CHAPTER THREE

THE RATIONALITY OF CREATIVITY

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I Introduction

My title links two abstract nouns that are usually set over against each other, seen as contrasting, if not in opposition. The view that informs this paper is that what can usefully be said about creativity is very little, and rather trite; and that it is co-extensive with the rational element in creativity. There may or may not be other than rational elements in creativity; confronted with them, my inclination would be for the first time to invoke Wittgenstein: “whereof one cannot speak, thereof one should be silent.” The little I think can be said about the rationality of creativity will be confined to section five. The preceding sections will offer a general critique of the literature, bringing out its poverty and its irrationality.

Much of the growing literature on creativity, it seems to me, bypasses several quite decisive arguments. Properly understood, these arguments vitiate much of the debate in that literature. These arguments are the following: the problem to be solved by studying creativity is not clearly specified; creativity is treated as a psychological rather than a logical issue; that to explain creativity is to explain it away; and, when we create an explanation that explains creativity, it also, paradoxically, must explain itself. To each of these arguments I shall devote a section.

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II  What Is the Problem?

What problem is it intended that theories of creativity solve? This, to be sure, is a question rather than an argument. But the absence of a satisfactory answer to the question can be turned into an argument against the enterprise. Einstein remarked in several places that formulating the problem clearly constitutes the better part of the solution. Of course, different writers work on different problems. Were I to set problems concerning creativity for others to work on, I might instance the paradox that the originality of an original idea only becomes ‘visible’ against the background of an intellectual tradition, and those in an intellectual tradition can become trapped in it and blind to new ideas. I might ask whether ideas accumulate, or are reached in one jump. My self-imposed task is not, however, to set problems in this way; it is to express dissatisfaction with a body of literature.

J. P. Guilford,3 in a paper often cited as initiating the modern literature on creativity, posed two questions for further research. (1) How can we discover creative promise in our children and youth? (2) How can we promote the development of creative personalities? Guilford was, at the time, President of the American Psychological Association, and his setting up of the problems for future research deserves close scrutiny. (1) tells us some children may be creatively promising. (2) implies that there are ‘creative personalities’ (creatively promising people?), whose development can be promoted. Creativity, then, is envisaged by Guilford as some sort of dependent variable, and the idea is to spot it and get to work on those factors, which affect it, in order to foster it.

But what is creativity that we should be interested in discovering it and promoting it? Presumably, it is something like the ability to produce new and original ideas, creations, inventions, and the like. But why should we want to discover thinkers, artists, and inventors, and promote their development? Is it because we want to increase the output of papers, works of art, and patents? Academics, art critics, and patent offices already complain loudly that they can scarcely keep up with the flood. And perhaps much of the flood are ideas, works of art, and inventions that are neither new, nor original, but merely dross. Output alone, then, I take it, cannot be the object of promoting creativity. Obviously, it is output of quality that is to be promoted.

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3 J. P. Guilford, “Creativity.”