Research Statement

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My research interests are in the philosophy of mind and action, aesthetics, and, Kant. I am interested in questions about rational agency, including mental agency; self-consciousness and the epistemology of self-attribution; and the self and personal identity. Most of my work has explored these concepts through phenomena associated with creativity. Is having a creative idea an exercise of mental agency? Is being motivated to pursue creative work an exercise of rational agency? Are intuitions about the direction creative work should take a type of epistemic attitude, a species of metacognition, or something else?

My largest research project, which pursues these and other questions, is a philosophical examination of what Graham Wallas called the "illumination" phase of the creative process.[1] During this phase, one becomes conscious of an idea that seems promising or worth exploring, but before any conscious evaluation of that idea has taken place. Philosophers have not had very much to say about creative illumination. When the concept does appear in discussion, it is often treated as of mainly psychological interest, e.g., as involving "a mysterious process whereby ideas simply 'pop' into someone's mind."[2] This neglects the various philosophically interesting questions one might ask about it.

Suppose that someone has an idea for something new. The idea may be an image for a painting or theme for a piece of music. It may be a proposition to figure in a philosophical argument or mathematical proof. She not only has the idea. She is also motivated to pursue it. And she is motivated to pursue it because she finds it promising or worth exploring.

My work articulates and defends a set of claims about these distinguishable parts of creative illumination. The mental events of having the ideas are not exercises of mental agency. Acting on the motivation to explore the ideas is not an exercise of rational agency. The self-consciousness one has during the mental event is different from the kind one has while, for example, thinking through a simple deductive argument. The "self" of which one is conscious when having creative ideas is not quite the self of which one is conscious in everyday thinking and reasoning.

Taken together, these claims form what I tentatively call a *selfless* account of creative illumination. At present, the account takes shape over several papers; my plan is eventually to incorporate them into a book.

"Creative Feeling" (under review) develops ideas at the heart of the account. Creative people in many different disciplines have *creative intuitions*. These are experiences that make some idea seem promising or worth pursuing, but before any conscious evaluation of those ideas has taken place. For example, in "Mathematical Creation" Henri Poincaré

[1] Wallas, Graham. (1926). *The Art of Thought*. J. Cape: p. 86.
[2] Livingston, Paisley. (2005). *Art and Intention*. Oxford University Press: p. 31.

describes having mathematical ideas and feeling completely certain they are true, before attempting to verify those ideas by giving a proof.

One thing that cases of creative intuition seem to have in common is *feeling*. Poincaré mentions a feeling of certainty, but there are others: feelings of knowing, of urgency, of fascination with some idea. What kind of feeling are these "creative feelings"? One might think they are *epistemic*, also sometimes called "metacognitive," feelings, examples of which include feelings of knowing, familiarity, and learning. I argue that this isn't right. Many creative feelings are *aesthetic*, of the same kind as the feeling one may have about a moving piece of music.

The crux of the paper is its claim about what the aesthetic feeling is a response to: When someone has a creative intuition, I argue, they have an aesthetic feeling in response to the mental activity in which they are engaged, and, by virtue of that response, they ascribe an aesthetic property to that mental activity. One implication of this claim is that having a creative intuition is an intrinsically rewarding experience. Another is that the mental activity of the one having the creative intuition satisfies norms of aesthetic evaluation; it is, aesthetically, as it ought to be. That mental activity is characterized not only by the (causal) psychological processes that generate the ideas, but also by the normative properties those processes can have.

The argument in "Creative Feeling" concerns creativity in any domain for which creativity is possible. It concerns creative intuitions in art, mathematics, and science. The papers I describe in what follows are focused on specifically artistic creativity.

Having a creative intuition is motivating; creative intuitions initiate the process of making new work. But how so exactly? I pursue this question in "Creative Motivation."

The answer I develop has its foundation in Kant's aesthetic theory. According to the argument in "Creative Feeling," when artists have a creative intuition, they ascribe aesthetic properties to their mental activity. In doing so, they take aesthetic pleasure in that mental activity. This pleasure, I argue, is *disinterested* in Kant's sense, which Kant develop in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. And, as Kant argues, such pleasures can be motivating. When an artist takes disinterested pleasure in her mental activity and is motivated to engage in creative activity, she is moved by a *creative motive*. I argue that acting creative motives does not amount to an exercise of rational agency. When an artist acts on a creative motive, she remains passive with respect to that motive.

In "Aesthetic Insight and Mental Agency" (forthcoming, *The British Journal of Aesthetics*), I turn from rational agency in the sense connected with motivation to mental agency. I argue that artists do not exercise mental agency over their creative intuitions, or as I call them in that paper, "aesthetic insights." I argue that an artist's having an aesthetic insight is not something the artist does for a reason. The argument turns on general principles about responding to reasons, as well as principles about the particularity of aesthetic evaluation—that is, the absence of general rules for determining whether it is right to ascribe an aesthetic property to something.

"Inspiration and Self-Consciousness" pursues one of the quintessential observations about creative inspiration, namely that artists often experience their ideas as coming from some other source or agency than themselves. The Muses, for example, were a very early suggestion about what that source might be. I argue that claims of this kind are best understood as reporting a distinctive kind of self-consciousness. As in "Creative Motivation," my argument here is rooted in Kant, but largely in claims he makes in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, rather than in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.

In the first *Critique*, Kant claims that conceptually-structured mental activity of a certain kind helps explain the consciousness we have of ourselves as thinkers, distinct from any of the particular thoughts we have. Such conceptually-structured mental activity helps explain this distinctive type of self-consciousness. I argue that, in creative illumination, mental activity is not conceptually-structured in the way it is during episodes of thinking. Nonetheless, by virtue of being as it ought to be, aesthetically, the mental activity is structured enough to support a kind of self-consciousness. I call this kind "alterior self-consciousness." This type of self-consciousness specifies the content of the artist's experience that her ideas come from something other than herself.

I have other papers in progress on closely related issues. "Impersonal Expression" (under review) examines the role of self-expression in creating art. While some artists encourage self-expression in the creative process, others caution against it. What are they disagreeing about? What alternative do the cautious have in mind? After critically discussing some potential answers, I argue that the artists who caution against self-expression are recommending a different way—an *impersonal* way—of expressing feeling in the process of creating art. Expressing feeling in this impersonal way does not lead to self-knowledge in the same way that self-expression does.

In "Lucky Artists" (revise and resubmit), I argue that artists, and performers especially, exercise a distinctively non-practical type of control over their bodily movements, which I call "receptive control." For an example, think of a pianist who doesn't need to carefully monitor her bodily activity because of her training and skill. I argue that, to affect fine-grained, aesthetically-relevant details of her performance, such as tone and dynamics, she listens to the results of her playing, and she imagines the way she wants it to sound. Neither of these, I argue, are practical—that is, control-oriented—attitudes toward her playing. Neither are intentions to play a certain sequence of notes, for example, or even intentions to play the passage in some particular way. Each nonetheless recruits bodily activity. Both listening and imagining in this way are, I argue, instances of exercising receptive control.

In future work, I plan to develop these lines of argument into an account of creativity in all its phases. Much of the important groundwork is in place. The bodily activity by which artists create works of art is an exercise of receptive control, not intentional control. Acting on the motivation produced by creative illumination is not an exercise of rational agency. Events of creative illumination themselves are not an exercises of rational *mental* agency, but they do involve a distinctive kind of self-consciousness. But what about a positive characterization? What is creative illumination if it is none of the above? Is it

essentially passive, akin to perception? Is it to be thought of as a species of passive imagination? These are questions for future work.

In addition to this work on human creative activity, I also plan to examine the extent to which computer programs, especially varieties of generative AI, could count as exercising creativity. I also have work in progress on the aesthetic of (human-made) digital art, especially work that involves what is called “procedural noise” in computer graphics.