Perhaps no other human capacity is so highly prized by us as creativity. Can there be no other explanation for this above average esteem than that creativity approaches and trades on the power of being God? It is certainly not superficial to claim that those who exercise their creative capacities and those who witness the execution of those capacities elevate themselves or feel themselves elevated above their mundanely human existence. In the presence or the thrall of creativity, we are understandably tempted to say that humans are inspired either to emulate the divine model—“How could there be gods,” Friedrich Nietzsche asked, “and I not want to be one?”—or to fill the void left by the God Nietzsche said was dead with their own sense of a divine purpose. Romanticism and the cult of the genius formed a movement from this becoming present and absent of God in art. (Are they not all romantics who believe that divine omniscience, omnipotence and grace can be replaced with the genius of poetry, technique and style?) Even those we would not call romantics commonly claim nothing less for creativity than an elevation of the human spirit to divine or quasi-divine standards. The creative talent of Mozart and the elevated feeling one can have while listening to Mozart’s music are the stock (if trite) evidence adduced in support of this claim, but have we no other way of accounting for what we give and what we get from creativity?

In an entry for the recently published Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics, Philip Alperson tries to distance this common view of human creativity from the classical conception of God divinely making something out of nothing, ex nihilo. He associates creativity on a human scale, instead, with making out of something, ex non nihil, something else that is exceptional, original, and rare. We call works of art creative, he says, if “they add something of interest to the world. That is a chief part of what distinguishes the creative from the routine, the pedestrian, the
derivative, and the merely novel.” Creativity, Alperson tells us, adds something to the world that is not only new but meaningful, but also, he says, the realization of a distinctly human power that is the possession of distinguished human beings. What exactly this power is, he concludes, what distinguishes it from all the other distinctly human powers and traits, and how it comes to distinguish certain human beings from others, has not been satisfactorily decided. Could that be because there is still something extra-human about the power that distinguishes creative human beings from the rest of us clinging to Alperson’s account? Can we not advance on this common and still romantic view that finds creativity only in what adds to our world by exceeding the routine and derivative? Can we find something creative, instead, in what subtracts the mundane and pedestrian from our experience of the world? Can we press this alternative further by considering creativity in fields other than art, fields like science, or even philosophy?

Though the subject of his handbook entry is creativity in art, some of what Alperson attributes to creativity there appears to be applicable to the conceptual and theoretical processes that characterize philosophy. The idea, for example, that creativity in art begins with the awareness of a problem, and that it proceeds through deliberation and inspiration to a concretely elaborated result, compares favorably with the way philosophers work. A philosopher might identify a problem, ruminate on some of the received wisdom on the subject, and finally elaborate, in an essay or a book, some intuition that provided its inspiration. Alperson points out, however, that this general account of creativity does not appear to be equipped to capture the significant degree of originality, profundity, and insight we ordinarily associate with it. Neither does it account for the important “social, historical, and cultural context of artistic creativity.” For this reason, Alperson concludes his essay by worrying that a general description of creativity in art may not be forthcoming. Still, something remains to be learned from the

3 Alperson, “Creativity in Art,” 251.