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## What, Then, Is Creativity?

■ Culture ■ Art ■ Imagination ■ Liberal Learning by

Allen Porter Mendenhall

Last week a student asked me, “What is creativity?” I was unsure how to respond. I felt like the speaker from *Leaves of Grass* musing about a child, who, fetching a handful of grass, asks him what the grass is. “How could I answer the child?” the speaker wonders. “I do not know what it is any more than he.”

What *is* creativity? How could I answer the student? I did not know what it was any more than he. My ignorance on this subject nevertheless inspired me to seek understanding, perhaps even a definition, and then to proffer brief, explanatory remarks. Here they are, principally for his benefit but also for mine—and for that of anyone, I suppose, who cares to consider them.

Every human, I think, is the handiwork of God. If humans are created in God’s image, and God is our creator, then humanity’s creativity is, or *might* be, a limited, earthly, imperfect glimpse into the ways and workings of God. “We too,” said Paul Elmore More, “as possessors of the word may be called after a fashion children of the Most High and sons of the Father, but as creatures of His will we are not of His substance and nature, however we may be like Him.”<sup>[1]</sup>

Inherently flawed and sinful, humans cannot create what or as God creates and cannot be divine. Our imagination can be powerfully dark, dangerous, and wicked. The Lord proclaimed in the Noahic covenant that “the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth.”<sup>[2]</sup> Construction of the Tower of Babel demonstrated that the unified power of ambitious men laboring together may engender impious unrestraint.<sup>[3]</sup>

Humans, however, being more rational and intelligent than animals, are supreme among God’s creation and bear the divine image of God. “What is man, that thou are mindful of him?” asks the psalmist, adding, “and the son of man, that thou visitest him? For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hath crowned him with glory and honour.”<sup>[4]</sup>

Saint Peter—or the author of Second Peter if that book is pseudographical—called humans potential partakers in the divine nature who have escaped the corruption of the world.<sup>[5]</sup> Saint Paul implied that followers of Christ enjoy something of Christ’s mind, some special understanding of Christ’s instructions.<sup>[6]</sup> He also suggested that followers of Christ, the saints, will judge not only the world but the angels.<sup>[7]</sup> beneath whom, in substance, we consist.<sup>[8]</sup>

What these passages mean, exactly, is subject to robust academic and theological debate, but surely humanity’s crowning artistic achievements—our paintings, sculptures, philosophies, architecture, poetry, theater, novels, and music—are starting points for exploration. What evidence have we besides these tangible products of our working minds that we who are not divine somehow partake in divinity?

Humans are moral, spiritual, social, creative, and loving, unlike the rest of God’s animate creation, only some of which, the animals, are also sentient. Aristotle and Aquinas, to say nothing of the author of Genesis, rank animals lower than humans in the hierarchy of living beings because, although sentient, they lack a discernable will, conscientiousness, consciousness, and capacity for reason that humans definitively possess. Moreover, animals provide humans with the necessary sustenance to survive, and our survival is indispensable to the advancement of knowledge and intelligence, themselves essential to the enjoyment and preservation of God’s creation.

All human life is sacred because of humanity’s godly nature.<sup>[9]</sup> which is a privilege with coordinate duties and responsibilities: to be fruitful and multiply and to subdue, or care for, the inferior creatures of the earth.<sup>[10]</sup> However awesome humanity’s creative faculties are, they are not themselves divine, and cannot be. “As the heavens are higher than the earth,” intones the prophet, “so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”<sup>[11]</sup>

Russell Kirk titled his autobiography *The Sword of Imagination*. A sword is a bladed weapon with a sharp, lethal point and sharp, lethal edges. It’s the symbol of medieval warriors and Romantic knights. The imagination, powerful like a sword, can be wielded for the forces of good or evil. It’s unsafe. But it can be channeled for moral and virtuous purposes.

Only God can have created something from nothing. That the cosmos exists at all is proof of an originating, ultimate cause, of some supreme power that is antecedent to all material life and form. Human creativity, by contrast, is iterative and mimetic, not the generation of



perceptible substance out of an absolute void.

Human creativity builds on itself, repurposing and reinvigorating old concepts and fields of knowledge for new environments and changed conditions. *We learn* to be creative even if we are born with creative gifts and faculties. Imitative practice transforms our merely derivative designs and expressions into awesome originality and innovation.

Creativity, then, is the ability of human faculties to connect disparate ideas, designs, and concepts to solve actual problems, inspire awe, heighten the emotions and passions, or illuminate the complex realities of everyday experience through artistic and aesthetic expression. The most creative among us achieve their brilliance through rigorous training and a cultivated association with some master or teacher who imparts exceptional techniques and intuitions to the pupil or apprentice; every great teacher was a student once.

Or so I believe, having thought the matter through. It may be that I know no more about creativity than I do about grass. But I know, deeply and profoundly, that we are fearfully and wonderfully made, and for that I am infinitely and earnestly grateful.

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*Editors Note: The featured image is "A Wild Scene" by Thomas Cole.*

Notes:

[1] Paul Elmore More, *The Essential Paul Elmer More* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1972), p. 55.

[2] Genesis 8:21.

[3] Genesis 11:5-7.

[4] Psalm 8:4-5.

[5] 2 Peter 1:4.

[6] 1 Corinthians 2:16.

[7] 1 Corinthians 6: 2-3.

[8] Psalm 8:4-5.

[9] Genesis 9:6.

[10] Genesis 28.

[11] Isaiah 55:9.



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