Research Statement: A Philosophical Account of Inspiration

Christopher Prodoehl

My research interests are in aesthetics, philosophy of mind, philosophy of action, and Kant, with special focus on questions about creativity. I aim to account for creative phenomena in terms of fundamental philosophical concepts—such as aesthetic value, self-consciousness, and mental agency—while at the same time using those phenomena to push for new ways of understanding the fundamental concepts. My largest research project is focused on artistic inspiration. However, I think much of what I say about that will apply to other kinds of creative activities, as well, including philosophical inquiry. I comment on how at the end.

What is artistic inspiration? Philosophers have had very little to say about it. One philosopher explains it as “a mysterious process whereby ideas simply ‘pop’ into someone’s mind,” but this is only one small part of the story.¹

The traditional idea of inspiration is that of divine inspiration: when inspired, artists receive their ideas from the Muses or some other supernatural entity. Artists do not talk much about the Muses anymore, but there is a more general form of the traditional idea that persists in the accounts they give of their creative experiences: when inspired, artists passively receive ideas from something outside themselves, an external source of some kind. In some accounts, this external source is esoteric but not clearly supernatural. One example is what the poet Jack Spicer calls “the Outside of you” that writes poetry.² In other accounts, the external source is the unconscious or something like it, physically internal to the artist, but external in some other sense. This general claim of inspiration is related to several others, which are also persistent. Whatever the external source of ideas is taken to be, the artist cannot control it or predict when it will yield new ideas; when it does yield new ideas, the artist can recognize them as significant, but can grasp them only partially at first.

It can be tempting to dismiss most of this as so much confabulation or magical thinking, but this is, I suggest, to be distracted by the wilder elements. My work treats claims about inspiration as attempts, made mostly by artists themselves, to characterize some of the most important properties of their creative mental activity. To understand what those properties are, the claims need to be interpreted and articulated, the supernatural and esoteric set aside. Properly treated, claims about inspiration are not only intelligible, but illuminating and defensible.

Over the course of several papers, I develop an account of artistic inspiration. I argue that the truth of many claims about inspiration can be explained in terms of—and by making novel modifications to—certain familiar and fundamental philosophical concepts, including aesthetic value, self-consciousness, mental

agency, and the phenomena of identification and alienation. In so arguing, I closely examine what artists say in interviews and essays about their minds creatively at work. I interpret these artist reflections and formulate claims to fit those interpretations. The result is a rich and systematic account of inspiration that vindicates much of what artists say about their creative experiences, which also offers a fresh, refined view of fundamental philosophical concepts.

“Having Something in Mind to Create” (under review) develops ideas at the center of the account. It examines the kind of mental content artists recognize when they begin their creative work, even though they have no clear sense for what they will create. Think of a poet, for example, who has various images in mind that she can work into a poem, has no determinate sense for what the final poem will be, but judges, nonetheless, that it is worth sitting down to write.

I argue that, when artists like this judge it is worth beginning their creative work, they ascribe a novel aesthetic value to what they have in mind, and that this value is neither beauty nor sublimity. I call it vitality. When an artist has something vital in mind, distinct ideas or images stand in complex relationships to each other. They seem able to be combined in various ways into something new, but do not cohere into an idea for some particular new thing. These complex relationships among ideas and images realizes distinctive aesthetic properties, which do not, I argue, ground ascriptions of beauty. When an artist has something vital and mind, ideas and images can seem entangled, for example, where this is an aesthetic property.

Judgments of vitality are motivating; making one initiates the process of creating new work. But how? I answer this question in “From Creative Pleasures to Creative Motives” (under review). The answer has its foundation in Kant’s aesthetic theory. When artists judge they may be on to something, I argue, they take pleasure in what they have in mind, and this pleasure is disinterested in the sense Kant develops in the Critique of the Power of Judgment. I so argue by suggesting there is a “fit” between this claim and the way artists often describe their own creative experiences. When an artist take disinterested pleasure in something in mind for new work, I argue, she has no salient beliefs about its causal history. This means, among other things, that she does not experience herself as the mental agent of what she has in mind for new work. And this is, I suggest, characteristic of the way artists describe their creative experiences.

I go on to argue that this account of creative pleasures yields an account of creative motives. These creative motives, I propose, fit unusually among relevant practical concepts. To act on them is not to exercise rational agency, for example. In near-future work, I will extend this discussion of the way creative motives interact with ideas in practical philosophy, examining, among other things, whether artists identify with their creative motives or not, and the sense in which those motives are sources of reasons for action.

While “From Creative Pleasures to Creative Motives” is concerned with mental agency, it is concerned only with the claim that artists do not experience themselves as exercising it when they have vital ideas for new work. That paper does not argue
for the metaphysical claim that artists really do not exercise mental agency over those ideas. "Aesthetic Insight and Mental Agency" pursues this further argument.

In that paper, I argue that artists really do lack agency over their vital ideas for new work. I defend the claim that the event of an artist’s having a vital idea fails to satisfy a requirement on exercises of mental agency, which, for example, the event of recognizing the next step in a logic proof does not. The argument turns on general principles about mental agency—about the conditions on being responsible for a mental event—as well as principles about the particularity of aesthetic evaluation: the absence of general rules for determining whether something has aesthetic value.

"Inspiration and Self-Consciousness" pursues what may be the quintessential claim of inspiration, namely that, when inspired, artists sense something other than themselves as the mental agent of their vital ideas—not just that they are not the mental agent of those ideas, but that something else is; again, think of the Muses. I argue that claims of this kind are best understood as reporting a distinctive kind of self-consciousness. As in "From Creative Pleasures to Creative Motives," my argument here is rooted in Kant, but largely in claims he makes in the first Critique, the Critique of Pure Reason, rather than in the Critique of the Power of Judgment.

In the first Critique, Kant claims that rationally-structured mental activity, such as reasoning, helps explain the consciousness we have of ourselves as thinkers, distinct from any of the particular thoughts we entertain. Rationally-structured mental activity helps explain this particular type of self-consciousness. I argue that, when artists have something vital in mind for new work, their mental activity is not rationally structured, but it is structured enough to explain another kind of self-consciousness, which I call it alterior self-consciousness. This type of self-consciousness specifies the content of the artist’s experience that something other than herself is the mental agent of her vital idea.

The first, second, and fourth of these papers derive from chapters of my dissertation, Aesthetic Ideation and the Artistic Mind. Since finishing it, I have been working to refine its ideas into a book-length manuscript on artistic inspiration. These four papers develop core elements of that work.

I have other papers in progress on closely related issues. "Impersonal Expressions" examines the role of self-expression in creating art. While some artists encourage aiming at self-expression, others caution against it. What are they disagreeing about? What alternative do the cautious have in mind? After critically discussing some potential answers, I argue that the artists who caution against self-expression are recommending a different way—an impersonal way—of expressing feeling in the process of creating art. Expressing feeling in this impersonal way does not lead to self-knowledge in the same way self-expression does.

In "Lucky Artists" (under review), I argue that artists, and performers especially, exercise a distinctively non-practical type of control over their bodily movements, which I call receptive control. Think of a pianist who doesn’t need to carefully monitor her bodily activity because of her skill and training. I argue that, to affect fine-grained details of her performance, such as tone and dynamics, she listens to her playing and imagines the way she wants it to sound, and that neither
of these are practical states of mind—neither are intentions to play a certain sequence of notes, for example, or even intentions to play the passage in such-and-such a way—but each nonetheless recruits bodily activity. Both listening and imagining in this way are, I argue, instances of exercising receptive control.

My work up to this point has been focused on artistic creativity, however I plan to apply it to activity in other domains. Philosophy is one of them. In beginning a line of philosophical inquiry, for example, 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. If this is right, then there are plausibly vital philosophical ideas. Or consider cases of deciding what to do in our personal lives, especially choices leading to transformational experiences. When a course of action is personally transformative, the reasons for taking it may not be available until after taking it. For example, the preferences that justify taking a job in a new city are formed only after, and by virtue of, taking the job. The concept of vitality might offer ways of thinking about how making such choices can be justified in prospect. We might have something vital in mind about what to do—thoughts about possible outcomes might be sufficiently entangled—and we choose for that reason, namely on the basis of aesthetic considerations.

In both contexts, then, aesthetic considerations—appearances of vitality, in particular—might play a role in guiding how we engage with ideas and problems. There may even be a way of so engaging that it is right to call inspired.