

Book Review

Achieving Extraordinary Ends: An Essay on Creativity

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I

Introduction: Sharon Bailin has written what to some will be a delightful book: to others however, it will appear dangerous. It will appear dangerous because Bailin claims to be demythologizing the current ideas about creativity, and "demythologizing" has always been a dangerous business. For example, Socrates set out to demythologize the poetry and the poets of his time, and we know what happened to him. In *Kerygma and Myth*, Rudolf Bultmann set out to demythologize Christian dogma. What followed was a reaction against liberal theology and the rise of Biblical literalism. Feminist thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir and Shulamith Firestone both worked to demythologize our notions of romantic love and motherhood, only to end with a society that is more eroticized than ever and women voting against the Equal Rights Amendment. Throughout history attempts to demythologize have either ended in harm for the person or in an ironic inversion of the intended end. One might wonder why this is so. To demythologize is to clear up waters that have been clouded by those who often wish them to appear deep. It is to make what has been veiled in

mystery clear and perspicuous. Why is it that such attempts are met with opposition? Perhaps humans naturally prefer mystery to clarity. For example, as the outward mysteries of the physical universe tend to be explained scientifically, many became infatuated with the apparently mysterious workings of the individual mind. Certain psychologists and teachers of creativity tell us that there is a unique storehouse of talent within. All we need to do is learn how to tap the source. For many moderns, creativity and the mysteries of the unconscious mind are the last bastions of the mysterious—and created works of art are its offspring. To such persons, to demythologize creativity is threatening, and they will surely be critical of Bailin's book.

Some people endorse mystery for ulterior motives. There has always been power associated with purveyors of mystery. The oracles of ancient Greece, the priests, and the poets all claimed to be seized with a divine force. Or consider the lover who mysteriously weaves a spell over the beloved—they are all enchanters and seducers and they all profit from their power. To demythologize their power, to explain it, is to dissipate their spell. Such folks, however, will not give up their power without a struggle.

There are others who believe that they are creative persons of special worth, even though nothing in fact has ever been created. For example, imagine a woman who believes she is creative, endowed with a special gift, "an artistic soul," as they

say, who is ironically always working on her first book. That is to say, she believes she is a creative artist, but has not created anything. (Simone de Beauvoir claims there are many women [and probably men] who live in such delusion and false consciousness.) Professor Bailin's book effectively dispels such an illusion. Such persons will not take kindly to her arguments.

To all of those people, those who benefit from the continuation of the myth of creativity, the book will be seen as a dangerous work—no doubt the work of some “demented rationalist mind,” steeped in the tradition of positivist science and analytic philosophy.

To some of us, though, Bailin's work is delightful. It is just what is needed in a field clouded with ambiguity, myth, and indefensible claims. “Creativity”—the activity grounded in the hidden powers of the soul or the muse—is brought to light for careful analysis, much like the Wizard of Oz is brought from behind his curtain and ironically, by virtue of the unveiling, all are better off than when living an illusion. Bailin shows that we can better employ our potentials and creative powers when these powers are understood and open to public scrutiny.

To my mind, a most beneficial thing about the work is that the analysis of creativity is not limited to artistic creativity. The reader gets far more than he or she bargained for. Some of the most insightful criticism and demythologizing are aimed at those philosophers of science (Feyerabend, Kuhn, and company) who would mystify the scientific method, much like artistic creativity is mystified by some aestheticians.

II

Summary of Arguments: *Achieving Extraordinary Ends* is divided into five chapters. “Each takes a critical look at one of the aspects of the contemporary view of creativity” (4). First, the contemporary

view is that creativity involves *originality*. Being original, creative acts and works involve a radical break with the past. Likewise, creative thinking is disconnected from the traditional order of accepted patterns of thought.

Second, most believe that because creativity transcends the ordinary and the commonplace, creative works cannot be judged by the same standards by which we judge ordinary things. Evaluation then becomes quite personal or *subjective*.

Third, the contemporary view sees the creative process or creative thinking as quite different from ordinary logical thinking. It transcends logic, breaks rules, and involves spontaneous leaps or breaks with the past.

Fourth, because creative thinking goes beyond the rules of reason and logic, the rules and methodologies of the normal academic disciplines are thought to be constraining to the creative mind, locking one into the conceptual frame of the commonplace.

And fifth, many hold that creativity involves an *inexplicable* transcendent element which escapes reasonable or logical explanation. Creativity involves inspiration, mystery, and emotion.

All in all, the contemporary view of creativity aims to mystify it, to set it apart from the normal processes of understanding, production, and judging. Let us quickly examine Bailin's criticisms of each of these claims.

III

Chapter One: “Originality” What's wrong with the claim that “Creativity involves something original which leaps across the *tradition*”? The problem is that there are many counter-examples to this claim. What we call novelty or originality can usually be seen as a continuous development that grows out of a well-defined tradition. Great works in music, art, and science all provide numerous examples. What we

call innovation is better understood as variation on ideas already present in a tradition or perhaps a reaction to certain problematic issues or ideas in the tradition. Part of Bailin's argument against the discontinuity thesis is to show that all acts of understanding are linked to what is understood within some familiar framework or Gestalt. The figure is only understood from within a familiar ground. If anything were radically new and hence totally discontinuous with the tradition, it would not be understandable—as she says, “it would be unintelligible to us because we would have no context within which to understand it” (10). So to speak of created works as totally discontinuous with a current tradition is also to make them beyond understanding, which is clearly not the case.

Finally, Bailin points out that even if some act were truly “original,” totally different from anything else, that would not entail that it was creative in any *significant* or artistic sense. For example, a child's doodling may be absolutely “original” but it has no artistic or creative merit. This sort of thinking about creative merit leads naturally to the second question of how we ascribe value to created work.

Chapter Two: “Values” A) The dominant attitude towards the value of created works follows from the position that creative works are discontinuous with their traditions. One can argue that if original created works (both in art and science) are truly novel or beyond the tradition, how can the tradition evaluate these works? Evaluation assumes the values and standards of taste of the particular tradition. Hence any work that is radically different from the tradition cannot be evaluated in an honest fashion. This position leads to a kind of aesthetic relativism. If the tradition cannot evaluate a new work by its own standards, aesthetic judgment and evaluation become something personal or subjective. Such thinking is quite popular and extends beyond aesthetics to the evaluation of all created works, including the evaluation of

scientific theories and rationality in general.

In response to such thinking Bailin points out that the first premise of the argument is false. Works of art are not discontinuous with their traditions, so it is false to claim that works cannot be evaluated by the standards present in the tradition. We often judge works as representative of a certain kind of work that exemplifies certain qualities proper to that type. For example, we judge a play by what is communicated to the audience, whether it allows us to gain a deeper understanding of the human condition, or perhaps whether the work opens up new ways of understanding social phenomena, or perhaps whether the work pointed towards new possibilities for human relations and social justice. If a play did none of these things, but was merely mindless entertainment, we would not judge it as a great work of art. Hence, there are objective factors, complex though they may be, that allow us to judge works. The fact that we have trouble stating the necessary and sufficient conditions of a great work does not entail that there are no objective criteria.

Bailin also points out that while all artistic response does involve a level of subjective judgment, the judgments can be changed through such objective factors as education, understanding, and experience. For example, a film like *My Dinner With André*, which may be quite boring and unintelligible to the average seventeen year old adolescent, can be seen as a masterful portrayal of some of the basic ideas in Kierkegaard's and Heidegger's philosophies once the viewer has read the appropriate works. The subjective response depends on objective components such as historical knowledge and education.

B) In the case of evaluating scientific theories, some argue that because the methods for evaluating competing theories assume a certain historical context or traditional framework, any radically new theory that does not assume the values and methodology of the tradition cannot be

evaluated from within the tradition.

Bailin criticizes this view by pointing out that if one is doing *science*, then there are certain general guidelines (no matter how they are contrived) that one follows. For example, referring to the work of Harvey Siegel, she claims that any acceptable scientific theory must offer some kind of explanation for the phenomena in question; second, the acceptability of the explanation should be testable by some means; and third, the theory should have some inductive or evidential support. If one is doing science, there is a commitment to these methods of evaluation, however the methods are refined through practice. Evaluation or theory selection is not purely subjective; if it were the people would be doing something besides science.

In summary, we judge both art and science in terms of how well they achieve their particular ends. Science aims at deeper understanding of the objects of study and so progresses as understanding progresses. Art offers us changing perspectives on the human condition and a variety of techniques for expressing these insights. Assuming that the audience has the needed understanding of the work, art can be judged for how well it achieves its purpose. The same is true when evaluating scientific theories. The fact that standards of taste change and that the manner of evaluating theories changes does not entail that evaluation is purely subjective or that just any theory is as good as the next.

Chapter Three: "Product, Process, and Person" Bailin next demythologizes the various questionable, though nonetheless popular, beliefs about the relationships between the created product, the creative process, and a creative person.

1) First, she criticizes the position that there can be creative persons in spite of the fact that they have created nothing of any recognizable worth. Such a position would follow from the assumption that it is impossible to evaluate created works. As she says, "If reasonable evaluation is impossible,

who's to say what I create is of little value?" But given the previous critique of the subjective or relativist approach to evaluation, this position is based upon a very questionable assumption. We have already seen that there are objective methods for evaluating created works. Hence, praise of persons for possessing the virtue of creativity should be reserved for those who actually produce something of worth.

2) Bailin next criticizes those who believe that the creative process involves a distinctive way of thinking which transcends ordinary logical thought. She argues that there is no qualitative distinction between creative and "normal logical ways of thinking." If she is correct, then all of those special courses that teach one to be creative are misguided, and, given her critique, should be changed to critical thinking courses.

Creative thinking, Bailin says, is not a distinctive way of thinking, but rather a response to the problems or anomalies in any field. And it is not qualitatively different from other modes of problem solving. We mistakenly assume that there are different modes of thought because of the varying speed that people solve problems or create works. While some people solve problems slowly and methodically through trial and error, others solve them through apparently instantaneous insight. But, those who claim that quickness entails a different mode of thought ignore the fact that usually such insight occurs with people who are very familiar with the area in which they are working. They are able to jump many steps in a process, while the uninitiated or less-familiar must plod along. Knowledge of the traditions then does not constrain creativity, but rather allows people to sort things out and posit a solution more quickly. And finally, those who work slowly through a problem are *not* less creative than those who seem to possess great insight or quickness of wit. The proof of creative capacity is in the product.

From a philosophical point of view, one

of the most important parts of this chapter is the critique of the claim that creative thinking is different from ordinary logical thought because creative thought goes beyond the limiting framework of reason and logic. Bailin's attack goes to the heart of the issue by challenging (as Davidson, Trigg, Grimshaw, and others have done) the very idea of a conceptual framework. One troubling question for all who talk of radically different frameworks which give rise to different ways of understanding is: What characteristics of a person would be sufficient to conclude that the person was operating from some radically different framework? Could it be age, sex, race, eye-color, education, origin, religion, or college major? If each difference is enough to constitute a qualitatively different conceptual framework, and each person does in fact possess a different set of such qualities, then communication is surely impossible. There would be as many frameworks as there are people, since each of us is different. There may be different ways of looking at issues, but this does not mean there are such radically different frameworks with different rules for correct thinking.

To those who claim that different academic disciplines have different ways of thinking, Bailin points out that within disciplines there are no clearly defined special rules for thinking. For example, there are no rules for thinking in a scientific fashion, as opposed to a psychological fashion, or philosophical fashion. Thinking is thinking. If people think in radically different fashions in different disciplines, how would interdisciplinary studies be possible? Yet they are not only possible, but quite popular. In fact, one teacher often teaches in a variety of departments: art, literature, and philosophy. Does this mean that the teacher has to think differently depending upon the course? That is hardly the case. One certainly doesn't have to change the rules of inference depending upon the class.

Bailin claims that even if there were such things as clearly defined conceptual

frameworks it would not follow that they impose limits on creativity. Frameworks help us be creative problem solvers. Even in a game such as chess where there are relatively few pieces and clear rules for play, the possible moves for the competent player are infinite. And, as in all thinking, the more we understand the rules, past games, and problematic situations, the more creative we can be.

Bailin's final question concerning the process of becoming creative is whether or not there is a special recipe for generating creative thought. There does not seem to be, because for every acclaimed procedure, there are counter-examples. Different artists and scientists have different standard operating procedures in order to produce.

The same can be said of "the creative personality." The more one studies those who have in fact created works of worth, the more one sees that there are no universal personality traits. The research by Howard Gardner has also shown that the ability to be creative in one area has little connection with being creative in others. Those who are quite creative in math and logic are not necessarily creative or even competent in music or language.

Chapter Four: "Rules, Skills, and Knowledge"

In the fourth chapter Bailin returns to the question of what helps and what hinders creativity. The basic issue is whether too much skill or knowledge is a dangerous thing for creative souls. It is claimed that as one becomes a skillful practitioner within any field, one develops certain ways of seeing, certain habits of mind, or certain routines that inhibit the ability to be creative (88-89). Some claim, moreover, that the creative mind must go beyond the everyday rules, patterns of knowledge, and skills.

A quick empirical study shows that in most arts there are rules that limit and guide what can be done, and knowing these rules will enhance one's ability to be creative. High accomplishment in any field is possible both within the general accepted way

of doing things and by going beyond the tradition. In music, for example, one could hardly *not* call J.S. Bach creative, yet he was a person who possessed great skill in and knowledge of music, and who worked always within the accepted forms of his time. He simply wrote *better* fugues than anyone else, and many more of them.

Rather than skills being a hindrance to creativity, skills should be understood as involving the critical judgment and expertise necessary for success in any field. Rather than limiting one's possibilities for creativity, technical abilities increase the odds for success. For example, the more skill one has at manipulating symbols in working mathematical proofs, the more energy one can devote to the questions of meta-mathematical theory. The more technical expertise one has at writing poetry, the more creative energy there is to focus on word choice, symbolism, or metaphor. Bailin claims, ". . . one is, in fact, more likely to be in a position to go beyond or change rules, to make a breakthrough and advance a discipline if one is working at an extremely highly skilled level . . ." (97).

Philosophers of science also make the argument that the rules which underlie any scientific methodology "are specific to the particular framework" and hence "cannot be of assistance when what is required is the transcending of the framework" (98). But when a truly revolutionary discovery is made, what is needed is just this kind of transcendence. So, thinkers such as Kuhn and Feyerabend claim that rules inhibit the creativity of the scientist. Feyerabend points out that in the actual practice of science, scientists often ignore the canons of the scientific method and of evidence, and that such a practice is to be commended. It is to be commended because, according to Feyerabend, all observation statements are theory-laden, and it is observation that counts for evidence. Hence, what is thought to be objective evidence is theory-laden. So, if one follows accepted methods of inquiry, there could never be any evidence for a

radically new scientific theory that transcended the existing framework. What is needed, then, are scientists who are willing to break the established rules and posit new creative ways of looking at things.

Bailin brings out a number of problems with this position. First, it assumes the troublesome idea of a framework, which itself has been discredited. Second, it assumes that creative theories are radically different from their predecessor, and this has been shown false in Chapter One. Third, Feyerabend is claiming that there are no rules or standards by which we can examine existing theories, hence theory choice becomes a matter of commitment rather than evidence. This position has already been refuted in Chapter Two. If one is going to do science, one must look at the explanatory power of the theory, there must be some notion of evidence, and there must be some appeal to inductive support.

So the scientists who oppose rules or given methodologies fall prey to the same arguments as the artists. Familiarity with the established methodologies of science are in fact helpful to the creation of new works and theories. Especially in the case of science, it is the scientist who understands the problems of existing theories who is most likely to be able to transcend the present state of affairs and posit a new theory or explanation.

Chapter Five: "The Something More?"

The final issue Bailin treats is the serious question that has been lurking in the background throughout—the question of imagination, soul, or inspiration in the creative process.

Bailin has defined creativity as "the process of excellent thinking and performing in an area" (129). "Excellent thinking" has been defined as highly skilled, rational thought. Skill at this highest level involves careful reflection, judgment, and critique, rather than rote algorithmic manipulations. The question is: Given such an account, where is the imagination, innovation, or the "fancy" of which so many creative people

speak? Isn't there an ineffable quality to works and so a mystical quality of creation?

First, one might ask why anyone would believe that creativity is a mysterious process that involves "something more" besides highly developed skill and rational abilities. This belief could be explained by the almost magical effect that certain works of art have on the audience. Something more seems to be going on besides technical expertise. Yet such observations do not entail the conclusion. Often the audience's response to a work can be explained through a careful analysis of the work. The work is shown to be the skilled contrivance of an artist who knew how to achieve the desired emotional response in the audience. We don't think there is something magical going on when a politician gives a well designed rhetorical speech in order to achieve a desired response in the constituency. Those who understand rhetoric know that the speaker has consciously manipulated the audience through the careful use of language, pseudo-argument, and symbolism. Why should one believe that artists are any different? In fact, the study of a work of art tends to show how the creator in a deliberative, self-conscious fashion has achieved her desired end and how the emotional response was created.

The process of creation, Bailin contends, is best understood as constructive inquiry or an experimental trial-and-error process governed by certain rules and materials present in each art form, rather than some mystical innovative process. Imagination and insight may provide new ideas, "hypotheses," but the instantiation of these ideas is a careful laborious process, one that usually involves much revision. Such an activity is anything but a cool, emotionless activity. Far from lacking inspiration, emotion, and passion, such an account of creative inquiry assumes the emotions of wonder, curiosity, inquisitiveness, intrigue, and openness. It assumes a love of truth and a fascination with new and deeper levels of understanding. Those who would claim that

the skilled scientist or artist is the antithesis of the creator because the former lacks emotion misunderstand the nature of the creative inquirer.

The text ends with a brief section on fostering creativity. As might be expected, Professor Bailin suggests that artistic ability is proportionate to one's skill and that a high level of skill in any area is conducive to imagination. The greater one's understanding of a given area, the higher the probability that the person will see the problems indigenous to the discipline and be able to solve them creatively. As she says, creativity "is more likely to emerge through the encouragement of knowledge, skill, and critical thought within alive and dynamic traditions" (130). These are traditions (whether in science, art, or the humanities) that are portrayed in all of their evolutionary nature, always undergoing change and modification, in order to deal with new problems and respond to new insights. She concludes that to become a participant in the dynamic process, students must have "an indepth understanding of the principles and procedures of the discipline, of the method whereby inquiry proceeds, of the standards according to which reasons are assessed, and of the overall goals and deep questions which are at issue" (130). Once students are aware of the important issues that are alive in the discipline and are given the tools to try to solve some of the problems, they will be inclined to become creative players in the dialogue. There is no need to posit such mysterious qualities as inspiration or fancy.

IV

Conclusion: In conclusion, Professor Bailin has begun by telling us that she is going to demythologize the current view about creativity. But, as one works through the book one sees that many more myths are being exposed, some of great philosophical importance; that is, the myth of discrete conceptual frameworks, the myth

of the relativity of aesthetic judgment, the myth of the relativity of scientific explanation and theory choice, the myth of static disciplinary knowledge and methods of inquiry, the myth of the creative personality, the myth that logic is a limitation to creativity, and the myth that reasoned inquiry is contrary to emotional involvement. One sees that an analysis of the notion of human creativity leads one to a careful rethinking of some of philosophy's most basic issues.

And so another human mystery, another complete set of myths, the myth of creativity, bites the dust at the hand of "clear-eyed analytic philosophy." But, before we rejoice (or moan) we should remember that Socrates thought he had shown that poetry could not be explained by the appeal to the myth of divine inspiration, because, if it were, how could one explain bad poetry? Yet, some 2300 years later poetry continues to have a magical quality, and poets continue to appeal to the muse.

Kant told us long ago that humans were enthralled with mystery and would not cease doing metaphysics simply because it had been shown to be a futile endeavor. And so, I suspect that even though Professor Bailin's book has done a masterful job of demythologizing the predominant views of creativity, there will continue to be college classes on the "the creative process" and self-help books on how to tap our creative energies. People are in love with the mysterious. It has, much like Rorty's description of relativism, "a deliciously naughty appeal." It promises to take us away from our average-everydayness, and offers a last-ditch defense against the probes of human rationality. Those guardians of mystery who support the status quo will no doubt be very critical of Bailin's fine book.

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