infringed already; so, rule-breaking cannot of itself explain their distinctiveness.

While it is difficult to propose necessary and sufficient conditions for creativity, understanding it is assisted if we note that it typically arises when a reflective person is steeped in a tradition, whether of music or literature or scientific endeavour, and applies to it skill and/or craftsmanship so as develop the tradition in a new or ingenious manner. At the same time, we can also note that it usually arises where a potential innovator is working within a community of musicians, scientists or writers which continually aims at having something distinctive to share and contribute. When we put these background aspects together, we can begin to understand the creativity of (for example) Joseph Haydn, even though he mostly did not infringe the conventions of classical music, as well as that of Beethoven, who certainly did. Once we take into account awareness of traditions of craftsmanship and also social factors (such as the way that the Bach family encouraged its members to contribute vastly and variously to European music), individual creativity becomes a great deal easier to comprehend. (At the same time, the relation of the learning of artistic traditions to artistic creativity helps make better sense of the way in which inspiration, of the internal kind, can be derived from one's teacher of the art in question, as when Mozart was inspired by Haydn.)

All this is clearly consistent with the continuity approach, which suggests that a wide range of people are capable of going through apprenticeships that equip them with understanding of traditions and related skills, and initiate them into communities or gilds of

productive practitioners. Besides, the continuity approach also helps explain how training in academic traditions and excellences can foster the kind of creativity that widely populates academic journals, philosophy journals not least.

It is time now to consider whether the continuity approach to creativity can be aligned with either of the two concepts of inspiration that were mentioned earlier. Since it involves creative people exercising a wide range of human capacities and sensitivities, it is hardly compatible with the approach to inspiration for which the human being is a passive recipient of divine deliverances. Creative people are surely more than mere vehicles of messages that flow through them onto a written page, or into the ears of an enraptured audience, even if the apparent perfection of their works or performances sometimes makes this appear so.

As for the continuity approach, Boden would claim that it makes inspiration of any kind unnecessary, except where inspiration refers to one previous work or creative achievement serving as (what we call) an 'inspiration' for another. Besides, there can clearly be creative achievements where the writer or artist has no awareness of seeking or receiving assistance either from a Muse or any other divine figure, or through a prayer or religious vow being answered. While some compositions, like George Frederick Handel's *Messiah*, may be regarded by their authors as a gift of divine grace, many are not, or are only seen like this in retrospect.

Nevertheless, the continuity approach may offer scope for the second concept of inspiration (as mentioned at the outset) to be relevant and applicable, and without the normal psychological processes of human minds being commandeered, or those minds becoming possessed. The late Austin Farrer had some suggestions to this effect (Farrer, 1963, 91-105), and applied them both to the inspiration of biblical texts such as the Revelation of St. John and to poetic works such as those of the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley.

Partly to avoid any suggestion that God might be colonizing a human mind, Farrer writes: 'God is no more outside me, than within; I am his creation, just as much as you are, or the physical world is' (Farrer, 1963, 96). And these claims can equally be made of creatures such as ourselves that emerge from evolution, including primates with the ingenuity to make tools, with problem-solving ingenuity, and with a range and variety of imaginative capacities, including a grasp of meanings, all of which underlie the emergence of culture (particularly among human beings).

But evolution can also be understood as a creative process, in which some of God's creative purposes are expressed. Because of our freedom, not all our activities will be expressions of God's purposes. Yes, the vast and various array of human creativity could still play a part in God's plan.

Farrer's arresting passage continues like this: 'He has the secret key of entry into all his creatures; he can conjoin the actions of any of them with his will, in such fashion as to reveal himself specially through them' (Farrer, 1963, 96). Indeed, those who acknowledge both divine creation and evolution can endorse these words, as expressing powers that must be open to the Creator. This is how Farrer continues: 'God speaks without, and within; he reveals himself both through the situation with which he presents the recipients of

revelation, and through the imagination, in terms of which he leads them to see and hear the voices and the sights surrounding them' (Farrer, 1963, 96).

Farrer (it turns out) focuses on the imagination, when expounding how revelations might take place. 'Supposing that our Creator wishes to speak to us in the mode of revelation, will it not be our imaginative faculty that he employs …?' (Farrer, 1963, 98). Not only our imaginative faculty, we may respond, in case that might seem to exclude our capacities for perception, like memory, reflectiveness, awareness of context and artistic ingenuity; but maybe Farrer would include some of these faculties within that of 'imagination'. Certainly, the comparison between revelation and the poetic imagination, which he now presents, suggests that the imagination must be part of the story.

Farrer's comparison is between the author of the biblical book of 'Revelation' and Shelley, as author of 'Ode to a Skylark'. In both cases, the author lays down rules for their composition, in Shelley's case rules about metre, rhyme scheme, persevering with the image of the skylark, and speaking of her and to her in ways appropriate to her as not a bird ('Bird thou never wert') but as a blithe spirit. Such controls can be irksome, but can free the poet to present 'a piece of verbal music'. Similarly, the author of 'Revelation' (whom Farrer calls 'St. John') observes parallel controls, but Farrer adds that 'A multiple control may liberate, not fetter the pen' (Farrer, 1963, 10)', and holds that this was a case in point.

Whatever we think about this comparison, it helps illustrate the prominence of imagination within creativity. Yet there is clearly a case for adding important roles for perceptive sensitivity, memory of words and images, reflectiveness, historical awareness, and contributions to an artistic tradition. There is also a case for amplifying the range of examples of creativity beyond poetry to music, art, history, science and philosophy. Farrer's choice of example suggests that he remained influenced by notions of creativity in which the author or composer is mysteriously transported so as to produce works beyond the powers of the ordinary run of humanity. Admittedly he was constrained to comply with the range of cases where we standardly speak of inspiration, and history, science and philosophy normally lie outside this range, although music, arguably, does not. Yet creativity extends to them all, and, to return to Farrer's perspective, God, the creator, could well have truths or messages to impart to and through practitioners in all these fields. There again, imagination probably has a role in creativity in all of them, just as Farrer finds it to have in poetic and scriptural contexts (Farrer, 1963, 105). (I have written more on these matters in my book *Wonder, Value and God* (Attfield, 2017, 137-152.)

I should finally draw to attention the major claim that Farrer has been leading up to. 'Belief in inspiration', he asserts, 'is a metaphysical belief; it is the belief that the Creator everywhere underlies the creature, with the added faith, that at certain points he acts in, as and through the creature's mind (Farrer, 1963, 105).' Such inspiration is not to be understood as an external force, taking control of a person's creative faculties, let alone as an influence or source of inspiration from another human being, but as an expression of the original creation through the God-given nature present in that person. Certainly, this notion of inspiration is different from many of the varieties of inspiration surveyed at the early

stages of this essay; yet it is clearly consistent with an activist concept of inspiration, in which the full range of human capacities can be actively deployed.

Being different, it may raise additional worries; for some could read into its God either adjusting the neurones and ganglia of a human brain, or focusing a person's attention in ways they would not have experienced otherwise, and beyond their control. I am confident that Farrer would have rejected these deterministic interpretations, in favour of inspiration taking place through the created and evolved nature of minds honed through social interactions and individual reflection and meditation. In any case, if we accept that Farrer's ampler account of inspiration is consistent with genuine creativity, then we have here an account of how the creativity of the Creator can operate through the creativity of human (and perhaps other mammalian) creatures.

I conclude that inspiration is best not construed along the lines of Plato's *Ion*; with Boden that creativity is continuous with standard human faculties; that it standardly involves participation in traditions and communities, whether rules are broken or not; with Farrer that inspiration can be made possible when observation of rules liberates an author for creative freedom; and that Farrer's metaphysical sense of inspiration opens up possibilities of the creativity of the Creator underlying the creativity of any and perhaps every minded creature.

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