Inspiration and Self-Consciousness
Christopher Prodoehl

Lewis Hyde’s book on creativity, The Gift, explores the thought that artistic inspiration—having ideas for a new work of art—is like a gift, in the following sense: like a gift, inspiration must be received from something else. As Hyde puts it: “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.”

Some artists describe this source in radical ways. Jean Cocteau describes his creative experiences by saying, “I feel myself inhabited by a force or being—very little known to me. It gives the orders; I follow.” Then there is the poet Jack Spicer, who says that, in the process of writing poetry, the poet becomes more and more sensitive to “a difference between you and the Outside of you which is writing poetry,” so much so that “you feel less proud of the poem that you’ve written and know damn well it belongs to somebody else.” Such radical descriptions go at least as far back as the ancient Greek poets. In Plato’s Ion, Socrates says that, in performing a poem, poets are “inspired, possessed” by the Muse, “and that is how they utter all those beautiful poems.”

Even artists who don’t describe the source of their ideas as some external force or entity still talk in a way that suggests that they themselves—in some sense—are not the source of those ideas. The poet Mark Doty begins writing with certain images in mind because he has a sense that those images have a “gravity or charge” attaching to them. According to Doty: “Will doesn’t have much to do with this; I can’t choose what’s going to serve as a compelling image for me. But I’ve learned to trust that part of my imagination that gropes forward, feeling its way toward what it needs.” It is not Doty himself—his “will”—that selects his poetic imagery. It’s rather “that part” of his imagination that “gropes forward,” finding “what it needs.”

In each of these cases, there is what I will call an experience of inspiration. This is the experienced, specified by the various externalizing descriptions above, that something other than the artist herself is the source of her ideas for new work. The descriptions claim an external source for those ideas, and not just in the sense in which, e.g., perceptions have their source in something external to us. The artists’ externalizing descriptions appeal to something minded or mind-like: the Muses, a force of being little known to the artist, the autonomous imagination. Is there a way

1 Hyde 187.
2 Cocteau 1964, original emphasis.
4 Plato 1983, 533e.
5 Doty 1997, 70.
of making sense of these descriptions without appealing to anything supernatural? Are they just confabulation or magical thinking, or is there something more to them?

In what follows, I propose answers to these questions. I first argue briefly against the attempt to explain the experience of inspiration solely in terms of the absence of an experience of control. I then argue that experiences of inspiration are rather best understood in terms of a distinctive kind of self-consciousness.

That account will turn partly on claims for which I argue elsewhere, and which I explain in the course of discussion. It will also turn on some of the claims Kant makes about self-consciousness in the Transcendental Deduction of the Categories, in the Critique of Pure Reason. I will developing the following contrast. According to Kant in the first Critique, a certain kind of rationally-structured mental activity supports our being conscious of ourselves as thinkers, distinct from any of the particular thoughts we entertain. I will argue that, when artists have ideas for new work, their mental activity supports another, distinct kind of self-consciousness. This other kind is what specifies, I suggest, the content of experiences of inspiration.

1 The Absence of an Experience of Control

An experience of control is, roughly speaking, an experience of effort, plausibly together with a sense of the predictability of the results of the effort. I experience myself as in control of my reading a difficult text, in part, because I do so with effort, and plausibly also because, when I try to read carefully through the words on the page, I do so. My behavior predictably follows on my subjective sense of effort.

The experience of control offers one way of explaining the experience of inspiration. The latter experience is, either in large part or in whole, the absence of the former experience. Artists experience inspiration when they lack an experience of control over their ideas for new work.

T.S. Eliot seemed to suggest something like this. Properly understood, he said, when artists talk about inspiration, they are really talking about “the breaking down of strong habitual barriers—which tend to re-form very quickly. Some obstruction is momentarily whisked away. […] This disturbance of our quotidian character which results in an incantation, an outburst of words which we hardly recognise as our own (because of the effortlessness), is a very different thing from mystical illumination.”

It’s because artists do not experience control over their ideas that they think those ideas have some kind of external source. Artists take themselves to be the source only of what they sense as within their control, within the purview of foresight and effort, and so they confabulate, turning the absence of an experience of control into an experience of receiving ideas from something external to them.

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6 Eliot 1986, 138, my emphasis.
In the philosophical literature on inspiration, an absence of control seems to be the central mark of experiences of inspiration, though this is reflected more in the way terms are used without explanation than in any explicit claims about inspiration experience.

Consider Paisley Livingston’s discussion of the role of inspiration in the artistic process. Livingston explains inspiration as “a mysterious process whereby ideas simply ‘pop’ into someone’s mind.” Livingston wants to allow that inspiration plays a role in creating art, while maintaining that intentions and plans play a role, too, so he says things like this: “if these unconscious and relatively uncontrolled moments of creativity are to contribute to the realization of a work of art, they must be prepared for and informed by intentions and actions resulting from reasoning or deliberation.” Here “uncontrolled” appears to signal inspiration. In another passage, while insisting that intentions play a role in the creative process, Livingston says he does not “want to support the misleading idea that artists are fully rational and lucid beings who enjoy complete foresight and control over the creative process”—where enjoying “complete foresight and control” is opposed to inspiration, so that inspiration is, presumably, the absence of foresight and control.

Given this use of terms, it is reasonable to think that, in Livingston’s view, the absence of an experience of control would play an important, if not central, role in accounting for the experience of inspiration.

I want to oppose this whole line of thinking, however—from Eliot to Livingston. I do not deny that the absence of a sense of control is an important part of experiences of inspiration, but I do want to insist that the absence of a sense of control is not a characteristic feature of those experiences, so offers no route to understanding them, in particular.

A preliminary consideration is that there are many things over which we lack a sense of control, but which do not invite the same externalizing descriptions that experiences of inspiration do. If I were frightened suddenly by a noise, for example, I might lack any sense of control over my visual attention as it scans my surroundings, attempting to locate the source of the noise. However, this isn’t a case in which I am inclined to say, “Something else was working through me, scanning my surroundings.”

To really reveal the mistake in understanding inspiration experiences in terms of an absence of an experience of control, though, I want to develop, and then criticize, a good argument for so understanding them. Call it the deflationary argument:

Start by focusing on what Doty says: he trusts his imagination to feel its way toward “what it needs.” This is supposed to be an externalizing description, specifying an inspiration experience. It is a subtle, “internal” type externalization, though: the external source of Doty’s idea is his imagination functioning in a way that seems to him autonomous.

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8 Livingston 2005, 46.
9 Livingston 2005, 45, my emphasis.
Now notice this is a relatively familiar way of talking about other parts of ourselves. Suppose I lack any experience of control over my desire to drink root beer. I can’t predict when I’ll want some, but when I do, I do. While it would be unusual to say, “It wasn’t me; I was letting the craving for root beer come through me,” it would at least make sense for me to say something like this: “I trust my body to tell me what it needs. When it craves a soda, I drink one.” This is analogous to what Doty says: he trusts his imagination to feel its way toward what it needs. In both cases, there is an externalizing description.

If that’s so, then Doty’s case—the artistic case—requires no special explanation. Inspiration experiences are actually very common. All there is to them is, roughly speaking, the appearance of an idea worth pursuing, and an absence of a sense of control over the appearance of the idea. We might experience inspiration when craving something to eat or drink; artists might experience inspiration when coming up with ideas for new work.

There are at least two reasons for rejecting the deflationary argument. First, it groups its cases—having an idea for a work of art, having an idea about what to drink—largely because, on one hand, we can talk about the needs of the body, and, on the other, artists like Doty can talk about the needs of the imagination. But these are very different senses of needs. The body needs food and water and whatever else, and not in a metaphorical sense: without them, the body will cease to function. By contrast, it’s not obvious what the imagination’s needs could be, in Doty’s case—certainly not something without which the imagination would cease to function. Obviously, the imagination is doing something that produces the sense that it has needs, but what is it doing? And why is it the case that its doing that thing, whatever it is, produces the sense that it has needs? This should make us wary.

The second reason for rejecting the argument is more decisive. When we talk about the body’s needs this way, we are really talking about our own needs, e.g., our own needs for food and water. So I might use the language of my body’s needs to register the way my desires for what to eat can conflict with what my body “tells” me I should eat—I try to avoid sugar, for example, but sometimes I sense that my body craves it. Notice, however, that the body is nonetheless still felt very much to be my body, its needs my needs. I do not struggle to see my body’s needs as my own. By contrast, the way Doty talks suggests that the needs of his imagination do not, as a rule, seem like his own needs. This suggests that his experience is best captured, as a rule, in terms of that type of externalizing description that artists characteristically use for experiences of inspiration, whereas talk of the body’s needs is not.

But there is a stronger way to put the point. One thing the deflationary argument gets right is that we can in some cases my body can seem foreign to me, and to that extent like “something other than me.” I might want to continue walking through the city with you, for example, but have a pain in my knee that makes it hard to go on, and so I “listen to my body” and stop. I might think: this isn’t what I really want; why am I stuck with this creaky body? However, any description that
externalizes the body’s needs in this way can be reformulated, without distorting the experience, in other, internalizing terms. “That creaky body needs rest, but that creaky body is my body and its needs are my needs; I need some rest.” In cases like Doty’s, however, reformulations of this kind don’t seem appropriate in the same way. “That imagination is my imagination” sounds fine, but “its needs are my needs” doesn’t. Unlike the case of bodily needs, then, for which both internalizing and externalizing descriptions are appropriate, the externalizing description is more appropriate for capturing Doty’s experience. For this reason, that experience calls out for special explanation. We should reject the deflationary argument.  

Where does this leave us? The experience of inspiration is more complex than the deflationary argument suggests. We need more sophisticated resources for capturing it, and I intend to provide them. What I will be arguing is that experiences of inspiration are a distinctive kind of self-consciousness. The externalizing descriptions artists use to specify the former are descriptions of what it is like to enjoy the latter.

I will make this argument in several phases. I will first do Kant in the first Critique. Then I will show how this applies to the artist’s mental activity when she’s having an idea for new work—when she is, in that sense, inspired. I will then show how the latter interacts with concepts of alienation and identification. I will be describing, roughly speaking, whether the “self” of which the artist is conscious in having an idea for her work is one she identifies with. And my answer will be no, not exactly.

2 Self-Consciousness in Kant’s Transcendental Deduction

It is easiest to begin explaining what I mean by self-consciousness with examples. When my brother kicks me in the shin, I notice something happening to me, a pressure and a pain in my leg. In noticing something happen to me, I am conscious of myself. And, in this case, I am conscious of myself in a particular way. I am conscious of myself as having a body, or of being a physical, embodied being, myself-as-body. I enjoy embodied self-consciousness. By contrast, when I am thinking about something, e.g., about whether that sculpture will fit diagonally in that box over there, given the dimensions of each, I am conscious of myself in a

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10 I have been focusing on the body, but I will note that many of the same considerations also apply to the activity of thinking. I might, without any sense of effort and without any warning, find myself thinking through Hume’s skepticism about induction, while not having any problem identifying myself as the source of those thoughts. I might find it surprising that that’s what I’m thinking about, and I might be struck by the kind of distance I can have from my own thinking, but neither of these is the kind of externalizing description appropriate to experiences of inspiration. Even philosophers like Galen Strawson who think that, not only are we in fact not in control of our thinking, but typically we lack any sense of control over it, allow that thoughts can be our own, at least sensed as our own, nonetheless (Strawson 2003). Strawson argues that “[o]ne can live a good—amazing—human life without any significant experience of oneself as an agent in one’s mentation” (Strawson 2003, 248). In fact, he suggests that most of our thoughts are not “direct products of consciousness,” which suggests, I assume, that there is no sense of control over them (Strawson 2003, 247). Nonetheless, Strawson says, “our thoughts and judgments are not in any sense not our own, or less our own, for not being direct products of consciousness” (ibid.).
different way. I am conscious of myself as a thinking being, a kind of mental entity that is distinct from any of the particular thoughts I entertain. When I am thinking, that is, I am conscious not only of the thought I’m having, but of myself as the one having the thought. I am conscious of myself as thinker.

In the Transcendental Deduction, Kant offers an account of the mental activity that supports being conscious of myself as a thinking being—the second type of self-consciousness I just illustrated. A central part of Kant’s account is a constraint that mental activity must satisfy if it is to support consciousness of myself as a thinking being: it must display, he says, a particular kind of integration. It’s this claim that I want to explain and to some degree defend in this section. Afterwards, in the next section, I will extend the claim to cases of artists having ideas for new work.

Kant develops a set of claims connecting three things: (a) mental activity of combining representations, of synthesizing them, which Kant says “can be executed only by the subject itself, since it is an act of its self-activity” (B129); (b) consciousness of myself as a thinking being, distinct from these various representations and to which they can be attributed; and (c) our representations of objects outside us, such as tables and chairs and rugs. In its strongest form, Kant’s claim is that the activity in (a) is sufficient for both (b) and (c). The very same mental activity that combines representations suffices both for our consciousness of ourselves as thinking beings and our representations of objects outside us. In recent work, Henry Allison suggests that this is the right way to understand Kant’s claim.\(^\text{11}\) For the purposes of my discussion here, however, I set (c) aside. My focus is on the connection between (a) and (b). What must the mental activity in (a) be like for it to support (b), consciousness of myself as a thinking being?

Kant seems to suggest that to be conscious of ourselves as thinking beings we must be conscious of the results of the mental activity in (a). That mental activity, in turn, according to many of Kant’s interpreters, is one that produces a kind of inferential, rule-based integration in one’s mental states.\(^\text{12}\) So, according to Derk Pereboom, we are able to grasp “the identity of the subject of different self-attributed representations”—i.e., ourselves as thinking beings—“in virtue of recognizing that they [the different representations] are related to each other in certain intimate ways, for example, that they are inferentially integrated in a special way”.\(^\text{13}\) This suggests that, whatever else it is, the mental activity in (a) is one of

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11 Allison 2015, 352.
12 This is maybe most clearly expressed in the A-deduction: “the original and necessary consciousness of the identity of oneself”—being conscious of oneself as a thinking being—“is at the same time a consciousness of an equally necessary unity of the synthesis of all appearances in accordance with concepts”—the results of the mental activity in (a)—“i.e., in accordance with rules that not only make them necessarily reproducible, but also thereby determine an object for their intuition, i.e., the concept of something in which they are necessarily connected” (A108).
13 Pereboom 1995. Inferential integration is not the only “intimate way” our representations can be related, recognition of which supports consciousness of ourselves as thinkers. Pereboom also mentions the way mental states of a single subject “causally interact with each other without a non-mental intermediary” (Pereboom 1995, 17). I focus on inferential integration in the text.
combining representations in a way that makes possible inferential connections among the representations combined.

Some of Kant’s other main interpreters agree. Henry Allison calls the mental activity a “rule-governed act of unification” in an account of the first-edition Deduction, which is roughly the same kind of suggestion as Pereboom’s: only if representations were first combined in a rule-governed way would they be susceptible to the kind of inferential integration Pereboom mentions.14 Béatrice Longuenesse also stresses that the mental activity in (a) must be one that leads to inferential integration. She says “[t]he act of synthesis of the sensible manifold is a conscious ‘I think’ only insofar as the synthesis is directed toward concept formation, that is, insofar as it makes analysis possible.”15 A synthesis that makes concept formation possible will be one that produces a certain kind of structure in the representations that are being combined. That structure will be one that admits of the kind of regular groupings and other generalities that concepts represent—one that allows us, e.g., to form the concept of a table as the kind of thing that, in general, has a flat top of a certain size on which things can be placed, and legs for supporting the top. These groupings of features and the generalities they yield are the kinds of structures on which inferential integration depends.

According to these interpreters, then, what supports consciousness of myself as a thinking being should be a matter of my recognizing inferential connections among the contents of my mental states. This is pretty much the letter of Pereboom’s claim. And it is contained in Allison and Longuenesse, as well: the mental activity in (a), the results of which we recognize in being conscious of ourselves as thinkers, is a mental activity that results in inferential connections.

This is a very abstract claim, so consider, as an example, my thinking through how many packs of pens to buy for the big meeting. I think: “Well, say each person will want one each of blue and black; and everyone likes the gel pens, which only come four to a pack; and since 14 people are coming, I should buy four packs of each.” Throughout this stretch of thinking, I am conscious of myself as the thinker of each thought not just by virtue of remembering having them, but in addition by virtue of recognizing the relationships among them, that each provides a reason for the next, and that all are inferentially related. If someone told me the pens actually come six to a pack, I would immediately revise my judgments; the entire shape of my reasoning would change. This recognition of the connections among the contents of my thoughts, which occur at different times, and which is present even when I’m not in the middle of revising my thinking in light of new evidence or reasons, supports my consciousness of being the thinker of those thoughts, something distinct from them, and to which they are attributable.

The example introduces the basic idea, but it needs to be developed. How more exactly does recognizing inferential integration in this way support consciousness of myself as a thinker? Does it really? After all, we are not—I am not—constantly reasoning this way about things, doing simple calculations in my head, and yet I

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14 Allison 2015, 230.
15 Longuenesse 1998, 68, original emphases.
am constantly conscious of being a thinking being, something having thoughts over some period of time. In what sense is this, too, a matter of recognizing inferential relations among my mental contents?

The Kantian account can answer the questions, and it can do so in highly plausible ways. Arthur Melnick’s somewhat idiosyncratic, but phenomenologically vivid and astute, interpretation of the Transcendental Deduction helps us see how.

In Melnick’s vernacular, thinking is an “intellectual marshaling action,” with a particular kind of complex structure. To illustrate, Melnick asks us to consider a chess player thinking through what move to make in a game. “To begin with,” Melnick says, “the thinking may be inchoate, unformed, and unsettled (as though subliminally going from thought to thought without yet a particular thought being focused on).” Once the player determines what to do, the “marshaling [action] then is one of settling provisionally on a move, which is having a particular explicit thought as the focus.”

But the focal thought is not all there is to the player’s mental activity. Melnick continues:

It is not, however, as if the inchoate unsettledness simply disappears, giving way to nothing but the specific thought. Rather, the marshaling settles on and coalesces around the particular thought. Roughly, inchoate, unformed thoughts that are close in content to the focal thought are in readiness to themselves form, whereas unconnected thoughts (not pertinent to the move), though part of my chess capacity, remain dormant and so not part of the marshaling (they remain only as what can be accessed).

All the while, Melnick says, “[w]ithin the marshaling action, there is a distinction between the particular thought and that which settles on it, encompasses it, and holds it.”

As I understand Melnick, he is trying to articulate a distinction between kinds of consciousness here. In thinking through what move to make, the chess player is not only conscious of “the particular thought,” but also conscious of “that which settles on it, encompasses it, and holds it.” In this latter case, the chess player is conscious of herself as the thinker of her thought, but she qua thinker is not the object of her consciousness in the way her particular thought is. Rather, she is conscious of herself as the thinker of her thought in a more implicit, non-focal way. She is conscious as thinker, or as thinking—as something over and above the particular focal thought on which she settles, something which is at the same time

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16 Melnick 2008, chapter 1, passim. Putting it this way simplifies somewhat, but (I think) does not distort, basic features of Melnick’s interpretation of Kant. According to Melnick, the intellectual marshalling action is really the act of combination to which I refer above in (a). But in Melnick’s view, this action is at work in thinking, e.g., performing this act of intellectual marshaling can rightly be called thinking.
18 Ibid.
19 Melnick 2008, 5.
20 Ibid.
not in any sense an object of consciousness. And that’s just what it is for her to be conscious of herself as a thinking thing: *to be conscious of herself-as-thinker*.

What it is for the chess player to be conscious-as-thinker in this way is (d) for her conscious experience to be such as to sustain a distinction between, on one hand, any particular focal thought and, on the other, something over and above that particular focal thought, to which the latter is attributable; and (e) for her to be sensitive to this distinction. And (d) just is, I suggest, for conscious experience to be structured as a dynamic, inferentially integrated system of contents. That system comprises a focal foreground content, as well as an unformed, but inferentially related, set of background contents. The foreground and background are changing very often, but those changes are regular and systematic, resulting in a kind of temporally-extended, dynamic whole. What is presently being thought is always related to what has been thought and what might be thought. And (e) just is, I suggest, a matter of recognizing the inferential integration in that system of contents—i.e., a matter of being sensitive to the way in which what is presently being thought is related to what has been thought and to what might be thought.

This structure in the chess player’s mind, and her sensitivity to it, make her conscious-as-thinker in the following way. In being sensitive to the inferential integration in this system of contents, the chess player is conscious of its particular foreground/background configurations as *configurations*, one among many others that are possible. She is, as a result, conscious of both the configuration and (put it this way) the thing configured. Now *thinking being*, I suggest, presents itself in consciousness as the latter kind of thing—a “thing configured,” which passes through different foreground/background configurations of inferentially integrated mental states over time. Thinking being presents itself, more simply, as something *thinking*. To be conscious-as-thinker, in the sense at issue, is to be conscious of oneself as (to be conscious as) a thing configured this way, and this consciousness arises, as I said, through being conscious of the particular configurations as *configurations*. The chess player, then, in being sensitive to inferential integration, so conscious of the particular configurations of her integrated mental states as configurations of a dynamic whole, is conscious of herself as that whole, i.e., the thing configured, i.e., herself-qua-thinker.²¹

Illustrative analogies are difficult to find here, but I would like to suggest one; as far-fetched as it might at first sound, consider a school of fish, and the way it can look like a single large fish. When it does so, it is in large part because of the dynamical profile it presents. The fish in the school hang together in a particular way, such that activity performed by the apparent “large fish” is the result of systematic changes in the movements of the smaller fish. In a very roughly analogous way, I want to suggest, being conscious of myself as the thinker of my thoughts (of myself-as-thinker) is my sense for the dynamic, temporally-extended epistemic profile my mental contents present—the profile of what I called above particular foreground/background configurations. They present that epistemic

²¹ Though there is still a small gap—why is the thinker of which she’s conscious herself and not someone or something else? I will be discussing this below, especially in section 4.3.1.
profile because of their inferential integration—because of the systematic shifts among the individual contents that their integration makes possible. So, myself-as-thinker, on this analogy, is the entity that appears emergent from this dynamic epistemic profile. “I”-qua-thinker am the one doing this thinking, just as the “large fish” is the one making a turn toward the depths.

Now let me say immediately that the analogy is manifestly inapt—to mention just one thing, it analogizes a subjective sense of ourselves as thinkers to an objective experience of things (fish) outside us—but it is instructive. Consider again my thinking about how many packs of pens to buy. When someone tells me the pens come six to a pack rather than four to a pack, my thinking changes in all the ways Melnick describes. Some contents recede into the background, and others come to the foreground, with new background contents waiting to take shape. I am conscious of being a thinker here, a thing distinct from any of these particular thoughts, engaged in this temporally extended stretch of thinking. I am conscious of myself this way in the sense that myself-qua-thinker is the entity emergent from the dynamic, temporally-extended epistemic profile my contents present.

However—and this is the Kantian point—to be conscious of myself in this way, fundamentally, is a matter of recognizing the way my contents are inferentially integrated. I am conscious of my thinking as extended through time, as having the dynamic profile it does, because I recognize the integration of the contents that compose it. Recognizing this inferential relations, then, is not a matter of evaluating some thinking for its rationality and thereby coming to be conscious of myself as a thinker, as the example of thinking through how many pens to buy might suggest. It is rather a basic sensitivity to the dynamic, inferentially integrated system of contents that structures experience in such a way as to sustain the distinction between particular thoughts and what is thinking them. Sensitivity of this kind is broader than, and itself a part of, instances of reasoning or explicitly evaluating thinking for its rationality.

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I want to extract a few principles from the discussion over the past few pages. The first is this:

1. The consciousness of my thinking being is supported by my recognizing the way my mental states are integrated.

I take this to be a condition on having a certain kind of experience—i.e., enjoying a type of self-consciousness. In saying that recognizing the way my mental states are integrated “supports” that experience, I mean: without recognizing that integration the experience would be absent, and recognizing it suffices for some minimal or attenuated version of it. An even stronger claim may be true, namely that consciousness of my thinking being just is my recognizing the rational integration of my mental states. This is all that is required for “full” experience. I do not need to go that far here.

The second claim I want to formulate in light of the discussion above is this:
2. One feature of the integration in (1) is rationality. The integrated contents stand in rational relations to each other, or the transitions between integrated mental contents are sensitive to rational norms. It may be that (2) is an implication of (1). The rationality of the integration is plausibly implied by its being, among other things, an inferential integration. In what way could contents be inferentially integrated but not rationally integrated? If so, then (2) simply makes explicit this important implication.

(2) is opposed by the line of thought on which something like sufficiently robust associative connections between mental contents is enough to support consciousness of our thinking being. I don’t have the space to defend (2) against this alternative, however. Rather, I will assume that (2) is true, taking its plausibility to have been established by the various examples I discussed. In each of them, consciousness of my thinking being just was a matter of recognizing the dynamic profile of my mental contents, and rational inferential integration is what made that possible.

Finally, to simplify some of the discussion below, I want to formulate explicitly one more claim:

3. If the integration of some mental states is not rational, then recognizing the integration those states display does not support consciousness of my thinking being.

This is a consequence of (1) and (2). While it introduces no new conceptual relations, it offers a sufficient condition for claiming that I am not, in some particular case, conscious of my thinking being. I am not so conscious if the relevant integration isn’t rational.

What I want to do now with these claims is use them to think about artists having ideas for new work, to ask what kind of self-consciousness it supports, if any. This will eventually lead back to the experience of inspiration, and allow me to follow through on the very rough suggestions I made at the end of section 1 above—namely, that experiences of inspiration can be understood in terms of the distinctive kind of self-consciousness.

3 Self-Consciousness and Vital Ideation

A lot is going to turn on just what it is for an artist to have in mind ideas for new work. The full account is well beyond the scope of this paper; I develop it elsewhere. I will explain it here in broad strokes, and treat it as an assumption.

22 A Humean, for example, might press this point. Why does the integration need to be rational? One answer the Kantian view will offer is that it’s implausible that there are enough such associative connections to provide integration that supports the experience of oneself as a thinking being. Another answer is something like this: rational integration is required for associative connections, even strong ones, to appear at all within one thinker’s mental activity. Again, I can’t fully defend the Kantian view against the Humean here. My goal is to put the Kantian claim, which is plausible enough on its own, to argumentative use.
Some artists begin their creative work because they judge they may be on to something. They consciously recognize something in mind that makes it seem worth beginning. And what do they recognize? What’s the content of their judgment? In my view, such artists make an aesthetic judgment. They ascribe aesthetic value to what they have in mind. They do not judge that what they have in mind would realize aesthetic value, but rather that what they have in mind itself realizes aesthetic value. I call that value vitality.

What the artists have in mind when they ascribe vitality so it is open-ended in the following sense. The ideas or images the artist has in mind do not support any belief about what her final work will be like. They do not specify any final goal for her creative work. Rather, the ideas and images realize a complex set of relationships. They appear to be entangled, where this is an aesthetic property of what the artist has in mind. Ideas for new work that are sufficiently entangled are vital, much in the way that works of art that sufficiently balanced and unified are beautiful. Think, for example, about a poet who has in mind several different images or bits of language, which might be combined in a poem in several different ways, but which do not in her mind stably cohere into a single passage of poetry that might serve as the goal of her creative activity. In this case, the poet has something vital in mind for new work, on which she will draw in writing her poem. She enjoys vital ideation, as I will also put it.

Because the artist’s realizes aesthetic value, there is a reason for it to be as it is; what the artist has in mind ought to be the way it is, if for no other reason than that, in being that way, it realizes an aesthetic value, and there is a reason for things to be such as to realize value. It is, in this sense, normatively appropriate for what the artist has in mind to be the way it is, for what the artist has in mind to realize the complex set of relationships that it does. Yet another way to put this—the way I will be putting it from here forward—is that, when vital, the artist’s ideation displays a normatively appropriate integration. The relevant norms are aesthetic rather than rational.

The claims in this characterization will interact logically with the claims about self-consciousness I formulated above. Consider (3), in particular, which I repeat here, along with two other claims about having something vital in mind:

3. If the integration of some mental states is not rational, then recognizing the integration those states display does not support consciousness of my thinking being.

4. In vital ideation, the integration of some mental states is not rational.

5. Recognizing the integration that mental states display in vital ideation does not support consciousness of my thinking being.

One way to think about (5) is, were the artist able only to have vital ideation—if nothing else in her mental life realized rational relations—she would not be able to be conscious of herself as a thinking being. Her self-experience would be fundamentally different, for example, from that of chess player thinking through
which move to make. The question, then, is what kind of consciousness of self does having something vital in mind support, if it supports any at all?

Start with the claim, introduced just above, that something vital in mind displays a kind of integration. That integration is normatively appropriate, satisfying aesthetic norms, rather than rational norms. It is, I suggest, from integration of this general kind—normatively appropriate integration—that the sense of something distinct from any of particular content emerges. It is this kind of integration that makes possible the distinction, in consciousness, between any particular focal content entertained, and the thing or being entertaining that content.

For example, consider a composer with something vital in mind for a new work. She imagines a serene passage for strings, and there is then a coalescing of images around that focal musical image. Other musical fragments are backgrounded, but ready to become the focus of her mental activity. When there is a transition from the serene passage to the frenetic one—when the frenetic passage becomes the focal musical image—there will be the same kind of systematic shift that there is in thinking: some images will come to the foreground; others will move to the background; new images will coalesce around the newly-focal image of the frenetic passage. Because of these systematic shifts—and just as in thinking, at the risk of repeating myself—there is an integration of the kind required for maintaining the distinction between the particular focal content of the artist’s ideation, on one hand, and the one doing the ideating, on the other.

It is plausible, this line of thought suggests, that there are more general versions of (1) and (2) above, which abstract away from the (already very abstract) “thinking being” in (1), and from “rationality” in (2):

6. Consciousness of the presence of mental being—call it the sense of subjectivity—is supported by my recognizing the way my mental states are integrated.

7. One feature of that integration is normative appropriateness. The integrated contents stand in some normatively appropriate relations to each other.

By “the sense of subjectivity,” I do not mean the experience of some particular state’s subjective qualities—the what-it’s-like of a subjective state, like the subjective experience of color or (in bats) echolocation. Rather, I mean the sense of being something mental that is distinct from any particular content entertained, something engaged in the mental process in which the contents are caught up, and to which those contents are attributed. We could call it the sense of subjecthood.

Earlier I said that, by “is supported by,” I meant the following. Recognizing the way my mental states are integrated is required for consciousness of the presence of mental being, and it also contributes to, or supports, some minimal or attenuated

form of that consciousness. So understood, the following is a consequence of (6) and (7):

8. If I recognize the normative appropriateness of the integration of my mental states, then I have, to some extent or other, the sense of subjectivity.

Now combine this with a claim about vital ideation:

9. In vital ideation, integrated mental contents stand in normatively appropriate relations to each other.

It follows that:

10. In recognizing the normative appropriateness of the relations among integrated contents in vital ideation, the artist has, to some extent or other, the sense of subjectivity.

What (10) says, given the way I explained what it means to have the sense of subjectivity, is that the artist is, to some extent or other, conscious of some mental being or entity—conscious of something having an idea—that is distinct from each of the particular ideas that compose the ideation itself.

However, this mental being or entity is not the artist-as-thinking being (cf. (5) above). This is because the integration the artist recognizes is not rational. For that matter, I might as well add, this mental being or entity is not the artist-as-embodied being. It must be some other kind of self-consciousness, then, but what kind?

The answer that might come immediately to mind, but which I want to resist, is that the artist is conscious of herself-as-ideator, or imagining being, rather than conscious of herself-as-thinker, or thinking being. So understood, the artist enjoys something we might call imaginative self-consciousness. It is true that this fits with some of what Doty says, namely that it’s his imagination—i.e., on the present proposal, himself-as-ideator—that is active in the early phases of his poetic process. However, for reasons I am about to give, this is not the right way to think about the distinctive kind of self-consciousness that vital ideation supports.

What is the alternative? In having something vital in mind, the mental being of which artists are conscious is not something that they are able to take to be themselves. In the next section, I will explain what this means by looking at how the self-consciousness in vital ideation interacts with the concepts of identification and alienation. When artists have something vital in mind, I will argue, they experience a kind of virtuous alienation from the mental being of which they are conscious—“virtuous,” again, in a sense to be explained. Artists, in such cases, are conscious of themselves-as-another, so to speak, rather than of themselves-as-thinkers, or as-embodied, or even as-ideators. I will call this alterior self-consciousness.24

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24 “Alterior” from “alterity,” meaning otherness or difference, especially difference from oneself.
3.1 Identification and Alienation

Some attitudes, appetites, or mental states can be literally our own—they appear in our own stream of consciousness and no one else’s—and yet can be foreign, or alien, or not truly us, at the same time. In the latter cases, the attitude, appetite, or mental state exerts a force on us not unlike the force that literally external things exert on us. Thoughts, beliefs, and desires can all impose themselves on us, or against us, in a way that is unwanted and unpleasant. When they do, we are alienated from those thoughts, beliefs, and desires. Otherwise, we are identified with them. They really are our own, not just literally, but in some meaningful sense not captured by the literal.

There is no uncontroversial way to understand identification and alienation, and I do not have the space to argue in favor of doing so in one way rather than another, so I will make assumptions as follows. Identifying with an attitude is a matter of having some explanation, or being able to give some explanation if the occasion arises, for why that attitude satisfies norms “governing” attitudes of that type, when the attitude does satisfy those norms. Imagine, for example, that I suddenly believe I need to buy a chocolate cake. Why, I ask myself? After thinking it through, I remember: there’s the birthday party at the end of the week! I said I would bring the cake. So assessed, the attitude fits neatly and without conflict among my other attitudes. I am “identified with” it, then; it’s a manifestation of me, my own thinking and believing aspect of self.

By contrast, imagine that I believe I need to buy a chocolate cake, but I cannot figure out why. Not only can I not figure out why, I also have good reason to think I have no need to buy chocolate cake. I am puzzled by the presence of the belief, and yet it persists. Over time, I even come to resent it. I don’t need to buy anything!, I tell myself; stop it; where is this coming from? In this case, the attitude does not fit among my various other beliefs. It conflicts with them, and so conflicts with the norms that “govern” belief. I have an explanation for why the attitude conflicts with those norms but the belief persists, and so I am “alienated from” it; it’s not a manifestation of me, my own believing aspect of self. Alienation of this kind is plausibly among the conditions of the experience of thought insertion, in which subjects report that thoughts are implanted in them by someone or something else.

What I say here is closely modeled on Richard Moran’s discussion of these notions in his 2002. See also his 2001. For a closely related view of the active/passive distinction (itself closely related to the identification/alienation distinction), see Raz 2002, Smith 2005, and Burge 2000. For opposing views see, e.g., Frankfurt 2006, or Cassam 2014.

This means that the question of identifying with or being alienated from things like physical pains doesn’t arise. It does not make sense to ask whether I am identified with the pain I have when I stub my toe. The pain just happens. By contrast, it does make sense to ask whether I am identified with a prejudicial belief I have—it’s possible in this latter case for it not to stand for me in the right way. I adapt this point from Moran 2002, 196-199.

Bortolotti and Broome 2009. Bortolotti and Broome “propose that thought insertion should be analysed as a condition in which typically both the capacity of self ascription and authorship as endorsement fail with respect to the ‘inserted’ thought” (Bortolotti and Broome 2009, 219). The requirements on “authorship as endorsement,” in Bortolotti and Broome’s view, are exactly those

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Notice that the distinction, explained in this way, applies to attitudes; my discussion here is focused, however, on something else: consciousness of mental being, or subjects sensed, emergent from a set of integrated mental states. But much of the same will apply for identifying with, and being alienated from, the latter.

Start with the case in which I am conscious of my thinking being. Being conscious of myself in this way requires recognizing, in ways I have described, the rational integration of my mental states. Identifying with the thinking being of which I’m conscious, the one distinct from the particular focal thoughts I am having, requires that the rational relations among the integrated states be suitably explicable to me. It is because I can explain why I should buy six boxes of pens, given that I need 23 pens and that they come four to a box, and given that having too few pens is not an option, that I experience myself thinking these various thoughts. I can capture this with the following conditional:

11. If I identify with a thinking being of which I am conscious, then

\[(\text{some mental states display a rational integration, consciousness of which supports consciousness of my thinking being, and (I can suitably explain why that integration is rational)}\]

The two conditions on identifying with the thinking being of which I’m conscious are represented here in the consequent of the conditional, and they are represented as a conjunction.

Both (11) and the example from which it abstracts concern cases of thinking, with its attendant norms of truth and rationality, but just as in section 3 above, there is a generalization, capable of covering any case in which there is a normatively appropriate integration. Any such case will be one in which it’s possible for there to be a subject sensed (claims (6) and (7) above).

So understood, I can formulate the following necessary conditions on identifying with a subject sensed:

12. If I identify with a subject sensed, then

\[(\text{some mental states display a normatively appropriate integration, consciousness of which supports that sense of subjectivity, and (I can suitably explain why that integration is normatively appropriate)}\]

In short, identifying with a subject sensed requires conformity with some relevant norms—rational or otherwise—and the capacity to explain why. I leave unspecified for now the precise sense of explanation, but it is instanced in cases like that above in which I explain why some integration is rational. I can explain, in the relevant sense, why I think I need 6 boxes of pens, after thinking I need pens for 23 people and that the pens come four to a box, but I can’t explain, in the relevant sense, why I think I need 5 boxes, given the same constraints. Or consider a case of practical rationality. I can explain, in the sense at issue in (12), why I think I need to bring the big umbrella, after thinking it’s raining outside and my friend is coming with

requirements Moran identifies as holding on identifying with an attitude, appetite, or state. In fact, the authors’ analysis is explicitly based on Moran’s discussion in his 2001.
me, but I can’t explain, in the relevant sense, why I think I need to draw a six concentric circles on the umbrella before we leave.

Notice that there is more than one way for a case to fail to satisfy the consequent of (12). Suppose I think “I need 23 pens and they come 4 to a box, so I should buy 7, and that means I’ll have 5 left over for the bunnies”—where there is no disposition to, or no ability to, correct myself, despite recognizing my error, and where the thought repeats itself insistently. The last two thoughts—I should buy 7; I’ll have 5 left over for the bunnies—aren’t rationally integrated with the others. With respect to these mental states, there is no rationally appropriate integration, so a fortiori no normatively appropriate integration. At least in this region of my mental life, there is a kind of disintegration: why do I think I should buy 7 boxes, and why do I keep thinking I’ll have 5 left over? In this case I am not identified with a subject sensed, trivially, because the mental states do not display a normatively appropriate integration, so there is no subject sensed. There are just some particular attitudes with which I am not identified. Again, here we are in the vicinity of conditions for thought insertion.

However, there is another way for a case to satisfy the consequent of (12), and that is through a failure to be able to explain why some integration is normatively appropriate. It should be no surprise: this is the right way to understand cases of vital ideation.28

3.2 Applied to Aesthetic Ideation: Alterior Self-Consciousness

I will run through the whole argument for why having something vital in mind fails to satisfy the consequent of (12). After doing so I will make a few comments about the argument, and briefly argue for one of its premises.

(P1) In vital ideation, there is a normatively-appropriate integration. The ideation is as it ought to be.

However:

(P2) There is no explaining why this is so—no explaining what it is about the mental activity that makes it the case that it realizes the aesthetic value it does.

I will give reasons for believing this premise in a moment. Assuming it is true, though:

(P3) Cases of having something vital in mind fail to satisfy the consequent of (12). They fail to do so not because there is no

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28 It is not typical for some mental activity to fail to satisfy the consequent of (12) by failing to satisfy only one of its conjuncts. If there is rational integration, then there is typically a suitable explanation for why the integration is rational—both conjuncts are satisfied. And if there is no rational integration, then there is no normatively appropriate integration, and so trivially no explanation for why there is a normatively appropriate integration (there is no such integration!)—neither conjunct is satisfied. Some (small) part of the interest in the account of aesthetic ideation is that it shows the conjuncts can be satisfied independently.
normatively appropriate integration, because there is. Rather, they fail to do so for lack of the capacity to explain that appropriateness.

(Conc) In cases of vital ideation, and unlike in cases of irrational or inexplicable thought, artists fail to identify with a subject sensed. The first two crucial premises here will perform be underexplained. (P1) is not very controversial, however, and since I have been taking the first for granted throughout, I won't say more about it now. I will say something about (P2), however. Why believe that, in general, artists can't explain why their vital idea is as it ought to be?

First let me clarify the kind of explanation the artist would need to give. When she ascribes vitality to her ideation, she does so by virtue of the response she has to it. When she is aware of what she has in mind, she experiences a distinctive kind of feeling, much as we do when we ascribe aesthetic values like beauty or power to works of art. I have argued elsewhere that the feeling is complex, but resembles pleasure in many important ways.

When the artist has something vital in mind, it is as it ought to be, and this is because, in being that way, it realizes aesthetic value. What it is to realize aesthetic value, though, is in large part to be pleasurable in the distinctive way it is. It is by virtue of being such as to elicit the pleasure response it does, that the artist judges her ideation to be vital. It is by virtue of being such as to elicit the pleasure response it does, that the artist’s ideation is as it ought to be.

To be able to explain why what is has in mind is as it ought to be, then, the artist must be able to explain why it is pleasurable in the way it is. She must be able to explain what it is about what she has in mind that makes it such as to elicit the pleasure response it does.

One mark of having an explanation for why some object is pleasurable is that I can use my grasp of the pleasure I take in it as a guide to pleasure in some other case, involving some distinct object. For example, it’s right to say I have an explanation for why black coffee is pleasurable because I can recognize that it’s the coffee’s bitterness that gives me sensory pleasure, and I can, on the basis of that recognition, seek out other bitter tastes, including other cups of coffee different from the first, to enjoy that pleasure again. A similar point applies to the satisfaction that attends rational thinking. I have a sense for why some thinking is satisfying—it is a simple syllogism, say—and I know how to reproduce that pleasure in a distinct case. I can, for example, think through the same syllogism but replace the relevant sentences.

Both cases reflect a capacity for a type of explanation for why something is pleasurable that is missing in cases of having something vital in mind. It is not true that the artist can recognize properties of her vital idea and use them as a guide to vitality in other instances. Nothing about, for example, some particular slow passage for strings, and some other more frenetic passages that coalesce around it in the artists mind, can serve in this way. And this signals that the artist lacks an explanation for why her idea is pleasurable in the way it is, so why it ought to be
the way it is. Since this type of explanation is absent in the case of having something in vital in mind, given (12) above, the artist is unable to experience herself as the one having the idea, doing the ideating. So much for P2, then.

While the argument’s conclusion (to repeat it) is that artists are not identified with the subject they sense by virtue of recognizing the integration in what they have in mind, their case is different from that in the previous section, in which I am alienated from my irrational thoughts. In that latter case, I am not identified with a subject sensed in a trivial way. There is no normatively-appropriate integration, and so there is no subject sensed. In the artist’s case, by contrast, there is a subject sensed—there is a normatively-appropriate integration—it’s just one the artist can’t take to be herself, for lack of the right kind of explanation. It is important to distinguish between the cases.

In both cases, there is a failure to meet a necessary condition on identifying with a subject sensed. Assuming the distinction between identification and alienation is exhaustive, then: since there is a failure to identify, there is alienation. But we can distinguish between types of alienation. I suggest we distinguish, in particular, between vicious and virtuous alienation. Cases of vicious alienation fail to satisfy the consequent of (12) in the way the case of my irrational thoughts does. It fails to satisfy both of the consequent’s conjuncts. In cases of vicious alienation, there is genuine disintegration. This type of alienation can be painful and confusing, as when I am bothered by the persistence of my belief that I need to buy a cake, even though I know there is no such need.

Cases of virtuous alienation, by contrast, fail to satisfy the consequent of (12) only by failing to satisfy the second conjunct. In virtuous alienation, by contrast with vicious alienation, there is no identification, but there is no conflict with other norms, either. The alienation can be thought of as virtuous because there is no painful inner fracture, no sense of irritatingly fixed ideas, no sense that the mind has been hijacked or taken over, let alone that thoughts are being inserted or controlled by some other entity.

Virtuous alienation captures the relation artists have to the subject they sense by virtue of having something vital in mind, emergent from the integration that their mental activity displays. In vital ideation, the mind functions in a way that supports consciousness of someone or something having an idea, something ideating, distinct from the images that compose this mental activity, but does not allow for the kind of explicability through which the artist can take herself to be the ideator—and all without the kind of inner fracture that characterizes vicious alienation.

And this, finally, is to specify the distinctive type of self-consciousness that having something vital in mind supports, what I have called alterior self-consciousness. To enjoy alterior self-consciousness is to be virtuously alienated from a subject sensed by recognizing the normatively-appropriate integration displayed by some collection of attitudes or states, which integration they display by virtue of the properties of their contents. To enjoy alterior self-consciousness is to be conscious of an aspect of oneself that seems, in one way or another, not exactly
identical with oneself. It is to be conscious, so to speak, of oneself-as-another (rather than as-thinker, or as-embodied).

This type of self-consciousness will seem obscure when formulated in abstract terms like these, but I suggest we have already read several attempts to explain what it’s like to enjoy it. When Mark Doty says that, in the early phases of the creative process, he trusts his imagination to feel its way toward what it needs, and that will doesn’t have much to do with this, I suggest he is trying to explain what it’s like to enjoy alterior self-consciousness.\(^{29}\) There is a kind of virtuous alienation, an internal alterity, describing which elicits this mildly externalizing description. The same goes for Jack Spicer when he talks about learning to distinguish between you and “the Outside of you which is writing poetry.”\(^{30}\) Spicer’s language is more extreme than Doty’s; the Outside doesn’t even suggest a kind of internality. But we can understand Spicer as trying to describe a particularly vivid form of alterior self-consciousness. It’s plausible enough that this self-consciousness comes in varying degrees of vividness or intensity, and these may well underwrite differences in the ways artists describe it.

4 Conclusion: Experiences of Inspiration as Alterior Self-Consciousness

The way in which alterior self-consciousness bears on the overarching question in this paper—that of how we should make sense of experiences of inspiration, particularly in light of the tendency artists have of giving externalizing descriptions of them, and the way such descriptions are especially appropriate to them—should be clear enough already. The answer emerged in the process of developing the concept.

Nonetheless, here is my explicit answer to the paper’s guiding question. What is the experience of inspiration? To have one is, either in part or in whole, to enjoy alterior self-consciousness. In other words, when artists attempt to explain and communicate their experiences of inspiration using the externalizing descriptions we have been reading, they are, either in large part or in whole, trying to make vivid what it’s like to enjoy alterior self-consciousness. One reason to accept this answer is the inadequacy of any appeal to an absence of an experience of control to make sense of experiences of inspiration. This is something for which I argued in section 1. Another reason—the main reason—is how well-suited alterior self-consciousness is to specifying the content of the artist’s experiences. This is something that became clear by the end of section 2. What would descriptions of being virtuously alienated from a subject sensed in some integrated collection of mental states look like, if not something like the descriptions artists give of their inspiration experiences?

It may seem as if I have done something illegitimate or sneaky, constructing the concept of alterior self-consciousness precisely in order to suit the experience in which I was interested. After all, I used the descriptions of inspiration experiences

\(^{29}\) Doty 1997, 70.

\(^{30}\) Spicer 1998, 7.
to illustrate what it’s like to enjoy alterior self-consciousness. There’s nothing illicit in the method, however. The concept itself followed from the features of having something vital in mind, reflection on Kant’s claims about being conscious of ourselves as thinking beings, and a particular way of understanding identification and alienation. None of these are themselves claims that turn on interpreting experiences of inspiration in one way or another. There is no question begging. It is true that the motivation for developing the account was the externalizing descriptions that artists give of their inspiration experiences. But there is nothing problematic about this either. There was a simple case in which the need for an account is suggested by a phenomenon, and the value of the account that results is measured in part by the extent to which it explains that very phenomenon.
References


