

Irving Singer

Modes of Creativity: Philosophical Perspectives.

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One has to be grateful for philosophers like Irving Singer. From his work on love and meaningfulness to the more recent reflections on opera and film, he combines the skeptical pertinacity of the analytic tradition—a hard-nosed demand for clarity—with an open mind and an uncommon ease with the provisional.

His recent book, *Modes of Creativity: Philosophical Perspectives*, displays these qualities while continuing strands developed in earlier work, all of which taken together might be seen as a single, many-faceted philosophical confession. An investigation into the modes of human creativity could easily come to grief in two ways. On the one hand, it could abstract into crystalline removes to theorize, beautifully, yet with neither friction nor relevance; on the other, it could descend into the confusion of the everyday and get torn limb from limb. Singer steers nicely between the two. He seems especially aware of how philosophy has sinned in the first regard, and readily immerses ideas into practical complications. Along with his freely admitted dissatisfaction with his previous treatment of certain questions, this lends the book a healthy, hospitable openness.

His is a musing, peripatetic way of working, an approach, he insists, both pluralist and empiricist. If the pluralist keeps in focus the many manifestations of the phenomenon, the empiricist eschews any idea ‘that a rigorous definition of the relevant terminology can truly elucidate this aspect of our existence’ (x). Singer questions the desire to come up with the *Urpflanze*, if you will, of all creative acts, the idea being that if we look at a diversified enough range of examples, ‘we may find that the all-embracing definitions that many philosophers crave professionally are, in principle, hardly worth our consideration’ (14). Instead, as in his previous work, he ‘draws upon a methodology entailing concrete analyses that seek to locate the meaning of a concept worthy of philosophical attention by placing it within a range of relevant insights about experiences and human interests to which it pertains’ (x). He is refreshingly eclectic in the choice of these relevant insights, which range from some of the usual suspects—Freud, Plato, Bergson, Tolstoy—to others you would not expect, including off-the-cuff comments, anecdotes, and even popular movies.

As he argued in his earlier *Meaning in Life: The Creation of Value*, there is in human life no prior, fixed, and ultimate meaning. To some this effectively dooms our lives to absurdity, but for Singer a transcendental lack simply requires us to recognize that *we* are the source of our meanings. All creativity, then, comes out of ‘the human desire to attain values and fulfill ideals that matter to us as natural entities’ (24).

If for ‘natural entities’ there need be no metaphysical endorsement of creativity as such, this certainly remains a tempting myth. Whether it is Plato or Whitehead, the

problem—and here comes the empiricist strain—is that we have no way of knowing whether such explanations have any real basis. Singer for his part sees no reason to look beyond the ‘mundane occurrence’ of this ‘dance of life’ (13). Taken at this level creativity broadens out into what Singer calls ‘transformation’. And this is relevant not only to aesthetics, but also expression, metaphor, myth, humor, the practical arts, and science, all of which he explicitly considers. ‘Far from duplicating any earlier reality that caused it, or somehow brought it into being, the new entity transforms its forbears’ (265). And in this transformation—to summarize in my own words—new content emerges. There are of course lesser and alas more pervasive versions, like the unimaginative tedium that marks much of daily life. Against this it becomes possible to employ the phrase, as he does, ‘truly creative’ (29).

Where does new content in transformation come from? Clearly this fascinates Singer. He provides examples from his own philosophical work. Once while giving an impromptu lecture on one of his books, fresh insights began to stir, and after some weeks in an off-season resort town, he had a new book on his hands. ‘At no time, or in any of its details, did I know beforehand what would emerge as the contents of that book’ (74). Even with his respectful dislike of transcendental accounts, Singer finds it hard to get away from terms that involve some sort of opacity, some suggestion of the workings of energies outside the ambit of our intention. ‘[I]maginative ideas that mysteriously issue forth in us are indicative of creativity not only because they seem wondrous in their unknown origin, but more essentially because they stem from forces within ourselves that are often crude or rudimentary, and always partly hidden’ (65). In his fine book on the Swedish filmmaker, *Ingmar Bergman, Cinematic Philosopher: Reflections of his Creativity*, Singer gives compelling accounts of the films but also cannot resist pondering how, for instance, the film *Persona* emerged from Bergman one day coming across two women in a park comparing hands. Singer has likewise gathered here a broad range of examples of how others have characterized and exemplified the emergence of new content in transformation, including—among many others—Einstein, Koestler, and Poincaré.

So is it intuition? Is it the unconscious? Is it inspiration? Obviously what matters is how each term *pictures* the transformation. None of them, in Singer’s eyes, can claim transcendental sponsorship. ‘Intuition is more rapid and spontaneous than the intelligence or laborious problem solving that generally fills our lives, but it belongs to the same family of human ideation’ (221). Freud’s account leaves Singer unconvinced. ‘Human beings don’t have two minds, one conscious and the other unconscious’ (41). What some call the ‘unconscious’, according to Singer, ‘resides within the peripheries of ordinary consciousness in the way that unmindfulness does, or even absentmindedness, in situations where we act spontaneously and may not be wholly aware of what we have done’ (221). As far as inspiration is concerned, Singer suggests that too often creative acts are assimilated into a supposedly single brilliant flash. We only need to look more closely to see ‘the routine and pragmatic, frequently laborious aspects of creativity’ (73).

Singer could, I think, have made further useful distinctions of this sort. Putting to one side for the moment what the origin *is*, there remains much of an empirical nature to

say about this ‘issuing forth’. For one thing, how in creative acts the deliberate self *relates* to it—the whole comportment taken up by the artist (which could be any one of us) toward this ‘unknown origin’. Singer gives the examples of Mozart and Shakespeare. Surely in such a discussion the two are unavoidable. Yet one could argue they exemplify creativity quite differently. Mozart was famous for having much of a piece already composed in his head before sitting down to put it on paper. Hence perhaps the Olympian lack of struggle in the process by which ‘the imaginative ideas mysteriously issue forth’. But the same can hardly be said about Shakespeare. Under the aspect of the logical rights of each concept, his work is a mess. One idea is hinted at, only to be submerged by another. He makes up words. Metaphors get mixed. In short, this seems to exemplify a different mode of ‘issuing forth’. To give just one of many possible instances, consider Falstaff’s ancient Pistol, who in Act II, Scene iv of *Henry IV Part Two*, enters the tavern in Eastcheap and for six lines exchanges the standard sort of banter you would expect from a member of Falstaff’s entourage. And then, abruptly, he starts spouting mock theatrical bombast, in which guise he continues for the rest of the play—even when conveying the serious news of the king’s death—and faithfully on into the later *Merry Wives of Windsor*. Whatever came over him after those six lines, he never snaps out of it. Is it possible Shakespeare only discovered Pistol after he had already come on the stage? It would appear to be this kind of creativity that Singer has in mind when he quotes Beardsley approvingly on the work art that *itself* becomes creative. A further step, then, might be to examine the *grain* of each creative act—namely, how it came to be structured in its relation to the ‘unknown origin’.

There remains of course the larger question. What *is* the mystery of the origin? Would an understanding of creativity require that we explain it once and for all? But what would count? Would a brain scan suffice? Or would we be better off instead cultivating our own particular modes of creativity? And rather than neurons and ganglia, would this not involve the study of expressive traditions, if not even, for that matter, our own affective histories? This seems to suggest, in other words, a divergence between two sorts of investigation, crudely differentiated by what we might call the cultural-subjective and scientific-objective.

Singer admits that on the question of creativity humanists and scientists often fail to find common ground. But—trusting perhaps in the broader and unforeseeable workings of transformation—he for his part looks forward ‘to the new disciplines that the search for it will generate’ (270). We shall look forward, in the meantime, to his continuing help in making sense of this fascinating subject.

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