From Creative Pleasures to Creative Motives
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Abstract. An artist begins her creative work because she is desires to do so. What kind of desire is this? My answer is an account of creative motivation. I first argue that, when artists recognize worthwhile ideas for new work, they take pleasure in those ideas, and that this pleasure is disinterested, in the sense Kant develops in the Critique of the Power of Judgment. I then argue that, when artists they take disinterested pleasure in their ideas for new work, they can be motivated to create on the basis of those ideas. Creative motivation of this kind interacts in unusual ways with other fundamental practical concepts. To illustrate, I argue that acting on it is not an exercise of rational agency. The account of creative motives I propose unifies two aspects of creative experience: the recognition that some ideas are worth pursuing, and the motivation to pursue them.

An artist begins the creative process because she is motivated to do so. She has a desire to begin working with some particular ideas or images she has in mind and not others. What kind of desire is this?

Artists often report having some kind of feeling in response to new ideas they have; they are intrigued or excited by them. The poet Mark Doty talks about being “struck” by an image, for example.1 Maybe creative desire should be explained in just those terms. Artists simply feel like beginning their work with something they have in mind because they are intrigued or excited by it. Maybe the feeling is of the same kind as whatever grounds other cases of feeling like doing something, as when I feel like doing a cartwheel, or feel like having ice cream rather than cake.2

But there is reason to think the artists’ feeling is more complex than this. Doty says more than that he is struck by an image. He says that, when he is struck by it strongly enough to begin working with it, there is some gravity or charge to it that makes him feel a need to investigate it.3 And he distinguishes this gravity or charge from the appeal of “lovely things,” which on its own does not motivate him to work.4

Whatever you think about Doty’s descriptions, it is plausible that artists begin their work with some ideas or images rather than other because they recognize their potential for realizing aesthetic properties. They recognize that the ideas are, in this sense, worthwhile. Nick Zangwill calls such recognitions aesthetic insights.5 Doty, so understood, recognizes that a poem in which his charged image figured would have aesthetic properties; it would be listless, for instance. It is also plausible the artists recognize ideas as worthwhile by virtue of having the same kind of feeling in response to them as we have in response to objects to which we ascribe aesthetic properties.

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1 Doty 1997, 70.
2 Chang 2004 discusses cases of “feeling like” in this sense.
3 Doty 1997, 70.
4 Ibid.
5 Zangwill 2007, 43.
properties. In both cases, there is a complex kind of satisfaction or sense of approval and liking that, for convenience, I will call aesthetic pleasure. This is what Doty, in his own words, is describing. He is struck by an image, which seems to have some gravity or charge: meaning, I suggest, he takes aesthetic pleasure in the image.\(^6\)

This aesthetic pleasure is a prime candidate for explaining artists’ motivation. If recognizing ideas for new work as worthwhile motivates artists to begin working—as it does Doty—and if artists recognize ideas as worthwhile by virtue of the aesthetic pleasure they take in them, then surely that pleasure is part of the account of the motivation. The artist’s motivation flows from the pleasure, in something like the way our motivation to have another piece of cake flows from the pleasure we took in the first piece.

However, there is a long tradition of distinguishing the aesthetic, on one hand, from the practical, moral, even the theoretical, on the other.\(^7\) One aspect of this tradition is the thought that aesthetic pleasures is, in one way or another, cut off from motivation. Kant’s concept of disinterested pleasure, which we take in objects in judging them to be beautiful, is an exemplary instance. According to the standard gloss, Kant claims that, in order to take disinterested pleasure in something, we must not have desires concerning it.\(^8\) Kant’s text encourages the interpretation; in the Critique of the Power of Judgment, at the beginning of the Analytic of the Beautiful, Kant seems to suggest that taking disinterested pleasure in something requires that we not care about its existence (5:205).\(^9\) If the artist’s pleasure in some idea she has for new work is disinterested, though, and such pleasures require not caring about the existence of their objects, then the artist must not care whether the idea exists or not. But this doesn’t sound at all like the kind of pleasure that could explain the artist’s motivation. Surely the motivation to create something cannot flow from a pleasure that requires not caring whether an idea exists or not.

One response would be to remove some of the barriers between the aesthetic and the practical in some explicit way, conceiving aesthetic value explicitly in terms of reasons for action.\(^10\) While appealing for its own reasons, this strategy is not forced on us by the traditional ideas. Kant explicitly allowed for the possibility of being motivated by our grasp of aesthetic value. More than that, I will argue, his account supports a plausible and powerful account of creative motivation, one that puts interesting pressure on some of our fundamental practical concepts. This pressure is a result of the distinctness of the aesthetic and the practical, and would be lost by assimilating them.

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\(^6\) I will assume this same basic kind of aesthetic pleasure is involved in ascribing aesthetic properties, like gracefulness, and aesthetic values, like beauty. It is plausible there is a distinct between the two, but it will not be important for my discussion here. See Zangwill 1995.

\(^7\) For some discussion, see Guyer 2005, 26-28.

\(^8\) E.g., Ginsborg 1997: a disinterested pleasure “must not presuppose or otherwise entail any desire for the object” (335). And Moran 2017: disinterested pleasure is “free from the compulsion or determination of desire, interest, or need” (72).

\(^9\) All citations of the 3rd Critique are to the Cambridge Edition. I cite using the volume and page number of the standard Akademie editions, which the Cambridge Edition reproduces.

\(^10\) As in, e.g., Lopes 2018.
I will be arguing for several different claims. I will argue that the aesthetic pleasure artists take in their worthwhile ideas for new work—their *creative pleasure*—is disinterested the sense Kant develops in the third *Critique*. I will then argue that disinterested pleasures can give rise to motivation to engage in creative activity. Creative pleasures can account for creative motives. In arguing as much, I show how Kant explicitly made the commonsense claim the disinterested pleasures we take in, e.g., natural objects and works of art, can be motivating. I extend this claim to the case of creative pleasures, which Kant did not discuss. Finally, I begin examining the relationship between creative motivation and rational agency. To act on a creative motive is not, I will argue, to exercise rational agency.

Above I sketched out some reasons for believing that artists take aesthetic pleasure in their worthwhile ideas for new work. I do not think this sketch fully justifies the claim, for which I argue at length in other work. In what follows, then, I will treat it as a plausible assumption.

I begin by explaining Kant’s concept of disinterested pleasure.

1 Disinterested Pleasure

When we ascribe beauty to an object, according to Kant, we take pleasure in it—setting aside whether the ascription is the pleasure itself or is rather based on some distinct, antecedent event of consciously registering the pleasure. And, Kant says, that pleasure has a particular quality. It is *disinterested*. Disinterested pleasures are meant to be distinct from another type of pleasure, which Kant calls an *interest*.

A pleasure is an interest when the representation of what brings us pleasure is, in part, a representation of its existence. Kant puts it this way: “[t]he satisfaction that we combine with the representation of the existence of an object is called an interest” (5:204). Kant discusses two types of interest. The first is that we take in something because of its goodness, either instrumental or intrinsic. When I judge that a table is instrumentally good, for example, as a place to my drink, I am pleased by it. And my pleasure depends, in part, my representing the good object as existing. I am pleased by an actual instantiation of goodness.

The second type of interest Kant discusses is that we take in something we judge it to be agreeable. These interests concern what appeals to the senses, rather than what we judge to be good. When I taste some chocolate, for example, and the sensation brings me pleasure—I judge the chocolate to be agreeable. This pleasure, too, depends on my representing the chocolate as existing, as really causing my sensation. I am pleased by an actual sensation, not something I take to be hallucinated or even vividly imagined.

What is it, though, to represent an object as existing? Kant is not as explicit as one would like about this, so I suggest the following. We represent an object as existing when our representation of it covaries with one or more salient beliefs
about the object’s causal history, including its causal dispositions or powers. The beliefs are salient not in the sense that they are necessarily conscious; we need not explicitly entertain thoughts about causal history when we represent an object as existing. Whether conscious or not, the beliefs are salient in the sense that they are actively primed to shape inference and behavior, in ways I explain below. And the covariation here is not incidental. It is what you might call constitutive covariation. What constitutes a representation of existence is its covariation with relevant salient beliefs about causal history.

Making this explicit helps make sense of the connection between interests and desire, in Kant’s view. In fact, all pleasures have a connection with desire, in Kant’s view. Consider Kant’s formula for pleasure, in general. Pleasure, he says, is “the consciousness of the causality of a representation with respect to the state of the subject, for maintaining it in that state” (5:220). Now think about the interest I take in the table. I judge it is good and take pleasure in that goodness. In taking the pleasure, I am conscious that my representation of the table is disposing me to maintain it. And, because my pleasure is an interest, my representation of the table is a representation of existence, which covaries constitutively with salient beliefs about the table’s causal history. In being disposed to maintain my representation of the table, then, I am disposed to protect those beliefs—without them, my representation would not be one of existence. In being disposed to protect the beliefs, in turn, I am disposed to protect the object of those beliefs. Meaning: I am disposed to keep something around that satisfies those beliefs, which is to be disposed to protect the existence of the table.

The same goes (mutatis mutandis) for the chocolate. My sensation of the chocolate is pleasing. In taking that pleasure, I am conscious that my sensation—my representation of the object of my pleasure—is disposing me to maintain it. I am, in other words, conscious of being disposed to keep sensing the chocolate. And because my pleasure is an interest, my representation (my sensation) is a representation of existence. Since I am disposed to keep sensing the chocolate, I am disposed to protect the beliefs with which my sensation constitutively covaries. I am disposed, more importantly, to protect the existence of their object. Which is to be disposed to keep some chocolate around, or seek out more if I have eaten it all.

In both cases, my pleasure is really best understood as the consciousness of my investment in or involvement with the existence of its object. In taking those pleasures, I feel, as Jane Kneller puts it, the need for the existence of their objects.

11 Kant clearly had in mind beliefs of this kind when he introduces the idea. He mentions not liking things because they were made to be gaped at, or because exploited labor used to build them (5:204). These are both beliefs about causal history.

12 It’s plausible that the relevant beliefs will also bear on phenomenology, but I won’t insist on that. Think of seeing a dog. Your first representation is of the dog as existing—you have various beliefs about its causal history. Then you’re shown that the dog is a cardboard cutout. It’s not just that the relevant beliefs go away (and are replaced by different beliefs), but your experience of the dog is different.

13 Kneller 2009, 61.
I desire their existence. It is in this sense that to take an interest in something is, in large part, to desire its existence.

Now the pleasure we take in an object when we ascribe beauty to it isn’t an interest, according to Kant. The pleasure we take in beauty is disinterested. This means several different things, in Kant’s account. Suppose I take disinterested pleasure in a friend’s new handmade table, judging it to be beautiful. That my pleasure is disinterested means, for one thing, that it is not caused merely by my sensing the table, as my pleasure in the chocolate is. It is also not one I take because I judge the table to be good.¹⁴ My disinterested pleasure could persist even were I to lose the ability to recognize the object as a table, at all.

More significantly, though, and more controversially, that my pleasure is disinterested means that my representation of the table is not a representation of existence. It does not constitutively covary with beliefs about the table’s causal history. More strongly, I suggest: the pleasure’s being disinterested requires the absence of such covariation; it’s not that the disinterested pleasure need not turn on beliefs about causal history, but rather that they do not. My representation of the table turns on no beliefs about where it came from, its causal dispositions or powers. All that matters for the disinterested pleasure I take in the table is the way it appears to me. It is that appearance alone that is the source of pleasure.

This is precisely where Kant’s concept of disinterested pleasure seems to sever the connection with motivation. That my disinterested pleasure is pleasure means my representation of the table disposes me to maintain the representation. But that it is disinterested means that, so to speak, that’s it. My representation of the table is not a representation of existence, and so, in being disposed to maintain that representation, I am not disposed to protect the table’s existence. I do not desire its existence. I desire only to continue representing the table. I desire only to keep contemplating it.

Readers of Kant are often shocked or amused at this point. Isn’t this just wrong? Don’t we desire the existence of the objects in which we take disinterested pleasure, to which we ascribe beauty? You might moved by the beauty of some natural object or work of art and because of that desire its existence. You are moved to make sure the natural object becomes part of the new park the city’s planning, that the work of art gets into a museum. Aren’t these extremely typical cases?

Kant would have said yes. §§41-2 in the third Critique are dedicated to the types of interests we can take in objects of beauty—and because of their beauty—where this interest is combined with, and does not undermine, the disinterested pleasure we take in such objects. I examine these claims below. Before doing so, I turn attention to the pleasure artists take in their ideas for new work. I will argue that these creative pleasures are disinterested.

¹⁴ I might find the table good, of course. I might find it instrumentally good as a place to set my drink and be pleased by this goodness. But this is distinct from my disinterested pleasure, which is independent of this judgment.
2 Creative Pleasure is Disinterested

Why think the pleasure artists take in their worthwhile ideas for new work is disinterested? Set aside worries about whether such pleasures can be motivating in the right way; I will argue they can be. What reason is there to be believe the narrower claim that creative pleasures are disinterested?

On some views of creativity, an essential feature of it is that artists are not in control of the ideas they have for new work. In a now-classic book on creativity and the artistic process, The Gift, Lewis Hyde collects and examines various expressions of this idea. He quotes the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz, for example, saying: "I felt very strongly that nothing depended on my will, that everything I might accomplish in life would not be won by my own efforts but given as a gift." Gifts serve as the book’s orienting metaphor. According to Hyde, ideas for new work—creative inspiration—must be received; this is part of the nature of inspiration, in much the way it is part of the nature of gifts; gifts, too, must be received. As Hyde puts it, commenting on Milosz’s remarks: "Not all artists use these very words, but there are few artists who have not had this sense that some element of their work comes to them from a source they do not control."

Given the popularity and persistence of artist testimony like this, a good account of creative experience should be able to capture it, and do so in a way that reflects in the right way its popularity and persistence. The full account of what artists mean when they say that the source of their ideas is something other than themselves is a complex one, which I will not try to give here. What I want to argue here is this: it is a feature of the claim that artists take disinterested pleasure in their ideas that they do not experience themselves as the mental agents of those ideas. That artists have this experience of their ideas is built into the very claim that creative pleasures are disinterested. This “fit” is a good reason, I suggest, for believing the claim.

The suggestion might be surprising. Why should a claim about mental agency be connected in this way with a claim about pleasure? In fact, the connection falls in a relatively straightforwardly way out of the account of what it is for pleasure to be disinterested.

If the pleasure an artist takes in her new ideas is disinterested, her representation of those ideas—the ideas themselves, in this case—does not covary with beliefs about their causal history. This includes any belief about the artist herself being a part of that causal history. In the absence of such beliefs, the artist does not experience herself as the mental agent of her ideas.

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15 Hyde 2007, 186.
16 Ibid.
17 I pursue this account elsewhere. I argue that the artists should be understood as describing a distinctive type of self-consciousness.
18 This doesn’t mean artists can’t go on to consider the matter, to think about what its cause could be. Artists tend to do exactly this. There are the Muses, the unconscious. The claim is that, when the artist takes pleasure in her idea, judging it is worthwhile, that pleasure is one that does not covary with beliefs about causal history.
This is right, but it is quick; so consider the point in another way, through a contrast case. Consider cases of thinking, including both reasoning and any old entertaining of mental contents. One type of interest we might take in our thinking, I suggest, has its basis in the goodness that attaches to the thinking we judge as under our control, or our own doing. I might wonder absent-mindedly: “what does that cloud look like?”—and then think: “an elephant,” and be pleased by my thought just because I judge that I myself produced it. Or I might reason my way through a simple logic problem and take pleasure in the existence of my thinking. I take pleasure in it not because of any goodness attaching to the contents whose logical relations I discern, and not only because it is good as a piece of reasoning, but also because the reasoning is something I take myself to be doing. I take pleasure in the existence of my thinking because it displays the good of mental agency, in addition to whatever pleasure I derive from its goodness as a piece of reasoning.

The claim that artists take disinterested pleasure in their new ideas is, in part, the claim that this pleasure does not depend on their judging those ideas to display any kind of (practical or moral) goodness. It does not depend on their judging those ideas to display the good of mental agency, then. Which suggests, again, that when artists take disinterested pleasure in their ideas for new work, they do not experience themselves as the mental agents of those ideas. That pleasure does not turn on their judging that those ideas display the good of mental agency.

The claim here, strictly speaking, is that the artist’s creative pleasure does not depend on her judging that her ideas display the good of mental agency. This is not the claim that the artist judges it not to display that good. One can imagine someone making the former judgment, but not the latter one. It is possible that there is some artist who never considers the matter. Such an artist would take disinterested pleasure in what she has in mind, since she does not judge it displays the good of mental agency, and without judging it does not display that good. (For this reason, any pleasure she takes in what she has in mind, whether an idea for a work of art or not, will be disinterested.) For artists who think about mental agency, though—and given the popularity of books like Hyde’s there are clearly many of them—not judging that an idea displays the good of mental agency will amount to judging that the idea does not display that good.

The passages I cited from Hyde show that artists describe their own experiences having worthwhile new ideas in way that harmonizes with the claim that they take disinterested pleasure in those ideas. The former passages, I said, are a reason for believing the latter claim. The passages were brief, though, so consider something in with more detail.

Seamus Heaney, in his essay “Feeling Into Words,” offers his own interpretation of the creative mental activity that led Wordsworth to write his poem The Thorn. According to the historical record, Wordsworth was inspired to write his poem on seeing a hawthorn while out for a walk during a storm. According to Heaney’s interpretation of the event, on seeing the tree Wordsworth had a “slightly

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19 Heaney 1981.
abnormal, slightly numinous vision” of it; he came to be in an “engendering, heightened state,” in which he would begin writing his poem.\footnote{Heaney 1981, 50.} While Wordsworth was in this heightened state, Heaney says, “images and ideas from different parts of his conscious and unconscious mind were attracted by almost magnetic power. The thorn in its new, wind-tossed aspect had become a field of force,” one into which other mental contents, such as memories, visual and auditory imagery, were drawn.\footnote{Heaney 1981, 51, my emphasis.}

In order to get the mind working this way, Heaney says, Wordsworth—poets, generally—need “technique.” Technique, as Heaney explains, is the ability to allow a field of force like this to develop in the mind, to allow this “first stirring of the mind round a word or an image or a memory to grow towards articulation: articulation not necessarily in terms of argument or explication but in terms of its own potential for harmonious self-reproduction.”\footnote{Heaney 1981, 48.}

In this description, as I understand it, Wordsworth’s coming to have a worthwhile idea for a new work is what Heaney refers to as “the first stirring of the mind.” Wordsworth takes pleasure in this first stirring: this is what makes it natural for Heaney to describe Wordsworth as being in a heightened state; and this pleasure reflects the absence of any sense in Wordsworth that he has control over having his idea. And Wordsworth is brought to his creative condition of mind by a “vision,” is something not under his control. His enjoying that condition is a matter of facilitating a “stirring of the mind”—allowing it—rather than a matter of Wordsworth’s stirring his mind himself.

3 From Creative Pleasures to Creative Motives

I have argued that, when artists take pleasure in their worthwhile ideas new work—when they judge those are worth pursuing—their pleasure is disinterested in Kant’s sense. The main reason for thinking as much is that a central feature of the experience of disinterested creative pleasure is also a feature of artists’ descriptions of their own creative experiences. Artists say they do not experience their having ideas as under their control, and so does the claim that they take disinterested pleasure in those ideas.

This leaves us with an apparent obstacle, however which I explained briefly above. According to the typical reading of Kant, disinterested pleasures do not motivate us. While the pleasure we take in some chocolate might move us to get more, the disinterested pleasure we take in in the beauty of an object cannot, according to the typical reading, motivate us in the same way. The typical reading is mistaken, though—or better: incomplete. It is true that disinterested pleasure does not motivate in the same way interests do, but it is false that, in Kant’s view, disinterested pleasure do not motivate us. The same will be true of artists’ creative pleasures.
In §§41-2 of the third *Critique*, Kant describes two routes to taking an interest in objects of beauty in a way that does not corrupt the disinterested character of the pleasure we take in them. The first of these is via our interest in community, what Kant calls our “drive to society” (5:297). We can take an interest in objects of beauty because the existence of those objects makes it possible to communicate with others. If I find some object beautiful, a source of disinterested pleasure, I can have you reflect on the object, too; and if you also find it similarly pleasurable, we will each have managed to understand something about the other’s state of mind. Kant calls this an *empirical* interest in the beautiful.

We can also take an *intellectual* interest in the beautiful, as long as the object of the interest is specifically beautiful *nature*. Kant is more obscure here. This intellectual interest, he says, is connected with our interest in morality. When we find some natural object beautiful, nature appears to be organized in a way that fits with, or is suited to, the activity of our minds. It brings us aesthetic pleasure. Kant suggests this is something like a sign or a trace that nature is organized in a way that fits with, or is suited to, the project of realizing our moral ends—acting virtuously, for example—in which we have a standing interest (5:300). If there can be a fit between nature and our minds in the first case (when we find nature beautiful), then there is some reason to think there can be a fit between nature and our minds in the second case (our moral projects). We take an intellectual interest in beautiful objects because they are signs of that second type of fit.

In each of these two cases, the combination of the interest and the disinterested pleasure does not undermine the disinterested quality of the latter because the combination is, as Kant puts it, *indirect*. This suggests that Kant has a contrast in mind, that there can be a *direct* combination of pleasure and interest, but Kant’s language is misleading. There is no direct combination of pleasure and interest. Interests just are pleasures, where the representation of the object in which we take the pleasure is, among other things, a representation of existence. Any way of combining pleasure and interest will be indirect. But this is a quibble; the point Kant makes is an important one.

Imagine I take disinterested pleasure in a painting. I am aware the I am disposed to maintain my representation of the painting; that’s what it is to take pleasure in it. Since my pleasure is disinterested, my representation is not a representation of existence. I have no salient beliefs about the causal history of the painting. Nonetheless, on recognizing the quality of my pleasure—on ascribing beauty to the painting—I recognize it as something that will facilitate communicating my state of mind with others, and my drive to society is engaged. Then my representation of the object becomes a representation of existence; beliefs about causal history become salient; and now my pleasure is an interest: I recognize I am disposed to protect the existence of the painting, that I desire its existence. Here my pleasures are, in a sense, combined; my disinterested pleasure is combined with my interest.

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23 This means that taking an intellectual interest in natural beauties requires some standing disposition to be moral. Kant even suggests that taking an interest in natural beauties is a sign of a good moral character (5:300-1).
I cannot have both pleasures at once, of course. But I can, non-simultaneously, take both in one and the same object.\textsuperscript{24}

According to Kant, then, beauty can be motivating in all the ways we intuitively think it can be. We might, for example, take disinterested pleasure in some beautiful work of art and, because of that pleasure, come to desire the work’s existence, to get it into a museum. We might take disinterested pleasure in some beautiful tree and, because of that pleasure, come to desire the tree’s existence, to make sure it is part of a new park.

And the same general thought applies to the artists: they can take an interest in their worthwhile ideas for new work by virtue of the disinterested pleasure they take in those ideas. They can, in other words, come to desire the existence of their ideas. But what does this desire move them to do? Create a work of art, I want to argue.

\textit{ii.} It is not obvious that desiring the existence of an idea motivates artists to create new work. In fact, there is a worry that this desire, properly understood, can’t so motivate them.

Consider that when I desire the existence of a work of art I am moved to do things that will help ensure its continued existence. I am moved to make sure a museum buys it, or to donate to the museum that already has it. When an artist desires the existence of what she has in mind, then, it would seem like she should be moved to do things that will help ensure the existence of her idea. Such a desire might move her not to think about or do anything else, for example, in case either one would disturb her state of mind. This is not the desire to engage in creative activity, though. The worry is especially pressing if we think that an artist’s creating something on the basis of what she has in mind would terminate that state of mind, e.g., by serving as an articulation of it. If that’s so, then an artist’s taking an interest in her new idea would seem to lead precisely to a desire not to create anything on its basis. Her interest would amount to an anti-creative motive.

The worry is interesting but misplaced. First notice that we don’t respond to the interest we take in some pleasurable sensation by doing everything we can to prevent \textit{that very sensation} from going away. I am not moved to prolong the pleasing taste of chocolate cake by refusing to chew it, hoping my saliva won’t dissolve what’s in my mouth. Rather, I seek out more cake. This a realistic and intelligible expression of my interest.

Similarly for the artist: there will be a realistic and intelligible expression of the interest she takes in her idea, which is not just \textit{doing whatever it takes not to disturb her present state of mind}. And what is that? Plausibly, the artist’s representational

\textsuperscript{24} Kneller 2009 glosses the point in a slightly different way. She emphasizes the fact that the representation in which we take disinterested pleasure is a representation of “the form of the object,” and this “may or may not really exist” (62). As I understand Kneller, she means either that we do not, or cannot, form beliefs about the causal history of the form of the object. To take an interest in it, then, we need a different representation of the object, about which we form beliefs about causal history. My presentation of the point does not require these distinct representations, though it could be easily reformulated to accommodate the need for them.
state in having her idea is relatively unstable. It may come and go and vary in intensity over time, as many of our ideas do. The best way to maintain that representational state, then, is to externalize it, to make something concrete reflection on which can reliably bring about that very representational state. In desiring the existence of what she has in mind, in being disposed to maintain the existence of the very representational state she is in, the artist will be motivated to create. Such creative motivation is a realistic and intelligible expression of the artist’s interest.

The claim is made even more plausible by reflecting on the nature of the artist’s interest. The artist takes an interest in what she has in mind because it engages one of the two standing interests I described above. The empirical interest in community is a good candidate. The artist takes an interest in her idea because others would respond to being in the same representational state much in the way she does. She believes others would find it pleasurable, that is—in Kant’s terms, they, too, would be conscious of being disposed to maintain the existence of that very representational state. (The art appreciator will also be disposed to maintain her representation state, but for her the situation will be slightly simpler; there would already exist an artifact capable of bringing about that state of mind.) Creating a work of art, as a way of making that representational state more readily available to others, as well as to herself, is a realistic and intelligible expression of this interest. In taking an interest in what she has in mind, she is motivated to create not only as an effective way of ensuring the ongoing existence of her state of mind, but also because she believes doing so would facilitate to communicating her feeling to others.

There is a distinctive type of motive here. An artist has it when she takes an interest in what she has in mind by virtue of the disinterested pleasure she takes in it. More precisely, her taking an interest is, in part, her recognizing the presence of that motive. Call the motive she recognizes a creative aesthetic motive, or creative motive, for short.

This concept of creative motives raises important questions for the philosophy of action, and offers valuable resources for philosophically articulating important aspects of creative experiences. Pursuing these at length is a topic for another paper. In the final pages of this one, however, I want to broach the first issue in a general way, by examining the relationship between creative motives and rational agency.26

25 What about the intellectual interest? According to Kant, remember, an intellectual interest is only possible with respect to beautiful nature. I think it is possible for an artist’s idea to be the object of such an interest, for an idea to be natural in the appropriate sense. But this requires an argument that I cannot give here.

26 There are also what we should call receptive aesthetic motives. These are the motives we have when we take an interest in beautiful art or nature. I set these motives aside here, however. One reason is to keep discussion relatively focused. Another is it can seem more natural to ask action-theoretic questions about creative motives. Questions about whether to act and why are arguably more pressing for artists than they are for art appreciators. An artist may really wonder about the nature of her desire to write some long novel, the end of which she hasn’t even envisioned yet, while I do not wonder in the same way about donating to MOMA to help protect the existence of the Picasso I find beautiful. One caveat is that the same isn’t true for art collectors, e.g., those buying
4 Creative Motives and Rational Agency

It is a deep principle in some parts of practical philosophy that a certain kind of practical excellence—I will call it rational agency, but you could also call it personal autonomy or autonomous action—requires a kind of inner unity. Here is Christine Korsgaard in the introduction to “Self-constitution in the Ethics of Plato and Kant”:

The actions which are most truly a person’s own are precisely those actions which most fully unify her and therefore most fully constitute her as their author. They are those actions which both issue from, and give her, the kind of volitional unity which she must have if we are to attribute the action to her as a whole person.

Many other philosophers, including Harry Frankfurt, Tamar Schapiro, and Sarah Buss, have pursued the principle that rational agency—Korsgaard calls it here “actions which are most truly a person’s own”—require inner unity.

What are the inner elements to be unified? There are, on one hand, our impulses and inclinations to do certain things, which we simply find ourselves having, and, on the other, there are our more thoughtful, reasoned, deliberate judgments about what we should do. For example: I say to myself, “Oh it would be great to see a movie!” And then I think, “No, I need to work; it’s only 3pm; I’m supposed to be out having lunch and then getting back to it.” The first is an impulse or inclination, and the second is a more careful, reasoned, deliberate judgment about what I should do. When I see the movie despite my judgment, displaying weakness of will, I fail to exhibit the relevant kind of inner unity. I perform an action that is not most truly my own, not an exercise of rational agency. We would move into the territory of identification and alienation phenomena, explored especially by Frankfurt, were that desire to see the movie—that felt impulse to go buy a ticket and forget the rest—to persist despite my judgment, even unpleasantly. Then, we might say, I am “alienated” from that desire. It is “external” to me.

In a series of articles, Tamar Schapiro scrutinizes some of the core content and implications of this basic idea. In “On the Relation Between Willing and Wanting,” Schapiro begins by pointing out the hierarchical relation that is mostly implicit in it. The relevant inner unity, Schapiro points out, is not mere harmony, but requires regulation. It is the function of one type of motive—our thoughtful, deliberate judgments about what we should do—to govern or regulate another type of motive—our impulses or inclinations. Schapiro vivifies her discussion by calling

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27 Korsgaard 1999, 3.
29 According to such theories, “we have (at least) two distinct motivational capacities, or two distinct types of motives, such that the job of one is to govern and regulate the other. In Plato’s terms, ‘reason’ is to govern ‘appetite.’ In Kant’s terms, the rational ‘will’ is to govern ‘inclination.’ In more contemporary philosophy, ‘intentions’ have the ‘functional role’ of regulating ‘desires’ (Schapiro 2012, 334).
the source of these different types of motives different “selves.” The volitional self is the source of our rational motives. The inclining self is the source of our impulses or inclinations. In these terms, it is the function of our volitional self to govern or regulate our inclining self.

Schapiro’s primary concern is the question of what justifies the hierarchy. Why should the volitional self govern the inclining self? The fundamentals of her answer, which she develops in the paper, turn on an account of human nature. It is because I am a rational animal that “I need to base my responses on something more than associations of ideas; I need a justification for what I do. […] And to do this, I have to exercise my natural authority in a way that takes account of my rational capacity.” When we have an inclination, Schapiro says, we are divided, though without conflict, primitively exercising authority over ourselves. For this exercise of authority to be properly developed, such that being so determined is an exercise of rational agency, I need to bring my rationality to bear. I need to determine whether my thoughtful, reasoned judgment about what I should do agrees with how my inclining self is moving me.

Now what about creative motives? When an artist has a creative motive, is she internally divided? Is there, to use Schapiro’s expressions, an aesthetic self that should be governed by the volitional self, as the inclining self is?

There is prima facie reason for thinking that artists are internally divided when they have a create motive, which is not, I emphasize, to say they are internally conflicted. Artists do not experience their objects—ideas for new work—as under their control. What has its source in the volitional self, namely our thoughtful, reasoned judgments about what we should do, are not experienced this way; those judgments are experienced, rather, as under our control. If this is so, then plausibly the objects of creative pleasures, namely what the artists have in mind to create, does not have its source in the volitional self. Otherwise, they wouldn’t fail to experience it as under their control. When artists are moved to create, then, being so moved is not movement by the volitional self, and this means artists are internally divided when they have a creative motive.

Then the next question: can the artists overcome that division? Can the volitional self govern the aesthetic self in the way required for rational agency? These are the big questions, of course, but I want to argue briefly that the answer to both questions is no.

The simplest way to begin is by thinking about whether there is a justified hierarchical relationship between rational motives and creative motives, as there is between rational motives and inclinations. I suggest there is not. In some cases, the rational justifiably governs the aesthetic. If a creative motive moved an artist to make something it would be morally wrong to make, for example, the artist would be right not to act on that aesthetic motive. In other cases, however, it is plausible that the aesthetic justifiably governs the rational. It might be right to act on an

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30 Schapiro 2012, 338.
aesthetic motive in some particular cases even though there are rational motives to act otherwise, e.g., to maintain certain material comforts or even a certain standard of physical health. Plausibly, the same is not true of inclinations. These are always subject to governance by rational motives.

To strengthen the point, let me approach it along a different, slightly murkier path. In some cases, reason conflicts with inclination, and we exercise rational agency by acting according to reason. An example is the case of not going to see a movie in the middle of the day. Still, when reason approves of an inclination, there is a sense in which inclination has taken the lead. I prefer vanilla to chocolate, so I am inclined to have a scoop of vanilla ice cream rather than chocolate. All reason can do here is determine that it is permissible to act on the inclination. There are no normative reasons for having vanilla rather than chocolate. Practical normative reasons have run out; brute preference is free to take over.

To some extent, the same is true where aesthetic motives are at issue. Imagine some artist who has a creative motive to paint this particular landscape rather than another one. All reason can do is determine that it is permissible to act on that creative motive. There are no normative reasons for painting this landscape rather than another one. Practical normative reasons have run out; aesthetic considerations must take over.

But there is a crucial difference between the cases. In the case of brute inclination, when the practical normative reasons run out, there is, so to speak, nothing normative left over. There is only the causal mechanism (or whatever it is) that grounds my preference for vanilla over chocolate. In the creative case, by contrast, when the practical normative reasons run out, there is still something normative left over.

There is a genuine, if difficult to understand, sense in which we can be right and wrong in taking aesthetic pleasure in some things and not others. We can debate about whether something has some particular aesthetic property, whether it has aesthetic value. You can help me grasp an aesthetic property that I didn’t grasp before, where this is not just hitting me over the head with something and simply putting the work in front of me again. Rather, you can help me by pointing things out to me, getting me to see or hear them in a certain way, to make certain connections between parts of a work I wasn’t making before. The considerations that figure in these kinds of conversations, which form the substance of critical discourse in the arts, are reasons of a kind—not practical reasons, of course—but there is a kind of normativity to them.32 Conversations about what to take aesthetic pleasure in differ from conversations about which taste to prefer, chocolate or vanilla. The considerations that figure in the former, to repeat myself, are reasons of a kind, while those that figure in the latter are not.

The artist, too, in taking aesthetic pleasure in her ideas for new work, is evincing a kind of normative response, of a kind with the response we have to works of art. Her sense for the worth of her idea, its being a source of aesthetic pleasure,

is not like her sense that chocolate tastes better than vanilla. It is true that she can’t
discuss this pleasure with others in the way we can discuss the pleasure we take in
some finished work, but it is a normative response all the same. The artist might
wonder, as we do in thinking about our response to a movie, for example: why do
I like it? Am I right in doing so?

The question of whether to act on a creative motive, then, which the artist has
by virtue of her creative pleasure, is a question about how appropriate the pleasure
is to her new ideas. If the creative pleasure is strong and vivid, she has good
aesthetic reason to act on it. But there is a normative weight here that is inaccessible
to practical reason; practical reason plays little role in determining that weight. The
same is not true of inclinations. Inclinations have a strength and vividness, too, but
on their own have no inherent normative weight, or very little of it; we don’t try to
unpack reasons for our inclinations, but determine what reasons there are to act on
them. Again, this is not so where creative motives are concerned. At bottom, the
point is this: determining the strength of creative motives draws on our broadly
rational capacities, just as forming reasoned judgments about what to do does, but
the rational capacities drawn on are distinct. This counts against thinking there is a
strictly hierarchical relationship between the two types of motives, as there is
between rational motives an inclination.

For this reason, I want to suggest, when artists act on their creative motives,
they do not self-unify. They do not overcome the inner division created by the
appearance of the creative motive. In acting on creative motives, self-unification is
not possible.

This does not mean, however, that artists do not display some practical
excellence in acting on their creative motives, engaging in creative activity. As I
said, determining the strength of creative motives draws on our broadly rational
capacities, so satisfies Schapiro’s requirement in some sense. The practical
excellence artists display is just of a different kind from the one we display when
we self-unify. Rational agency, then, may not be the only practical excellence we
can display in action. There may be another: call it aesthetic agency. The rational
agent self-unifies. The aesthetic agent does not.

5 Conclusion

What does the aesthetic agent do if she doesn’t self-unify? What kind of practical
excellence does she display? I would like to suggest that she acts in recognition of
her inner disunity, not to say inner conflict. She recognizes the autonomy of the
aesthetic in her thinking about what to do. This is what I would like to suggest, but
I leave doing so for another paper. The issue is one of several to be developed
concerning the way creative motives interact with fundamental practical concepts.
Are creative motives themselves sources of reasons? Do the artists acting on them
identify with them or not?

In this paper, I have provided the groundwork for pursuing these further lines
of inquiry. When artists begin their creative work, I have argued, they have creative
motives, and by virtue of the creative pleasures they take in their ideas, where these creative pleasures are disinterested, in Kant’s full sense. In being so motivated, they do not experience themselves as the mental agents of their ideas, and their acting on such motives is not an exercise of rational agency. In conceiving creative motivation this way, the account unifies two aspects of creative experience that we would expect to be unified: the recognition that some ideas are worth pursuing, and the motivation to pursue them.

An even more general thought the account supports concerns the distinctiveness of creative phenomena. The various things artists say about their creative experiences suggest that those are distinctive in some way, different from their ordinary experiences of thinking and acting. Hyde’s book, *The Gift*, which I mentioned briefly in section 2, is evidence of this. It can be tempting, though, to dismiss what artists say as confabulation or something like it, assuming there is no good sense to be made of it. The argument in this paper suggests the opposite is true: there really is something distinctive about creative experiences. It does so by pursuing one small part of the picture: the distinctiveness of creative motivation.
References


