Having Something in Mind to Create

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Abstract. Some artists begin their creative work because they recognize something in mind that makes it seem worth beginning. They judge they may be on to something, as I put it. What is the content of this judgment? While the question is essential for understanding the creative process and creative ability, the literature does not raise it explicitly, and, I argue, work on related issues offers no good answers. After doing so, I propose my own answer, which turns on an account of a novel aesthetic value that I call vitality. Artists ascribe vitality to what they have in mind when they judge they may be on to something. In some ways, vitality resembles those aesthetic values that we ascribe to objects, like beauty or gracefulness, but it differs from them in fundamental respects. Vitality is, in a sense I explain, a distinctively creative aesthetic value. In addition to shedding light on the nature of creative ability, the discussion clarifies the relationship between the philosophy of creativity and aesthetics.

Some artists begin their creative work with something like an aesthetic experiment. They make something just to see what it will look or sound like, generating material that might later be developed if it is interesting. Others, though, begin because they recognize something in mind that makes it seem worth beginning. The composer Roger Sessions calls it a vital musical train of thought. The poet Seamus Heaney describes it as an image that has become a field of force. Toni Morrison, putting somewhat less fine a point on it, talks about recognizing “when something is urgently there.”

These artists are inspired and have consciously recognized as much. They have judged, to adapt a phrase of Monroe Beardsley’s, that they may be on to something. But what is the content of these judgments? What in mind have the artists recognized in making them?

They have not, as will become clear, recognized an idea for a complete work of art. What the artists have in mind is not determinate enough to specify the final goal of their creative activity; it does not even support belief about what the final work will be like. What they have in mind is more like a starting point, but a significant one: a vital musical train of thought, something urgently there. What do these expressions mean?

The questions focus attention on what is, for these artists and others like them, a crucial moment in the creative process. An artist’s judging she may be on to

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1 Lyn Hejinian, for example, describes “a technique of first gestures. One makes a form, sketches it out, looks to see it, and pursues the suggestions it has made” (Hejinian 2000, 14).
2 Sessions 1950, 46.
3 Heaney 1981, 51.
4 Morrison 1993.
5 “What I mean by the creative process is that stretch of mental and physical activity between the incept and the final touch—between the thought ‘I may be on to something here’ and the thought ‘It is finished’” (Beardsley 1965, 291).
something marks the beginning of her creative work; it motivates her to begin. More than that, though, the judgment is plausibly itself an expression of creative ability. This might seem off on first reading. Creative ability is so strongly associated with generating ideas, and an artist’s judging she may be on to something sounds like a recognitional ability, not a generative one. However, the two are tightly joined. To be able to come up with worthwhile ideas but not be able to recognize them as such is plausibly just as partial a creative ability as being able to recognize worthwhile ideas but not being able come up with them. And something even stronger might be true: the capacity to generate ideas worth pursuing draws on the very same mental processes that the capacity to recognize them does. The generative and the recognitional might in this sense share common ground. Whatever the truth is here, it is clear enough that understanding the nature of the artist’s recognitional ability, what she discerns when she judges she may be on to something, is important for understanding creative ability.

The philosophy of creativity, however, has not examined this recognitional ability in any self-conscious way. It has not explicitly raised any of the questions I did above, and, I will argue, work on related issues offers no good answers to them. After so arguing, I will argue for answers of my own, which have no close relatives in the literature.

My answers turn on the foundations of an account of a novel aesthetic value, which I eventually call vitality. Artists ascribe vitality to what they have in mind in judging they may be on to something. The judgment they make in doing so is an aesthetic judgment.

Let me give a prefatory sketch of some of what this means. Imagine I ascribe beauty to an old tree; I judge it to be beautiful. I do so by virtue of a feeling I have when I contemplate the tree. I do so, also, by virtue of recognizing some of the tree’s objective properties. Among these latter are properties of organization and structure—e.g., symmetries and asymmetries—which together constitute the object’s form. Any reasonably complex object has a form, in this sense. In ascribing aesthetic value to the tree, though, I judge that its form is aesthetically valuable. It shows a distinctive unity amidst diversity, to use an old aesthetic formula.

When an artist judges she may be on to something, I will argue, what she has in mind also has an aesthetically valuable form, but this is not the same kind of form that objects of beauty have. To get a feel for the thought to come, consider the following comparison. Distinct propositions about some subject matter have a rational form when there are rational relations among them; and, I will argue, distinct ideas for a work of art have an aesthetically valuable form—a vital form—

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6 The issue of what to call what the artists have in mind is vexed; I find it vexing. As will become clear, it can be an idea or an image (something imagined, like a tree), or a collection of these, or a “musical train of thought,” as Sessions says. No term I can think of neatly and fluently captures all the possibilities. “Ideation” comes close, but it is undesirable for other reasons, some of them grammatical. I will mostly stick with “something in mind,” “having something in mind,” or some other contextually appropriate variant. These are not technical expressions.

7 Hutcheson 1726/2004, I.I.III.
when there are relations among them of a certain kind: not rational relations, of course, but something else. In the process of making this argument, I will be distinguishing vitality from beauty. I will be arguing that these are distinct aesthetic values, and that vitality is a distinctively creative aesthetic value.

Some part of the account consists of claims that are descriptive in the sense that they characterize, using non-evaluative terms, what artists recognize in mind when they judge it is worth beginning their creative work. I support these claims with two lines of evidence. One is artist testimony: things artists say in essays or interviews about their minds creatively at work. I have been appealing to it already. In what follows, I interpret what artists say in this testimony and formulate claims to fit those interpretations. The second line of evidence derives from work in the psychology of creativity, which I discuss briefly in section 3. The account does not only make descriptive claims, however. It also make claims about, among other distinctively philosophical matters, aesthetic values: the grounds on which they are ascribed, the nature of the merit or excellence that those ascriptions track, and so on.

The discussion will remain focused on artistic creativity, artists judging they may be on to something; but this judgment plausibly plays a role in other kinds of activities. Philosophy is one of them, I want to suggest—which is to suggest that aesthetic value can play a role in philosophical inquiry. I cannot say more about this very clearly in advance, and fully developing the point would require another paper; but I briefly comment on it at the end. I mention it now to make sure the discussion’s wider context is sufficiently in view: in addition to shedding light on creativity in art, my account of vitality may well shed light on creativity in other practices, as well.

1 Three Ways Not to Interpret the Artists

Philosophers of creativity have not pursued as such the question of what it is for artists to judge that they may be on to something, but it is possible to anticipate what some of them would say given their work on related questions. To motivate my own answer—my account of vitality—I want to critically discuss what Bence Nanay, Berys Gaut, and Nick Zangwill would, in this sense, say.

1.1 General Features of Creativity

Many accounts of creativity focus on its general features, namely those shared by both artistic and non-artistic cases. These accounts tend not to say enough to explain what artists recognize when they judge they may be on to something. I will briefly discuss two such accounts.

* Nanay’s account of subjective creativity.*

According to Nanay, something is subjectively creative, roughly, when it is new to the creator, objectively creative when it is new to everyone. This distinction, or something very close to it, is

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8 Nanay 2014.
common in the philosophy of creativity. A mental process (or its output) is subjectively creative on Nanay’s account, only if, among other things, it is rightly experienced by the artist as something she has never before taken to be possible.

This suggests a way of understanding the artists. When they judge they may be on to something, they judge what they have in mind to be subjectively (and possibly objectively) creative. This means, given Nanay’s account, that they experience what they have in mind as something they have never before taken to be possible. They experience it as radically novel.

But that isn’t satisfactory. Consider the poet Mark Doty (I return to Heaney and Sessions below). He says he begins working with an image because there is some gravity or charge to it that makes him need to investigate it. “The goal here is inquiry,” he says, “the attempt to get at what’s so interesting about what struck me.” This does not suggest he is experiencing the image as something he has never before taken to be possible. He may be experiencing it this way, of course, but he says nothing about it. His description focuses on how appealing the particular image is, the charge attaching to it, where “charge” does not appear to be, at least in any straightforward sense, a metaphor for radical novelty. We need something else to explain what makes the image significant to Doty.

Gaut’s teleological account of creativity. In “Creativity and Skill,” Berys Gaut argues that any creative process, artistic or otherwise, “can be teleological, and indeed, that is almost always how it is.” He argues that we can be creative either in specifying a goal to be pursued, or in finding the means to achieving some goal we already have.

This suggests understanding the artists in terms of their goals. Doty, for instance, understood in this way, begins with the image he does because of its relation to some further goal. That may be to write a poem of some kind, maybe a poem with some particular aesthetic property, like wittiness. The charged image offers either a specification of that goal—i.e., it makes more precise the poem Doty wants to write—or it is a means of reaching that goal—e.g., maybe the image is a part of the poem Doty has been wanting to write.

But this will not get us very far, either. First of all, Doty does not seem to consider the image as a means to anything very specific, as if he’s been wanting to write something mournful and the image seems like a way of doing that. The image does offer Doty a means to achieving a more general goal, something like “begin poems with good material.” His charged image is plausibly good material, and so, by beginning a poem with that image, he can satisfy that general goal. However, the teleological account on its own cannot explain what makes the image good.

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9 Jarvie 1981. There is the related distinction in Boden 1990 between psychological and historical creativity.
10 Nanay 2014, 23.
11 Doty 1997, 70.
12 Ibid.
13 Gaut 2009, 92.
14 Gaut 2009, 91.
material, and so cannot explain why he begins with that rather than something else. Doty’s image is not good just because it is a means to the more general goal of beginning poems with good material. The image is instrumentally good for that reason, but it is instrumentally good because it is good in some other way; it has some other kind of value. What kind is that?

1.2 Aesthetic Insight

Since we are talking about artistic creation, we might expect the answer to appeal to aesthetic properties—we might expect, for instance, that what makes the image significant for Doty is its potential for realizing some aesthetic property or properties. This can have nothing to do with any other artistic or aesthetic goals Doty had before entertaining the image. The image appears in mind and suggests new possibilities.

There is good reason to think artists respond to aesthetic properties when they judge they may be on to something. First, they tend to describe having a complex feeling when they become conscious of worthwhile ideas for new work. Doty talks about a “need” to investigate his charged image, feeling “intrigued” by it and finding it “compelling.” Second, those feelings are part of an experience in which the artists take themselves to discern properties of their ideas, as opposed merely to properties of their response to those ideas. Doty discerns the charge that his image has, not the charge that his response to his image has. Third, the feelings the artists have seem to be stronger than simple enjoyment or cursory interest. This is revealed in part by their tendency to focus on properties of their ideas, rather than properties of their own feelings. It is also explicit in what Doty says. He distinguishes the charge attaching to some images, which moves him to create, from the appeal of “lovely things,” which does not so move him. Both are ways of being drawn to an image, but only the former is strong enough to make him want to work.

All three descriptive tendencies reflect conventional ways of describing the experience of ascribing aesthetic properties to something. When we find a painting graceful, for example, or powerful, we have a complex feeling in response to it. And that feeling is part of an experience in which we take ourselves to have grasped something about the painting, not just something about our response to it. We take ourselves to have grasped something about (e.g.) the painting’s power and gracefulness, what it represents and the way it represents (if it represents anything), and so on. And the feeling is more than simple enjoyment or cursory interest. It is a feeling that reflects a valuing of the object, which disposes us to treat the object in certain ways, to discuss it with others in certain ways.

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15 I fix the relationship between aesthetic properties and values below. Throughout, I am focused on aesthetic properties that are typically, defeasibly reasons for making positive, rather than negative, aesthetic evaluations. I am focused, that is, on properties like being graceful, rather than properties like being garish.
16 Doty 1997, 70.
17 Ibid.
18 All three appear in Kant’s Critique of the Power of Judgment. Beardsley emphasizes the role “gratification” plays in ascribing aesthetic properties (Beardsley 1982, 45). He also claims that
Artists respond to aesthetic properties when they judge they may be on to something, then, but how, more precisely, do aesthetic properties figure in that response?

Nick Zangwill’s notion of aesthetic insight offers one answer. According to Zangwill, when artists create their work, they are guided by an aesthetic insight. The content of this insight is that some aesthetic property would be realized by some nonaesthetic properties.\(^19\) When working on “Circle Composition,” for example, Calder’s aesthetic insight was that playfulness, say—an aesthetic property—would be realized by some simple circles in primary colors—some nonaesthetic properties.\(^20\)

The concept of aesthetic insight suggests an account of what artists judge when they judge they may be on to something: they judge what they have in mind to be an aesthetic insight. They recognize some aesthetic property that would be realized by creating the nonaesthetic properties contained in the insight. When Doty says there is a gravity or charge to some image, on this way of understanding him, he is grasping that certain aesthetic properties would be realized were he to write a poem in which the image figured.

This improves on the accounts in the previous section, but it still does not adequately capture the content of Doty’s judgment. What Doty says does not obviously signal any sense for aesthetic properties that would be realized by his image, or by a poem containing it. There may not yet be enough to the image, or enough other images connected to it, to provide any sense for what such properties might be. That’s why it is natural for Doty to describe his goal as inquiry. He wants to find out, because he does not know yet, what aesthetic properties it might be possible to realize. His goal is not to begin realizing aesthetic properties the potential for which he has already grasped.

The problem is even more acute when we look again at what Seamus Heaney says. In “Feeling Into Words,” Heaney describes the activity of mind that led Wordsworth to write his poem The Thorn.\(^21\) The description is based in part on what Wordsworth said in his diaries about the events that led him to write the poem, and in part on how Heaney himself understands the poetic mind. The story is that, while out for a walk during a storm, Wordsworth saw a hawthorn tree, and, as Heaney puts it, had a “slightly abnormal, slightly numinous vision”; he came to be in an “engendering, heightened state” in which he would begin writing.\(^22\) While Wordsworth was in this heightened state, “images and ideas from different parts of his conscious and unconscious mind were attracted by almost magnetic power. The

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\(^19\) Zangwill 2007, 43.
\(^20\) He “thinks that if certain nonaesthetic property instantiations were produced then certain aesthetic property instantiations would be produced” (ibid.).
\(^21\) In Heaney 1981.
\(^22\) Heaney 1981, 50.
thorn in its new, wind-tossed aspect had become a field of force” into which other images and ideas were drawn. For example, Heaney says, “[i]nto this field were drawn memories of what the ballads call ‘the cruel mother’ who murders her own baby.”

Heaney describes Wordsworth as judging he may be on to something. And what is the content of this judgment? On a Zangwill-type view, it should be that some aesthetic property would be realized by writing a poem that included the thorn and the cruel mother among its images. But this is not how Heaney describes Wordsworth. Part of Wordsworth’s being in a heightened state is his recognizing the field of force that the image of the thorn has become, and being moved to write as a result. None of this draws attention to properties the poem to come might come to have. Wordsworth’s recognition is focused on the image and its potential, presumably, but nothing more determinate than that.

This problem for the Zangwill-type view is not limited to cases of poetic creation. In The Musical Experience of Composer, Performer, Listener, in the chapter focused on the composer, Roger Sessions describes a psychology experiment he took part in, in which he was to write whatever music came to mind when presented with various visual cues. By the end of the experiment, Sessions says, he found he had been writing fragments “all alike in meter, in tonality, in general character,” but he decided not to turn them into a full-blown work. He says that, despite this unified musical character, there was “no idea there”—where an idea is “the starting point of a vital ‘musical train of thought’. "The word ‘vital’ is necessary,” Sessions says, “because all composers, and possibly all musicians, have tones moving in their heads all the time, and thus often idly pursue musical trains of thought, as we all at times follow patterns of association which are not in any sense ideas at all.”

Sessions distinguishes vital musical trains of thought from those that are better described as mere patterns of musical association. He judges he may be on to something when he recognizes the former. A view like Zangwill’s would specify the content of that judgment in the by-now familiar way: Sessions judges the imagined music would realize certain aesthetic properties were it composed or performed. But this still doesn’t seem right. When Sessions calls his musical train of thought “vital,” he is not recognizing more or less particular aesthetic properties that would be realized by the music. As with Wordsworth, as with Doty, there may

23 Heaney 1981, 51, my emphasis. Compare Heaney’s metaphor with Doty’s, a field of force with charge or gravity.
24 Ibid.
25 Sessions 1950, 55. Sessions was a composer and music professor most active in the mid-twentieth century.
26 Ibid.
27 Sessions 1950, 46.
28 Ibid.
29 This is not an ideal formulation, but it is fine for my purposes. I am avoiding the question of what the relevant nonaesthetic properties are in the case of music, so what realizes the relevant aesthetic values. Is it an abstract musical structure? Particular performances? Nothing turns on the answers to these questions.
not be enough other music in mind to form any beliefs about the aesthetic properties that would be realized by a work composed on the basis of this musical train of thought. It is explicit in what Sessions says; he does not describe what he has in mind as an idea for music that would be vital, but as a musical train of thought as itself vital already.

If the artists do not recognize aesthetic properties that would be realized by their ideas for new work, what do they recognize? I answer: aesthetic properties actually realized by their ideas for new work. When Sessions says his musical train of thought is vital, when Doty talks about the charge attaching to his image, when Heaney talks about an image that has become a field of force, they are describing ascriptions of aesthetic properties to the very things they have in mind. Their ideas themselves have aesthetic properties. My task now is to explain what this means.

2 Introducing Vitality

There is more than one way to think about what it is for something in mind itself to realize an aesthetic property. One is to think that what the artist has in mind realizes the same basic kinds of aesthetic properties that artifacts and other objects do (and this includes abstract objects, like mathematical proofs and theorems). The artist’s ideas might themselves be graceful, for example, even beautiful. Ascribing gracefulness to some ideas need not even ground any belief about the gracefulness of some possible artifact. The ideas might have a kind of gracefulness all their own, which an actual work is not expected to have.

The thought is suggestive, but I want to argue that even it is not the right way to understand the artists. To do so—and to explain what I think is the right way to understand the artists—I will need to make a few of my terms more precise, and to introduce a distinction.

I have been saying that nonaesthetic properties realize aesthetic properties. This is true, but the whole story is slightly more complex; I adopt Nick Zangwill’s “three layered cake” approach to it.30 Start by thinking about beauty. Beauty is what I will call an aesthetic value. (The sublime is another one.) When we ascribe beauty to some object, we make a positive aesthetic evaluation of it. An aesthetic value like beauty is determined by other substantive aesthetic properties, such as the property of being graceful.31 We can cite such aesthetic properties in explaining some ascription of aesthetic value. We can say something like: “the music is graceful and balanced (aesthetic properties), and so it is beautiful (aesthetic value).” In ascribing aesthetic properties to something, however, we are not thereby committed to ascribing aesthetic value to it. So I might say, of another piece of music: “at the beginning it is graceful and balanced, but it becomes unfocused at the end, which prevents it from being beautiful.” The same isn’t true for beauty, as I understand it.

30 Zangwill 1995, 324.
31 As I say in a note above (fn. 15), I am focused exclusively on aesthetic properties that are typically, defeasibly reasons in favor of ascribing aesthetic value to something.
It makes no sense to say “the music was beautiful, but because of some other defect it lacked aesthetic value.”

In these terms, to claim that artists ascribe aesthetic value to what they have in mind is to claim the following: what the artists have in mind has nonaesthetic properties, which realize aesthetic properties, which determine aesthetic value. But what are the nonaesthetic properties? What are the aesthetic properties? What is the aesthetic value?

According to the thought just above, the answer to each question is roughly the same as the answer would be in cases of ascribing aesthetic value to objects or artifacts. Whatever the nonaesthetic properties are, they realize aesthetic properties like balance and gracefulness, which, in the right combination, determine the beauty of what the artist has in mind.

I want to argue, however, that this isn’t right. The aesthetic value artists ascribe to what they have in mind when they judge they may be on to something is different from beauty. The nonaesthetic properties that realize aesthetic properties are different, the aesthetic properties realized are different, and the aesthetic value those aesthetic properties determine is different. The last of these—the aesthetic artists ascribe to what they have in mind—is what I want to call vitality. I use the same word as Sessions does, and in that sense follow his lead; however I will develop a much richer, more systematic meaning for the word than Sessions does. I will argue that vitality is an aesthetic value like beauty, but fundamentally different from it. I begin doing so by drawing a distinction between types of nonaesthetic form.

3 Vitality and Form

A traditional thesis about beauty says that an object’s form is ultimately responsible for realizing its beauty. The thesis can be broken down into at least the following two parts.³² 1) In some cases, all that matters for assessing an object’s beauty is what is available to the senses. One need not know what the object is or what it’s for, or facts about the social or historical context in which it was created.³³ 2) In cases where sensible properties are all that matter, what matters is not any single sensible property, but rather relations among them, and especially properties realized by those relations, such as complex symmetries and asymmetries.

(2) concerns the nonaesthetic properties that constitute an object’s nonaesthetic form—symmetries and asymmetries.³⁴ The thesis on the whole concerns the relationship between nonaesthetic form and aesthetic ascriptions. Call this its third

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³² One or another of the parts appear throughout 18th century German aesthetics (Guyer 2005). They appear together most explicitly in Kant’s Critique of the Power of the Judgment.

³³ This is a species of what contemporary aesthetics calls “formalism,” defended, for example, by Zangwill 1999 and 2000, against Walton 1970.

³⁴ Some literature in the psychology of aesthetics calls these collative properties. Collative properties include “novelty, surprisingness, complexity, ambiguity, puzzlingness,” and we should include orderliness, covering, e.g., various types of symmetry (Berlyne 1971, 69). Grasping such properties requires comparing or “collating” information from distinct informational sources, e.g., distinct spatial or temporal locations in a work (ibid.).
part. (3) A beautiful object’s nonaesthetic form realizes substantive aesthetic properties: being balanced and being unified. These aesthetic properties, in turn, determine aesthetic value: beauty.  

I will not be defending the traditional thesis, though it is defensible, and I will not focus on (1); rather, I will argue that analogues of (2) and (3) are true of vitality. When an artist judges what she has in mind for new work to be vital, it has a nonaesthetic form. There are relations among some of the properties of what she has in mind; and there are properties realized by those relations. And this nonaesthetic form realizes aesthetic properties, which, in turn, determine aesthetic value. As promised, at each step—at each layer of Zangwill’s cake—we will discover a reason to think vitality is different from beauty.

3.1 The Analogue of (2): Nonaesthetic Form

In some cases, nonaesthetic form is realized by relations among properties, where these properties belong to some single object or artifact. Think of the relations among colors-regions in a painting, for example. The same could be true of some mental content. There could be a nonaesthetic form realized by relations among properties, where those properties all belong to that single content. In cases like these, there are, as I will put it, relations within content. In cases of vitality, however, I suggest the nonaesthetic form is different. There are relations among properties of distinct contents, rather than among properties of some single content. Think, for example, of relations that might obtain among the properties of an image of boiling water and an image of an elephant ear. In cases like this—cases of vitality—there are relations among contents rather than relations within content.

These claims are descriptive, but this should not be surprising: the claims concern nonaesthetic form. To argue for them, I first return to the artist testimony. When artists themselves describe judging they may be on to something—in my terms, ascribing vitality to what they have in mind—they describe responding to relations among contents. I then briefly discuss some work from the psychology of creativity.

The most detailed account of an artist’s responding to relations among contents is Heaney’s description of Wordsworth. On seeing the hawthorn tree during the storm, remember, “images and ideas from different parts of [Wordsworth’s] conscious and unconscious mind were attracted by almost magnetic power”; “[t]he thorn in its new, wind-tossed aspect had become a field of force” into which other images were drawn.”  

Wordsworth is ascribing vitality to what he has in mind, and what he has in mind presents itself as an image that has become a field of force, which attracts others to it—an image that stands in various relations to others. What Wordsworth recognizes in ascribing vitality to what he has in mind, I suggest, are those various relations.

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35 I have left out a fourth part of the traditional idea. Something about an object’s aesthetic form resists being grasped by the intellect. This is a feature of Kant’s aesthetic theory, for example.

The same is true for Sessions. When he ascribes vitality to his musical train of thought he recognizes a train of thought, entrained musical imagery. He contrasts this with idle musical association, which is already to draw attention to differences between the kinds of relations he is able to recognize in his musical thinking. Some of these relations are merely associative, and others are vital. When Sessions ascribes vitality to his musical train of thought, he responds to relations of a particular kind, those by virtue of which he has more in mind than mere idle association. When Sessions judges his musical train of thought is vital, then, he responds to relations among contents.\(^{37}\)

Then there is Doty. Of the three, his testimony might seem most resistant to my interpretation. When he recognizes the gravity or charge that attaches to his image—it’s vitality—his goal is inquiry. His sense is that there is more to discover. Is this a way of responding to relations among contents? I suggest that it is. While there is a focal image, the gravity or charge attaching to it is determined not by properties of that image alone. It is determined, rather, by relations among the focal image and others, not all of which are consciously in mind. The charge attaching to the focal image signals these relations. It is a sense that some property of the image, here a relational property, has been incompletely grasped. This is why Doty’s response to his image, the one that makes immediate sense to him, is inquiry: the attempt to discover or determine what more is there.\(^{38}\)

In none of these cases is the artist responsive, in the first place, to properties possessed by isolated ideas or images alone. None responds to relations within content, as they would be were they responding to, for instance, the beauty of the image. What they respond to, instead, are relations among contents.

The claim is supported by some work in the psychology of creativity. In Creative Cognition, Ronald Finke, Thomas Ward, and Steven Smith propose a psychological account of creativity, which they call the Geneplore model. According to the Geneplore model, creative cognition is composed of two distinct kinds of mental processes. Some are generative processes, which produce “preinventive forms.” These are then interpreted by exploratory processes, which attempt to interpret and find meaning or function for the preinventive forms. For example, I might find myself imagining a certain unusual and interesting shape (a preinventive form), and then, thinking about what the shape could be, decide it could be a new type of birdfeeder.\(^{39}\)

\(^{37}\) Objection: music just is relations among tones or sounds; any musical idea, then, will concern relations among auditory imagery. Reply: notice that the relations Sessions discerns are not the same as those realized in his finished music. They are not, e.g., the kinds of fixed temporal relations that will help determine the beauty of the finished piece. Rather, what Sessions discerns is that what he has in mind might become beautiful music. He discerns the potential for those fixed temporal relations eventually to emerge or take shape.

\(^{38}\) The background thought is that, while artists ascribe vitality to what they have consciously in mind, and in doing so recognize relations among contents, there can be contents related to what’s consciously in mind that are not themselves conscious.

\(^{39}\) Preinventive forms are not just visual. They include contents of all kinds, including “verbal combinations,” “musical forms,” “action schemas,” and “visual patterns and object form” (Finke et al. 1992, 22).
This is a case of what you might call functional creativity, inventing something for practical use, and cases like it serve as the focus of much of what Finke et al. have to say. In earlier work, however, Finke (on his own) makes it clear that cases of artistic creativity are considerably more complex:

Consider an artist, for example, who begins by combining visual forms in an intuitive way, and then realizes what compositions might follow from those forms. Or, the composer who first writes down the melodies that come into his head and then realizes where the melodies belong. This is similar to how one might discover inventions or concepts that belong to a preinventive form. Creativity, so conceived, is discovering the pathway that allows one’s intuitions to mature.40

A lot in this passage is obscure. (What is it for intuitions to “mature,” and why would some “pathways” and not others allow them to mature? What is a “pathway”?) But set all that aside.

I assume that, in Finke’s description, the artists have judged they may be on to something—they have ascribed vitality to what they have in mind, that’s why they have begun their creative work. Then notice that the artist’s preinventive form in each of the cases Finke describes is complex. The painter, Finke says, combines “forms” (more than one) in an intuitive way, and has the sense that those and more might be combined in a painting. The composer, he says, entertains “melodies” (more than one) and then sees or hears how to combine them, presumably sensing the way other musical imagery might also be combined with those melodies. Both cases are “similar to how one might discover inventions or concepts that belong to a preinventive form”—similar, for example, to how one might discover that some interesting shape could be a birdfeeder. The preinventive form in the artistic case is much richer than some interesting shape, however. It comprises the various visual forms the painter imagines, the various melodies the composer hears. According to the Geneplore model, too, when artists ascribe vitality to what they have in mind for new work—they recognize relations among contents.

It would be desirable to specify the nature of these relations more precisely, but nothing the artists say, and nothing in the Geneplore model, is very helpful for doing so. Still, it is useful to speculate, if for no other reason than to fix ideas, or to show it is possible to fix them.

Whatever relations obtain among the artists’ ideas or images, they do not stably join those ideas or images into anything like a unified whole. This is true in each of the cases I just discussed. Nonetheless, it is intuitively plausible that the relations suggest various possible ways of joining things. This must be part of why the artists are compelled by what they have in mind, why they are moved to work.

I have two speculative thoughts about what relations of this kind might be like. First, image fragments or more fully-formed images might be related to each other in such a way that they can be joined in various ways to create a single object or scene. A painter, for example, might imagine a rocky surface attached to no particular rock, a bird wing, a flash of sunlight in no particular location, and many

40 Finke 1990, 169.
others, which can be made to fit together in a single scene and in various ways. A composer might imagine fragments of sound and timbre that seem able to be combined in various ways into a single musical event. In cases like these, the contents are related compositionally. They realize a compositional form.

Second, image fragments or more fully-formed images might be related to each other expressively. Suppose two images both bring to mind the theme of loneliness. There is a solitary tree on a hillside (Wordsworth’s hawthorn), and someone sitting alone in a bar (a scene from Hopper). Without intending anything technical, say that both images express that theme. If so, then the two images are related by something we might call their expressive meanings. Other ideas or images the artist entertains might also share this expressive meaning, resulting in a kind of general structure among them. The ideas or images would be related expressively, realizing an expressive form. The form of what Wordsworth has in mind (in Heaney’s description of him) is plausibly expressive in this sense.

Conceiving vitality’s nonaesthetic form in terms of relations among contents, whether those are compositional or expressive relations, gives us our first reason to think vitality is distinct from beauty. The two have different types of nonaesthetic form. It is tempting to think that the nonaesthetic form of beauty is constituted by relations within content. The process of making something beautiful on the basis of something vital in mind seems like it should be a process of taking some contents among which there are relations and forging some single thing within which there are relations.

We should allow, though, that something beautiful might have nonaesthetic form constituted by relations among contents (a movie in which different images appear on the screen over some period of time?). Even in such cases, however, the relations among contents will be fixed, static. The nonaesthetic form of something vital in mind, by contrast, is characterized by unfixed, dynamic relations among contents—expressive form and compositional form are both examples. There are important differences between these two, which will show up in the aesthetic properties each realize, the aesthetic value each determines.

3.2 The Analogue of (3): Aesthetic Properties and Value

What I called the third part of the traditional thesis about beauty was the following. When an object is beautiful, its nonaesthetic form realizes aesthetic properties, such as gracefulness and balance, and these determine its aesthetic value—its beauty. What about cases of vitality? Analogously, when an artist has something vital in mind, its nonaesthetic form, which is constituted by relations among contents, realizes aesthetic properties, and these determine its aesthetic value—its vitality. But what are these aesthetic properties?

As a way into the question, consider a rough but serviceable reformulation: what are the merits of something vital in mind, grasp of which tends to be accompanied by feeling? And think back over some of the nonaesthetic properties of something vital in mind. When an artist has something vital in mind, there are relations among contents (e.g., compositional relations), and nonaesthetic
properties realized by those relations (being richly composeable), rather than by properties of single contents alone (having an interesting shape). These relations among contents are characteristic of thinking about how things might be put together or made into something new, formed into a new object or joined by expressive meaning. The relations among contents are characteristic, that is, of something rightly described as creative thinking.\footnote{There is some analogy here—along with many disanalogies—with reasoning, which sheds some small light on the character of having something vital in mind. In reasoning, rational value is determined by relations among of contents (e.g., entailments), and properties realized by those relations (being deductively valid), rather than by properties of single contents alone (being true or false). Relations among contents of this kind are constitutive of reasoning. By contrast, as I say in the text, the relations among contents in something vital in mind are characteristic of creative thinking.}

When these relations are such as to realize vitality, though, they do not merely obtain, but do so in complex and compelling ways; recognizing them is accompanied by the characteristic feelings artists have when they judge they may be on to something. In what sense “complex and compelling”? First, the relations signal a rich set of creative possibilities. They constitute a complex network of compositional and/or expressive relations. Second, the relations suggest these possibilities open-endedly: as I said above, recognizing them does not engender belief about what will result from the work of creating something on the basis of those relations. Putting the two together: the relations among contents displayed by something vital in mind signal creative possibilities without specifying any particular creative possibility. They signal something like creative possibility or potential as such.

Here is a central merit of something vital in mind, then: signaling creative possibility as such. And grasp of this merit is accompanied by feeling. Recognizing the distinctively complex and compelling relations among contents is accompanied by excitement, agitation, the felt need, which Doty describes, to investigate he has in mind.

This points the way toward the aesthetic properties we’re after, those realized by the nonaesthetic form of something vital in mind. The aesthetic properties will be those that aptly characterize something in mind that has the merit of signaling creative possibility as such. And what are these aesthetic properties? Among them, I now suggest, are the properties of being entangled or complexly clustered. Much in the way beautiful objects might seem balanced and unified, a vital set of ideas for new work might seem, for instance, entangled. Or a set of vital ideas might seem charged, as Doty says, or heavy; it may be seem bound by a field of force, to use Heaney’s phrase. These are all examples, I suggest, of the aesthetic properties that might be realized by the nonaesthetic form of something vital in mind. They reflect different aspects of the complex appeal that a set of ideas can have when it signals creative possibilities without specifying any particular creative possibility.

These aesthetic properties are different from the aesthetic properties that an object of beauty has. This is intuitively plausible. Intuitively speaking, being
entangled, complexly clustered, or bound by a field of force—possible aesthetic properties of something vital in mind—is different from being balanced, unified, and graceful—possible aesthetic properties of a beautiful object. The two sets of aesthetic properties are also distinguished by the types of nonaesthetic form that realize them, which I discussed in section 3.1 above. In the cases of beauty, the aesthetic properties are realized by static relationships among an object’s elements, the way those elements fit together. In cases of vitality, the elements of what the artist has in mind do not “fit together” in this same sense. Those elements are rather more like constituents of an ongoing episode of ideation, which fit together unstably and in various ways. Dynamic relationships of this kind are what realize aesthetic properties like being entangled.

The best way to appreciate the difference between the sets of aesthetic properties, though, is by appreciating the sense in which each determines a distinct aesthetic value—the sense, that is, in which beauty and vitality are distinct aesthetic values.

Combined in the right way, the aesthetic properties of something vital in mind, and the aesthetic properties of a beautiful object, determine distinct aesthetic excellences. These excellences are what we look for in ascribing aesthetic value something, and each aesthetic value tracks its own distinctive kind. The excellence of the beautiful lies in a characteristically formed set of sensible properties. The excellence of the sublime lies in being overwhelming to our senses (a starry night sky), or in being capable of overwhelming our physical bodies while presenting no actual risk to our safety (a stormy ocean viewed from the shore). The excellence of the vital, though, by contrast with both, lies in being susceptible to having, but not actually having, a formed set of sensible properties. Beauty, then, is an excellence of actual organization in something’s sensible properties, while vitality is an excellence of possible organization in a set of ideas for not-yet-instantiated sensible properties. In a slogan: beauty is an excellence of actuality, vitality an excellence of possibility.

The aesthetic excellences that evaluations of beauty and vitality respectively track are different, and, for this reason, the two are different aesthetic values. And the aesthetic properties that determine these values are of distinct types for the same reason: combined in the right way, they determine distinct aesthetic excellences. To be entangled is to be headed toward one type of aesthetic excellence, namely vitality’s, while to be balanced is to be headed toward another.

This explanation of vitality’s evaluative nature shows us two important things. First, it shows us why judgments of vitality serve so well as an account of artists’ judgments that they may be on to something, the sense in which ascribing vitality expresses their sense that it is worth beginning creative work. Vitality is an aesthetic value that tracks an excellence of possible organization. To have something vital in

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42 I want to call it perfection, but this has a traditional sense in aesthetics, which is not what I have in mind here. Explaining aesthetic value in terms of perfection was common before Kant, appearing at least in Baumgarten, Wolff, and Sulzer (see Guyer 2005, ch. 8, for discussion).

43 Here I am glossing Kant’s analysis of the sublime, which he gives in the Analytic of the Sublime in the 3rd Critique.
mind is not just to sense that it might be possible to bring about some new organization or other to some materials, but to sense overwhelmingly that there are connections to be made—to sense that something is urgently there, as Toni Morrison put it. The complexity of the entanglement that determines the vitality of what the artist has in mind suggests the possibility of creating something that would have aesthetic properties, and so aesthetic value, even though the artist has no grip on what those aesthetic properties might be.

The explanation also shows us, almost incidentally, the sense in which vitality is a distinctively creative aesthetic value. Put simply, works of art do not display the same excellence of possibility that something vital in mind does; works of art do not display entanglements and complex clusters. Vitality is, in this way, proper to exercises of artistic creativity. It is realized by what the artist has in mind when she judges it is worth beginning the creative process, but it cannot be realized by the finished work she will create.

4 Conclusion

The discussion has offered an account of what artists judge when they judge they may be on to something, and it has done so by developing an account of a novel aesthetic value. In doing so, the discussion has also expanded our repertoire of aesthetic properties. In summary, artists judge they may be on to something, but this is not a judgment about novelty, or instrumental value, or aesthetic properties that would be realized by what they have in mind. Rather, the judgment is aesthetic. When artists make it, they ascribe aesthetic value to what they have in mind. And that aesthetic value is vitality.

Not all artists begin their creative work because they recognize something vital in mind, though. Some begin, as I said, with something like an aesthetic experiment: they make something, see what it suggests or what else can be made with it, and take it from there. This, too, can lead to valuable work. I have argued, however, that many artists do begin their creative work with a judgment of vitality. This includes prolific artists who produce very valuable work. It is important, therefore, to understand what it is to make those judgments, to ascribe vitality to something in mind. Doing so is necessary for any full understanding of creative ability.

There is more work to be done to fill out the account. How do vital ideas guide an artist’s creative process? How does she draw on an entanglement of ideas, which signals creative possibilities without specifying any particular creative possibility, in making a new work? Can artists be wrong in ascribing vitality to what they have in mind? This last question I can answer now. Yes, though how one thinks about the source of the error will depend on what one thinks is the ground of aesthetic judgments. If it is fundamentally feeling of a certain kind, as it is for Kant, for example, the error will likely arise from the artist’s misidentifying what she feels.
in response to what she has mind. A poet with writer’s block might suddenly have new ideas for a poem and judge them to be vital, but be incorrect in doing so. She is moved by her new ideas, but more by having ideas at all than by anything having to do with their value.

Still, even as developed here, the account of vitality is fruitful. It not only improves our understanding of creative ability, but also clarifies the relationship between the philosophy of creativity and aesthetics. From the perspective of the study of aesthetic value, one might think there is nothing special about creativity. Artists have ideas for new work, and they may recognize that the work to be created will have aesthetic value. So described, however, any aesthetic value the artists recognize—any aesthetic value at issue in the creative process—is of the same kind as that which the finished work will have, and so one whose nature we can study just as well by studying that finished work.

According to my account of vitality, however, this isn’t right. There is an aesthetic value particular to the exercise of artistic creativity, a value realized by what the artist has in mind but not by the finished work of art. In this sense, the study of creativity is in part the study of a particular type of aesthetic value, rather than simply the study of some distinctive type of mental process. And, moreover, the study of aesthetic value is not exhausted by the study of those values that works of art, natural objects, even abstract objects realize. The philosophy of creativity is a part of aesthetics, and presents its own specifically aesthetic problems—the nonaesthetic properties that realize clusters and entanglements, for instance.

The account also brings into focus a creative phenomenon that is not specific to artistic activity; and here I return to something I mentioned briefly at the very beginning. When artists judge they may be on to something, they are making a judgment about potential or promise, that something they have in mind is worth pursuing. And they do so, as I have argued, without any determinate sense for what their finished work will be like. Their judgment about potential does not require any judgment about some particular end to be brought about. But there are other activities in which we make judgments of this kind. Philosophy is plausibly one of them. In beginning a line of inquiry, we sometimes judge that a cluster of ideas, even some particular claim, is worth pursuing, even though we have no determinate sense for what the final argument will be. Philosophical ideas, too, can appear entangled. If finding them this way turns out to be a judgment of vitality, then my account will help us sharpen our understanding of creativity not only in art, but also in philosophy—and possibly elsewhere. It will show, among other things, that aesthetic value can play a role in philosophical inquiry.

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44 Henry Allison has said that, for Kant, the difficulty of knowing one has correctly ascribed aesthetic value is analogous to the difficulty of knowing one has acted for genuinely moral reasons, rather than self-interest or something else (Allison 1990, 109-110).


