**Toward a Theory of Creativity**

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I maintain that there is a desperate social need for the creative behaviour of creative individuals. It is this which justifies the setting forth of a tentative theory of creativity - the nature of the creative act, the conditions under which it occurs, and the manner in which it may constructively be fostered. Such a theory may serve as a stimulus and guide to research studies in this field[[1]](#footnote-1).

**The Social Need**

Many of the serious criticisms of our culture and its trends may best be formulated in terms of a dearth of creativity. Let us state some of these very briefly:

In education we tend to turn out conformists, stereotypes, individuals whose education is "completed", rather than freely creative and original thinkers.

In our leisure time activities, passive entertainment and regimented group action are overwhelmingly predominant while creative activities are much less in evidence.

In the sciences, there is an ample supply of technicians, but the number who can creatively formulate fruitful hypotheses and theories is small indeed.

In industry, creation is reserved for the few - the manager, the designer, the head of the research department - while for the many, life is devoid of original or creative endeavour.

In the individual and family life, the same picture holds true. In the clothes we wear, the food we eat, the books we read, and the ideas we hold, there is a strong tendency toward conformity, toward stereotype. To be original or different is felt to be "dangerous".

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Why be concerned over this? If, as a people, we enjoy conformity rather than creativity, shall we not be permitted this choice? In my estimation such a choice would be entirely reasonable were it not for one great shadow which hangs over all of us. In a time when knowledge, constructive and destructive, is advancing by the most incredible leaps and bounds into a fantastic atomic age, genuinely creative adaption seems to represent the only possibility that man can keep abreast of the kaleidoscopic changes in his world. With scientific discovery and invention proceeding, we are told, at the rate of geometric progression, a generally passive and culture-bound people cannot cope with the multiplying issues and problems. Unless individuals, groups and nations can imagine, construct and creatively revise new ways of relating to these complex changes, the lights will go out. Unless man can make new and original adaptations to his environment as rapidly as his science can change the environment, our culture will perish. Not only individual maladjustment and group tensions, but international annihilation will be the price we pay for a lack of creativity.

Consequently it would seem to me that investigation of the process of creativity, the condition under which this process occurs and the ways in which it may be facilitated, are of the utmost importance. It is in the hope of suggesting a conceptual structure under which such investigation might go forward that the following sections are offered.

**The Creative Process**

There are various ways of defining creativity. In order to make more clear the meaning of what is to follow, let me present the elements which, for me, are a part of the creative process, and then attempt a definition.

In the first place, for me as scientist, there must be something observable, some product of creation. Though my fantasies may be extremely novel, they cannot usefully be defined as creative unless they eventuate in some observable product - unless they are symbolised in words, or written in a poem, or translated into a work of art, or fashioned into an invention.

These products must be novel constructions. This novelty grows out of the unique qualities of the individual in his interaction with the materials of experience. Creativity always has the stamp of the individual upon its product, but the product is not the individual, nor his materials, but partakes of the relationship between the two.

Creativity is not, in my judgement, restricted to some particular content. I am assuming that there is no fundamental difference in the creative process as it is evidenced in painting a picture, composing a symphony, devising new instruments of killing, developing a scientific theory, discovering new procedures in human relationships, or creating new formings of one's own personality as in psychotherapy. (Indeed it is my experience in this last field, rather than in one of the arts, which has given me special interest in creativity and its facilitation. Intimate knowledge of the way in which the individual remoulds himself in the therapeutic relationship, with originality and effective skill, gives one confidence in the creative potential of all individuals.)

My definition, then, of the creative process is that it is the emergence in action of a novel relational product, growing out of the uniqueness of the individual on the one hand, and the materials, events, people or circumstances of his life on the other.

Let me append some negative footnotes to this definition. It makes no distinction between "good" and "bad" creativity. One man may be discovering a way of relieving pain, while another is devising a new and more subtle form of torture for political prisoners. Both of these actions seem to me creative, even though their social value is very different. Though I shall comment on these social valuations later, I have avoided putting them in my definition because they are so fluctuating. Galileo and Copernicus made creative discoveries which in their own day were evaluated as blasphemous and wicked, and in our day as basic and constructive. We do not want to cloud our definition with terms which rest in subjectivity.

Another way of looking at this same issue is to note that to be regarded historically as representing creativity, the product must be acceptable to some group at some point in time. This fact is not helpful to our definition, however, both because of the fluctuating valuations already mentioned, and also because many creative products have undoubtedly never been noticed, but have disappeared without ever having been evaluated. So this concept of group acceptance is also omitted from our definition.

In addition, it should be pointed out that our definition makes no distinction regarding the degree of creativity, since this too is a value judgement extremely variable in nature. The action of the child inventing a new game with his playmates; Einstein formulating a theory of relativity; the housewife devising a new sauce for the meat; a young actor writing his first novel; all of these are, in terms of our definition, creative, and there is no attempt to set them in some order of more or less creative.

**The Motivation for Creativity**

The mainspring of creativity appears to be the same tendency which we discover so deeply as the curative force in psychotherapy - man's tendency to actualise himself, to become his potentialities. By this I mean the directional trend which is evident in all organic and human life - the urge to expand, extend, develop, mature - the tendency to express and activate all the capacities of the organism, to the extent that such activation enhances the organism or the self. This tendency may become deeply buried under layer after layer of encrusted psychological defences; it may be hidden behind elaborate facades which deny its existence; it is my belief, however, based on my experience, that it exists in every individual, and awaits only the proper conditions to be released and expressed. It is this tendency which is the primary motivation for creativity as the organism forms new relationships to the environment in its endeavour most fully to be itself.

Let us now attempt to deal with this puzzling issue of the social value of the creative act. Presumably few of us are interested in facilitating creativity which is socially destructive. We do not wish, knowingly, to lend our efforts to developing individuals whose creative genius works itself out in new and better ways of robbing, exploiting, torturing, killing other individuals; or developing forms of political organisations or art forms which lead humanity into paths of physical or psychological self-destruction. Yet how is it possible to make the necessary discriminations such that we may encourage a constructive creativity and not a destructive one?

The distinction cannot be made by examining the product. The very essence of the creative is its novelty; and hence we have no standard by which to judge it. Indeed, history points up the fact that the more original the product, and the more far-reaching its implications, the more likely it is to be judged by contemporaries as evil. The genuinely significant creation, whether an idea, or a work of art, or a scientific discovery, is most likely to be seen at first as erroneous, bad or foolish. Later it may be seen as obvious, something self-evident to all. Only still later does it receive its final evaluation as a creative contribution. It seems clear that no contemporary mortal can satisfactorily evaluate a creative product at the time that it is formed, and this statement is increasingly true the greater the novelty of the creation.

Nor is it of any help to examine the purposes of the individual participating in the creative process. Many, perhaps most, of the creations and discoveries which have proved to have great social value, have been motivated by purposes having more to do with personal interest that with social value, while on the other hand, history records a somewhat sorry outcome for many of those creations (various Utopias, Prohibition, etc.) which had as their avowed purpose the achievement of the social good. No, we must face the fact that the individual creates primarily because it is satisfying to him, because this behaviour is felt to be self actualising and we get nowhere by trying to differentiate "good" and "bad" purposes in the creative process.

Must we then give over any attempt to discriminate between creativity which is potentially constructive and that which is potentially destructive? I do not believe this pessimistic conclusion is justified. It is here that recent clinical findings from the field of psychotherapy give us hope. It has been found that when the individual is "open" to all of his experience (a phrase which will be defined more fully) then his behaviour will be creative and his creativity may be trusted to be essentially constructive.

The differentiation may be put very briefly as follows. To the extent that the individual is denying to awareness (or repressing, if you prefer that term) large areas of his experience, then his creative formings may be pathological or socially evil or both. To the degree that the individual is open to all aspects of his experience, and has available to his awareness all the varied sensings and perceivings which are going on within his organism, then the novel products of his interaction with his environment will tend to be constructive both for himself and others. To illustrate, an individual with paranoid tendencies may creatively develop a most novel theory of the relationship between himself and his environment, seeing evidence for his theory in all sorts of minute clues. His theory has little social value, perhaps because there is an enormous range of experience which this individual cannot permit in his awareness. Socrates, on the other hand, while also regarded as "crazy" by his contemporaries, developed novel ideas which have proven to be socially constructive. Very possibly this was because he was notably non-defensive and open to his experience.

The reasoning behind this will perhaps become more clear in the remaining sections of this paper. Primarily, however, it is based upon the discovery in psychotherapy:

"... *that if we can add to the sensory and visceral experiencing which is characteristic of the whole animal kingdom the gift of a free and undistorted awareness of which only the human animal seems fully capable, we have an organism which is as aware of the demands of the culture as it is of its own physiological demands for food or sex; which is just as aware of its desire for friendly relationships as it is of its desire to aggrandise itself; which is just as aware of its delicate and sensitive tenderness toward others as it is of its hostilities toward others. When man's unique capacity of awareness is thus functioning freely and fully, we find that we have, not an animal whom we must fear, not a beast who must be controlled, but an organism able to achieve, through the remarkable integrative capacity of its central nervous system, a balanced, realistic, self-enhancing, other-enhancing behaviour as a resultant of all these elements of awareness. To put it another way, when man is less than fully man - when he denies to awareness various aspects of his experience - then indeed we have all too often reason to fear him and his behaviour, as the present world situation testifies. But when he is most fully man, when he is his complete organism, when awareness of experience, that peculiarly human attribute, is most fully operating, then he is to be trusted, then his behaviour is constructive. It is not always conventional. It will not always be conforming. It will be individualised. But it will also be socialised."[[2]](#footnote-2)*

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**The inner conditions of Constructive Creativity**

What are the conditions within the individual which are most closely associated with a potentially constructive creative act? I see these as possibilities:

1. **Openness to experience: Extensionality**

This is the opposite of psychological defensiveness, when to protect the organisation of the self, certain experiences are prevented from coming into awareness except in a distorted fashion. In a person who is open to experience, each stimulus is freely relayed through the nervous system without being distorted by any process of defensiveness. Whether the stimulus originates in the environment, in the impact of form, colour or sound on the sensory nerves, or whether it originates in the viscera, or as a memory trace in the central nervous system, it is available to awareness. This means that instead of perceiving in predetermined categories ("trees are green", "college education is good", "modern art is silly") the individual is aware of this existential moment as it is, thus being alive to many experiences which fall outside the usual categories (this tree is lavender, this college education is damaging, this modern sculpture has a powerful effect on me).

This last suggests another way of describing openness to experience. It means lack of rigidity and permeability of boundaries in concepts, beliefs, perceptions and hypotheses. It means a tolerance for ambiguity where ambiguity exists. It means the ability to receive much conflicting information without forcing closure upon the situation. It means what the general semanticist calls the "extensional orientation".

This complete openness of awareness to what exists at this moment is, I believe, an important condition of constructive creativity. In an equally intense but more narrowly limited fashion it is no doubt present in all creativity. The deeply maladjusted artist who cannot recognise or be aware of the sources of unhappiness in himself may, nevertheless, be sharply and sensitively aware of form and colour in his experience. The tyrant (whether on a petty or grand scale) who cannot face the weakness in himself may nevertheless be completely alive to and aware of the chinks in the psychological armour of those with whom he deals. Because there is the openness to one phase of experience, creativity is possible; because the openness is only to one phase of experience, the product of this creativity may be potentially destructive of social values. The more the individual has available to himself a sensitive awareness of all phases of his experience, the more sure we can be that his creativity will be personally and socially constructive.

1. **An internal locus of evaluation**

Perhaps the most fundamental condition of creativity is that the source or locus of evaluative judgement is internal. The value of his product is, for the creative person, established not by the praise or criticism of others, but by himself. Have I created something satisfying to me? Does it express a part of me - my feeling or my thought, my pain or my ecstasy? These are the only questions which really matter to the creative person, or to any person when he is being creative.

This does not mean he is oblivious to, or unwilling to be aware of, the judgement of others. It is simply that the basis of evaluation lies within himself, in his own organic reaction to and appraisal of his product. It to the person it has the "feel" of being "me in action", of being an actualisation of potentialities in himself which heretofore have not existed and are now emerging into existence, then it is satisfying and creative and no outside evaluation can change that fundamental fact.

1. **The ability to toy with elements and concepts**

Though this is probably less important than A or B, it seems to be a condition of creativity. Associated with the openness and lack of rigidity described under A is the ability to play spontaneously with ideas, colours, shapes, relationships - to juggle elements into impossible juxtapositions, to shape wild hypotheses, to make the given problematic, to express the ridiculous, to translate from one form to another, to transform into improbable equivalents. It is from this spontaneous toying and exploration that there arises the hunch, the creative seeing of life in a new and significant way. It is as though out of the wasteful spawning of thousands of possibilities there emerges one or two evolutionary forms with the qualities which give them a more permanent value.

**The Creative Act and its concomitants**

When these three conditions obtain, constructive creativity will occur. But we cannot expect an accurate description of the creative act, for by its very nature it is indescribable. This is the unknown which we must recognise as unknowable until it occurs. This is the improbable that becomes probable. Only in a very general way can we say that a creative act is the natural behaviour of an organism which has a tendency to arise when that organism is open to all of its inner and outer experiencing, and when it is free to try out in flexible fashion all manner of relationships. Out of this multitude of half-formed possibilities the organism, like a great computing machine, selects this one which most effectively meets an inner need, or that one which forms a more effective relationship with the environment, or this one which discovers a more simple and satisfying order in which life may be perceived.

There is one quality of the creative act which may, however, be described. In almost all the products of creation we note a selectivity, or emphasis; an evidence of discipline; an attempt to being out the essence. The artist paints surfaces or textures in simplified form, ignoring the minute variations which exist in reality. The scientist formulates a basic law of relationships, brushing aside all the particular events or circumstances which might conceal its naked beauty. The writer selects those words and phrases which give unity to his expression. We may say that this is the influence of the specific person, to the "I". Reality exists in a multiplicity of confusing facts, but "I" bring a structure to my relationship to reality, I have "my" way of perceiving reality, and it is this (unconsciously?) disciplined personal selectivity or abstraction which gives to creative products their aesthetic quality.

Though this is as far as we can go in describing any aspect of the creative act, there are certain of its concomitants in the individual which may be mentioned. The first is what we may call the Eureka feeling - *"This is it!" "I have discovered!" "This is what I wanted to express!"*

Another concomitant is the anxiety of separateness. I do not believe that many significantly creative products are formed without the feeling: "*I am alone. No one has ever done just this before. I have ventured into territory where no one has been. Perhaps I am foolish, or wrong, or lost, or abnormal*."

Still another experience which usually accompanies creativity is the desire to communicate. It is doubtful whether a human being can create, without wishing to share his creation. It is the only way he can assuage the anxiety of separateness and assure himself that he belongs to the group. He may confide his theories only to his private diary. He may put his discoveries in some cryptic code. He may conceal his poems in a locked drawer. He may put away his paintings in a closet. Yet he desires to communicate with a group which will understand him, even if he must imagine such a group. He does not create in order to communicate, but once having created he desires to share this new aspect of himself-in-relationship-to-his-environment with others.

**Conditions fostering Constructive Creativity**

Thus far I have tried to describe the nature of creativity, to indicate that quality of individual experience which increases the likelihood that creativity will be constructive, to set forth the necessary conditions for the creative act and to state some of its concomitants. But if we are to make progress in meeting the social need which was presented initially, we must know whether constructive creativity can the fostered, and if so, how?[[3]](#footnote-3)

From the very nature of the inner conditions of creativity it is clear that they cannot be forced, but must be permitted to emerge. The farmer cannot make the germ develop and sprout from the seed; he can only supply the nurturing conditions which will permit the seed to develop its own potentialities. So it is with creativity. How can we establish the external conditions which will foster and nourish the internal conditions described above? My experience in psychotherapy leads me to believe that by setting up conditions of psychological safety and freedom, we maximise the likelihood of an emergence of constructive creativity. Let me spell out these conditions in some detail, labelling them as X and Y.

**X = Psychological Safety**

This may be established by three associated processes:

1. **Accepting the individual as of unconditional worth**

Whenever a teacher, parent, therapist or other person with a facilitating function feels basically that this individual is of worth in his own unfolding, no matter what his present condition or behaviour, he is fostering creativity. This attitude can probably be genuine only when the teacher, parent, etc. senses the potentialities of the individual and thus is able to have an unconditional faith in him, no matter what his present state.

The effect on the individual as he apprehends this attitude is to sense a climate of safety. He gradually learns that he can be whatever he is, without sham or facade, since he seems to be regarded as of worth no matter what he does. Hence he has less need of rigidity, can discover what it means to be himself, can try to actualise himself in new and spontaneous ways. He is, in other words, moving towards creativity.

1. **Providing a climate in which external evaluation is absent**

When we cease to form judgements of the other individual from our own locus of evaluation, we are fostering creativity. For the individual to find himself in an atmosphere where he is not being evaluated, not being measured by some external standard, is enormously freeing. Evaluation is always a threat; always creates a need for defensiveness; always means that some portion of experience must be denied to awareness. If this product is evaluated as good by external standards, then I must not admit my own dislike of it. If what I am doing is bad by external standards, then I must not be aware of the fact that it seems to be me, to be part of myself. But if judgement based on external standards are not being made then I can be more open to my experience, can recognise my own likings and disliking, the nature of the materials and of my reaction to them, more sharply and more sensitively. I can begin to recognise the locus of evaluation within myself. Hence I am moving toward creativity.

To allay some possible doubts and fears in the reader, it should be pointed out that to cease evaluating another is not to cease having reactions. It may, as a matter of fact, free one to react. "*I don't like your idea*" (or painting, or invention, or writing), is not an evaluation but a reaction. It is subtly but sharply different from a judgement which says: "*What you are doing is bad (or good) and this quality is assigned to you from some external source.*" The first statement permits the individual to maintain his own locus of evaluation. It holds the possibility that I am unable to appreciate something which is actually very good. The second statement, whether it praises or condemns, tends to put the person at the mercy of outside forces. He is being told that he cannot simply ask himself whether this product is a valid expression of himself, he must be concerned with what others think. He is being led away from creativity.

1. **Understanding empathically**

It is this which provides the ultimate in psychological safety, when added to the other two. If I say that I "accept" you, but know nothing of you, this is a shallow acceptance indeed, and you realise that it may change if I actually come to know you. But if I understand you empathically, see you and what you are feeling and doing from your point of view, enter your private world and see it as it appears to you - and still accept you - then this is safety indeed. In this climate you can permit your real self to emerge and to express itself in varied and novel formings as it relates itself to the world. This is a basic fostering of creativity.

**Y = Psychological Freedom**

When a teacher, parent, therapist or other facilitating person permits the individual a complete freedom of symbolic expression, creativity is fostered. This permissiveness gives the individual complete freedom to think, to feel, to be whatever is most inward within himself, concepts and meanings which is a part of creativity.

Note that it is complete freedom of symbolic expression which is described. To express in behaviour all feelings, impulses, and formings may not in all instances be freeing. Behaviour may in some instances be limited by society, and this is as it should be. But symbolic expression need not be limited. Thus to destroy a hated object (whether one's mother or a rococo building) by destroying a symbol of it, is freeing. To attack it in reality may create guilt and narrow the psychological freedom which is experienced. (I feel unsure of this paragraph, but it is the best formulation I can give at the moment which seems to square with my experience).

The permissiveness which is being described is not softness or indulgence or encouragement. It is permission to be free, which also means that one is responsible. The individual is free to be afraid of a new venture as to be eager for it, free to bear the consequences of his mistakes as well as of his achievements. It is this type of freedom responsibly to be oneself which fosters the development of a secure locus of evaluation within oneself, and hence tends to bring about the inner conditions of constructive creativity.

**Putting the theory to work**

There is but one excuse for attempting to discover conceptual order and stating it in a theory; that is to develop hypotheses from the theory which may be tested. By such testing, profitable directions for action may be found and the theory itself may be corrected, modified and extended. Thus if this theory which I have tentatively formulated is worthwhile, it should be possible to develop from it hypotheses which might be objectively tested in classes in the arts; in education outside of the arts; in leadership training groups, whether in industry or the military services; in problem-solving groups of any sort. Let me suggest a few of the general hypotheses which might be given more specific and operational form for any of the above groups. They would apply whether one was concerned with the development of creative artists or creative leaders; with originality of design or creative methods of problem solving.

**Hypotheses regarding inner conditions**

1. Individuals who exhibit a measurably greater degree of conditions A, B and C (openness, internal locus of evaluation, ability to toy with materials) will, over any given period of time, spontaneously from more products judged to be novel and creative, than a matched group who exhibit a lesser degree of A, B and C.
2. The products of the first group will not only be more numerous but will be judged to be more significant in their novelty. (Such a hypotheses could be given operational definition in art classes, problem-solving groups or leadership training groups, for example).
3. Condition A (openness to experience) can be predicted from conditions B or C, which are more easily measurable. (It is not at all certain that this hypothesis would be upheld but it would be worth careful investigation. If conditions A, B and C are highly inter-correlated then they could jointly be predicted from the one which proved most easily measurable. Thus we might gain clues as to how we might less laboriously select graduate students, for example, with a high creative potential).

**Hypotheses re: fostering constructive creativity**

1. Given two matched groups, the one in which the leader establishes a measurably greater degree of conditions X1, X2, X3 and Y (psychological safety and freedom) will spontaneously, from a greater number of creative products, will be judged to be more significantly novel.
2. Conditions X1, X2, X3 and Y are not of equal importance in fostering creativity. By comparing different groups in which one or another of these conditions is emphasised or minimised, it may be possible to determine which of these conditions is most effective in facilitating creativity.
3. A group in which conditions X1, X2, X3 and Y are established should, according to our theory, have more effective and harmonious interpersonal relationships than a matched group in which these conditions are present to a lesser degree. (The reasoning is that if creativity is all of a piece, then a group in which the fostering conditions are established should be more constructively creative in social relationships.)
4. The extent to which different groups in our culture provide the fostering conditions (X and Y) could be measured. In this way one could determine whether creativity is now being fostered to a greater degree by the family group, classes in schools and colleges, bull sessions, social clubs and groups, interest groups, military groups, industrial groups. (One wonders how college classes would show up in such a comparison.)

**Conclusion**

I have endeavoured to present an orderly way of thinking about the creative process, in order that some of these ideas might be put to a rigorous and objective test. My justification for formulating this theory, and my reason for hoping that such research may be carried out, is that the present development of the physical sciences is making an imperative demand upon us as individuals and as a culture, for creative behaviour in adapting ourselves to our new world if we are to survive.

*"(F)aith in reason is not only a faith in our reason, but also - and even more - in that of others. Thus a rationalist, even if he believes himself to be intellectually superior to others, will reject all claims to authority since he is aware that, if his intelligence is superior to that of others (which is hard for him to judge), it is so only in so far as he his capable of learning from criticism as well as from his own and other people's mistakes, and that one can learn in this sense only if one takes others and their arguments seriously. Rationalism is therefore bound up with the idea that the other fellow has a right to be heard, and to defend his arguments ... One does not kill a man when one adopts the attitude of first listening to his arguments."*

*Karl Popper: The Open Society and its Enemies.*

1. That I am much indebted to the thinking of others will frequently be evident, but especially I am indebted to the Conference on Creativity called together by a sponsoring group from Ohio State University which nourished and vitalised my thinking and led me to produce the rough notes upon which this paper is based. The Conference was held at Granville, Ohio, December 5-8, 1952. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. From "Some of the Directions and End Points of Therapy" Carl R. Rogers, in Psychotherapy Theory and Research Methods, Ed. O.H. Mowere (New York: Homed Press, 1953) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *For this and the idea in the following paragraph I am specifically indebted to my student and colleague, Mr. Robert Lipgar.* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)