Towards a “Dialectics of Creativity”

Hand in hand with the transformations of the capitalist economy over the last half century, the notion of creativity has become a new watchword and this in at least two different ways. On the one hand creativity has assumed the role of a new norm for what is to be taken for the good life. As such it has effectively replaced the neo-Christian (initially: Protestant) virtues of duty, responsibility and piety. On the other hand the notion of creativity developed into the linchpin for justifying income inequality and as such the battle cry par excellence for neo-liberal ideology. The altered situation of creativity in the social landscape can perhaps be highlighted nicely with two historical images closely epitomizing the creative individual of their respective times. Whereas the romantics celebrated the poète maudit, who has to pay by suffer for his or her divine gifts with outsiderdom, the neoliberal creator par excellence is the successful entrepreneur who lives in the center of society showered with attention and riches. Its Vincent van Gogh versus Steve Jobs, if you like.

Not surprisingly this shift led to psychological and social scientific research on creativity which at the end of it aimed at enabling humans to teach and ultimately sell creativity as skill that can be learned, potentially by everyone. School and university curricula, the training and continuing education of businesspeople and other professionals, even the pursuit of hobbies of all sorts have been systematically geared toward making people more creative. I do not think it is far-fetched to argue that the pursuit of creativity has become commodified.

In this climate any thoughtless celebration of creativity has potentially harmful consequences. These range from contributing to the minimum wage prison of unskilled physical labor to undermining the very idea of creativity in some peculiar way. For nothing seems less creative than running with the herd.

In view of this situation one may wonder whether it wouldn’t be time to subject creativity to the same sort of critique that reason has been subjected to. There is nothing particularly creative in this move. It’s an old academic journeyman’s ruse that I am applying here ruthlessly copycatting from the old masters of the Frankfurt School. What we need is at least in my modest opinion, a kind of dialectics of creativity both as a theoretical enterprise and as a practice. And just like with the Frankfurt program of critiquing reason, which at no moment aimed at a celebration of unreason, of the irrational, the point of such an endeavor could not be the cultivation of the uncreative, the merely reproductive. Rather like helping to retrieve the powers of reason to deal with the potential destructiveness of instrumental reason, I would like to suggest with this paper a few gentle steps to save creativity from the potential onslaught of instrumental creativity.

Research has focused on creativity as an active process, as something people do. Domain transcendent border crossings involving the metaphorical transpositions of patterns from one domain to another have perhaps garnered most attention in this respect, closely followed by a notion of free play. Even though there is very little dispute today that both of these are important, it is much less clear how people manage to cross thresholds that is how they come to disregard
boundaries often deeply engrained and how they do really get themselves to play without inhibitions. I surmise that the passive components of the creative process are particularly important in both regards. Research has not overlooked these altogether by at least noticing the import of relaxation in the creative process.

In the next part of this paper I will give more thought to the passive aspects of creativity. In particular I will link these to Vipassana meditation practices and I will in particular explore both non-instrumentality and sensing and their relationship to creativity. I will extend this into some phenomenology-guided musings about mindfully perceiving art as a related phenomenon.

If time permits I will venture from here into the notion of imaginaries and their by no means automatic but nevertheless extant potential for subversion. I will explore this with insights garnered from Plato’s notion of creating in logos and perhaps ironically his framing of courage as tenacity.

Thus equipped I will return at the end once more to the question of a dialectic of creativity.