

Is There a Quintessential Meaning for the Concept of Creativity?

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ABSTRACT: A number of explanations concerning what creativity might be are discussed in the present essay. The range of diverse functions ascribed to the concept of creativity today raises the question why the term is currently attractive in so many respects: creativity is said to be both something on which everything rational is based, and the counterpart to rationality, that which is outside the rational. At first glance, this inconsistency seems to refer to an arbitrariness of the definition of the concept, and therefore, philosophically to an inability to define the term. Admittedly, one cannot leave matters so, simply by ascertaining this set of problems. Instead, one should ask whether the apparently so contradictory interpretations of the concept do not in fact have something in common, which lies (more or less explicitly) at their basis.

KEYWORDS: Creativity, action, action theory, art, critic of creativity.

One of the most significant characteristics of the concept of creativity seems to be its ‘projectability.’ Projectability means that much can be put into the concept and projected onto it; that it has become a projection surface for claims and interests. A number of explanations concerning what creativity might be is discussed in the present essay. The first section focuses on affirmative interpretations of the concept of creativity in the context of action theory and epistemological considerations. The second section is dedicated to an overview of various criticisms of creativity. The criticism of creativity from the perspective of art (even if not conceived precisely as such) is connected to this critical discourse.

The range of diverse functions ascribed to the concept of creativity today raises the question why the term is currently attractive in so many respects: creativity is said to be both something on which everything rational is based, and the counterpart to rationality, that which is outside the rational. At first glance, this inconsistency seems to refer to an arbitrariness of the definition of the concept, and therefore, philosophically to an inability to define the term. Admittedly, one cannot leave matters so, simply by ascertaining this set

of problems. Instead, one should ask whether the apparently so contradictory interpretations of the concept do not in fact have something in common, which lies (more or less explicitly) at their basis.

I. Affirmative Definitions of the Term

I.1. Action Theory Perspectives on Creativity as a Practical Model of Action

The models explained in this first section of affirmative definitions and/or ‘metaphors’ of creativity outline it as a singular type of action, which can be contrasted with other types of action.

Dieter Thomä draws on the historical figure of the creative artist and criticizes the “notion that creativity goes back to an individual, who can make relationships dance” (Thomä 2009: 225f.). Such attribution of creativity to an individual, which during the Renaissance referred back to the figure painting of antiquity, understands art as a quasi-divine act of creation, which alongside a “total mania towards form” might lead to a “perverted fantasy of power” (Thomä 2009: 229). According to Thomä, two mutually exclusive models describe the artist as a marginalized outsider on the one hand, but also, on the other hand, as a “person of power,” or as (respectively) an “individual veering from the norm,” who “does not confine himself to the order of the world” or as a “modern ruler” “who shapes the world” (Thomä 2009: 228). Thomä explains this dialectic of the two prototypes as an unresolvable contradiction – an inconsistency, written into the concept of creativity.

Thomä rejects the attribution of individual sovereignty to artists, who, conceived as creators, have competed with the Lord of Creation since the Renaissance: “Whoever imagines an artist as a self-assured master of creativity, reshaping conditions at will, completely underestimates the arduous, circuitous experiences, and feelings of helplessness and vulnerability, which have consistently been articulated by artists [...]” (Thomä 2009: 230). For, he contends, “creativity is closely entangled” not with sovereignty, but with its opposite, namely “with passion and conditionality” (Thomä 2009: 230). The second reservation that Thomä formulates against the conception of the sovereign and creative artist concerns the source of his creative powers: “Here, we are dealing with a figure completely torn out of context, who is treated as if all of her powers came into being out of nothing, as it were. The question concerning the [artist’s] social context is left out of account here” (Thomä 2009: 231). For Thomä, the chief concern is to understand

the phenomenon of becoming – the interplay between individual artists and their surroundings: “We must let go of a specific idea of the artist, as well as that of the individual, according to which the question how one becomes what one is, is skipped over” (Thomä 2009: 231). Thomä reformulates the question about the circumstances that favor creativity as a question about the self-conditioning of creatively acting subjects. The occurrence of creativity may be promoted if one understands his own helplessness and vulnerability to others as a precondition for passion. By dismantling one’s rigidly defined human relationships, one may increase the chances that creative moments will occur. Along with Nietzsche and Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thomä gives precedence to continual interaction over ‘comfort’ or ‘passive contentment’ (Nietzsche). Thomä indeed takes the production of an “inner tension,” which essentially arises from “allowing oneself to be surprised by one’s own life” – to be ethical: “The openness to what has not yet been lived through, which we perceive in the present, is the attitude which we can designate as an ethic of creativity” (Thomä 2009: 241f.). This ‘ethic of creativity’ no longer specifically concerns artists, but rather the attitude of creatively operating subjects in general. Moreover, when Thomä adds Wilhelm von Humboldt’s considerations on the subject of *Bildung* (education) into his account, he expands his general concept of interactive creative practice to encompass another dimension – to include consideration of institutions such as schools and universities, and thus communication with the ‘world.’

Therefore, in sum, Dieter Thomä transforms the concept of creativity that was originally attributed to artists into a concept describing the creative acts of all subjects, who behave with ‘openness to the unforeseeable.’ By touching upon the theme of education, Thomä indirectly raises questions about the conditions favoring creativity, specifically about whether the university as an institution might be one such condition – and, consequently and more broadly, about how the institutional frame for subjective behavior should be constructed so that it is possible for subjects to act according to an ethic of creativity.

At the end of the 1980s, Hans Joas attempted to articulate a positive conception of creativity to be discerned within the project of Modernism. His project was to question the implicit preeminence of actions serving a rational purpose, thought of in means-ends terms. For this purpose, Joas makes use of the concept of creativity, which, he claims, is the ultimate, if unrecognized source of and therefore also connects many other, apparently quite distinct concepts that have arisen in the history of ideas. In the course of his ensuing discussion, creativity is understood as the opposite of rational and normatively motivated action on the one hand (described by Joas using

the terms ‘expression,’ ‘production,’ and ‘revolution’) yet also, on the other hand, as a necessary condition for all actions (and, consequently, also rational action). In discussing this second connotation of creativity, Joas speaks of it as connected to concepts of life and intelligence/reconstruction. This section will begin with the first model, which contrasts rational and normative action with another type of action.

My claim is [...] that the conception of action which is so crucial to how sociology understands itself needs to be reconstructed in such a way that this conception is no longer confined to the alternative of a model of rational action versus normatively oriented action, but is able to incorporate the creative dimension of human action into its conceptual structure and thus also to take adequate account of the intellectual currents which hinge on this dimension (Joas 1996: 72).

Because of the purported foundational role of creativity for the concepts mentioned above, Joas refers to them as ‘metaphors of creativity.’ He identifies the idea of expression, which was first philosophically articulated by Herder (1772) as the first metaphor for creativity. For Joas, ‘expression’ is a concept that principally concerns “the subjective world of the actor” (Joas 1996: 71). Inasmuch as it is involved in the explanation of the process of education, which constitutes subjects, Herder’s idea of expression is reminiscent of Thomä’s considerations about the concept of education.¹ Self-expression first takes place implicitly, as a spontaneous emergence. According to Joas, it is only through our remarks and actions that later “we recognize our own potentiality.”

We accept a greater or lesser part of what we generate spontaneously as an appropriate expression of our being and accord this expression a level of recognition that we deny to other parts. It is only in the same process in which we realize ourselves that we become aware of the self that we are realizing (Joas 1996: 81).

Although Herder begins with “the true poet in search of himself” (Joas 1996: 80), he later expands his anthropology of expression to “the conduct of human life as a whole” (Joas 1996: 80). According to Joas, creativity is a strategy of self-realization, which can be found exemplarily in art, but which can be democratized as a strategy of action; i.e. it is applicable to everyone. Joas dissociates himself from the idea of a national collective subject, to which Herder also accorded a potential for expression, in favor of an inter-

¹ Thomä (2009: 232) draws on Herder’s phrase, “What I am, I have become” (“Was ich bin, bin ich geworden”).

subjective structure of action in which language and non-verbal forms of expression overlap.

The idea of production is a second metaphor for creativity, which according to Joas is related “to the objective world, the world of material objects that are the conditions and means of action” (Joas 1996: 71). Following the young Marx, Joas initially describes producing as the “bringing forth [of] new objects.” Working in a Hegelian perspective, Marx conceives this bringing forth as an externalization of the powers inherent in human nature (Joas 1996: 93–94). Not all types of productive activity are included in such a definition of work, however, and reproductive activities seem particularly to be excluded from work so defined. Joas concedes that a concept of work that equates work with production, is deficient as a definition, since it does not include activities like “peasant farming” or other “activities which perform a mediating, protective or serving function.” “The expressivist interpretation of the concept of labor is clearly not up to the task of covering the full diversity of forms of action,” or the productivity of capital, as treated by the later Marx (Joas 1996: 94f.). Joas is interested, however, in the ‘productive power of human beings’ suggested by the concept of production: “The central concept of productive power is still meant to signify the productive power of human beings and not a technology divorced from humankind. Precisely where such a divorce has occurred, Marx believes we are dealing with the symptom of alienation [...]” (Joas 1996: 96). Agnes Heller’s interpretation of Marx, which, according to Joas, “attempts to draw a sharp distinction between a labor paradigm and a production paradigm in Marx,” makes clear the reasons for Joas’ link of creativity to Marxian production (Joas 1996: 100).

[Heller] defends the paradigm of work because on an anthropological level it contains the Romantic and emancipatory aspects of Marx’s thought, that is, it formulates the claim that human work should be meaningfully fulfilling and creative. She rejects the paradigm of production, which she now takes to mean the whole complex of a theory of history in which social developments are analyzed in terms of the level of development of the productive forces [...] (Joas 1996: 100).

Thus, it is in fact the concept of work (not that of production) that needs to be brought into agreement with the concept of creativity to support Joas’ contention. The extent to which work is in fact connected with the ‘world of material objects’ would, likewise, still have to be shown.

Thirdly, Joas identifies the idea of revolution as a metaphor for creativity. He defines revolution as something that “can fundamentally reorganize the social institutions that govern human coexistence” (Joas 1996: 71). But

where exactly is the creativity in a revolution? Does creativity here still belong to individually acting subjects or is it here rather a transsubjective ‘creative history?’ For Joas, revolution is a theoretical model of action, according to which a collective action process can be described as a creative process. When, however, Marx speaks of classes and a class struggle in which they engage, then, as Joas rightly noted, “the interpretation of events in terms of class struggle ascribes a meaning to them which they do not necessarily have for the actors themselves” (Joas 1996: 109). The question about the location and the subject of creativity in revolution remains to a large extent undetermined here, although it shares the characteristic of deferred action that has been associated with creative processes. As in expression on Herder’s account, subjects first recognize the (revolutionary) result of their actions when they evaluate their actions in retrospect.

Hannah Arendt’s concept of the ‘free action of the members of the society,’ cited by Joas, should not be understood as a calculated ensemble of actions with a specific, foreseeable result (Joas 1996: 115). Yet, while Arendt’s idea of a new beginning and ‘natality’ seems to fit with the idea of the revolution, it remains to be investigated whether the process of revolution itself (like every other process of emergence of the new) can actually be represented as creative and be put into effect in the established, organized process. Thus, for Arendt, a lack of clarity and randomness appear fundamentally to call into question creative authorship in political action, which makes ascriptions of creativity in the political sphere even at the moment of the revolution more difficult.

1.2. Creativity as a Foundation of Every Action

Joas himself objects to conceiving of creativity as a unique type of action, arguing that there is a ‘downside’ or disadvantage to this categorization: “An inevitable consequence of this approach is that other concrete types of action are denied all vestiges of creativity and perceived as the very opposite of creativity” (Joas 1996: 116). Joas therefore corrects and expands his systematic contextualization of the concept of creativity: he understands creativity in the wider context as “an analytical dimension of all human action” (Joas 1996: 116). In this way, two mutually exclusive conceptions of creativity are present within Joas’ own theory.

In this section, creativity understood as potentially underlying every action will be discussed (Joas 1996: 116). Joas presents this conception of creativity through treating two further metaphors for creativity: life and intelligence/reconstruction.

Joas turns first to the idea of life. He defines the wide-ranging area of the ‘philosophy of life’ (*Lebensphilosophie*) with the help of a definition from Herbert Schnädelbach: as a philosophical current directed against the rigid forms both of middle-class society and in the philosophy connected to it. “Life is a symbol of opposition to what is dead and ossified, to a civilization that has become intellectualistic and inimical to life, a symbol which stands for a new feeling of life, for ‘authentic experiences,’ for ‘authenticity’ per se: for dynamism, creativity, directness, youth” (Joas 1996: 117). To this definition, Joas adds the “concrete way in which every individual conducts his or her life” and the “biological concept of life” (Joas 1996: 117).

Joas uses Schopenhauer’s concept of the will to explain this concept of life, which could for him be summed up as vitality. Conscious purposes of action are regarded “as ‘rationalizations’ of the true determining force, the will” (Joas 1996: 120). In this context, creativity is the ‘elemental force’ underlying everything rational and normative, which provides a basis for and guides rational action in an almost metaphysical way. “The substantialization of the will consists precisely in the fact that it is conceived of not as an abstraction derived from action but as a primal force which realizes itself in action. According to this view, it is possible to think of the conscious mind as an instrument of this primal force” (Joas 1996: 123). Joas’ criticism of Schopenhauer’s (and also Nietzsche’s) theory of the primacy of the will is directed precisely against the charged, metaphysical status of the will as ultimate and originary, to which, ultimately, only a metaphysical concept of creativity can correspond. This sort of concept of creativity typically lacks an intersubjective dimension.

Joas names intelligence and reconstruction as the fifth category of the metaphors of creativity. Here, he is concerned with the role of creativity in ‘problems and problem solving.’ Joas speaks of a “pragmatic conception of creativity,” which is connected to a “pragmatist understanding of human action itself” and thus to pragmatism as a philosophical program. On this view, creativity is a means to an end, namely to the solution of a problem (Joas 1996: 126). Joas cites various objections that have been raised against pragmatism. Three of these seem worth mentioning: first, his accusation of objectivism (the pending problem and/or the problem to be solved imposes a course of action on the agents and precludes them from really reacting creatively); second, the accusation of individualism (where are the co-subjects?); and third, the danger of instrumentalization – on this view, the value of “non-purposeful action[s],” such as “art and play,” would be reduced to their abilities to be instrumentalized, as would creativity (cf. Joas 1996: 129f.). This last objection has been quite influential, as will be discussed below, when I

reconstruct the current sociological criticism of the concept of creativity. A concept of creativity as problem-solving puts all other opinions about what creativity might be “into service,” according to Bröckling (Bröckling 2007: 159). For his part, Joas – agreeing with Dewey – takes art to be a paradigm of creative action, which can be “accessible to all actors” (Joas 1996: 140). Strictly speaking, however, Joas’ view does not hereby avoid the objection to the instrumentalization of creativity in the pragmatists’ model of action. For the fact that everyone can be creatively active like an artist, that creative problem solving can be demanded from everyone, even those who do not work for themselves, but as company employees, for instance – is precisely the prerequisite for such instrumentalization.

1.3. *Epistemological Perspectives on Creativity as a Foundation of Normativity*

Similar to Joas’ suggestion that creativity could be understood as problem-solving action is Alessandro Bertinetto’s view that creativity should be understood as a rule-changing practice, both generally and in art. Bertinetto assumes that it is not possible to identify which features or qualities of a subject lead to creativity, and that following rules does not have to be considered the opposite of creative action. Therefore, like Chomsky, he differentiates between two types of creativity – rule-based creativity and rule-changing creativity (Bertinetto 2011: 85).² Innovation, understood as deviation from that which already exists, is determinative for both kinds of creativity. The distinction between the two concerns how the innovation is accomplished.³ Ultimately, however, Bertinetto comes to the conclusion, against Chomsky, that it is the rules themselves that are formed creatively in praxis. “Therefore, creativity is not simply limited and governed by established rules, nor is it only a way to invent more or less new and unexpected ways for following the rules: rather, rules are creatively generated and established in the praxis” (Bertinetto 2011: 86f.). Bertinetto views art as exemplary of such a practice in which rules change their application: “[...] artistic creativity is so important that it can be regarded as a paradigmatic *exemplification* of creativity *tout court*” (Bertinetto 2011: 87). For it is true of artists that they always work in relation to conventions, which they simultaneously always transform: “So

² Hence the principles or the symptoms of creativity will not enable one to be creative. They will at most “enable one to classify certain actions as creative” (Novitz 2003: 177).

³ The rule-based creativity works in the following way: an almost infinite number of new outcomes can result from a finite set of rules. In contrast, in the case of rule-changing creativity, the accumulation of individual deviations from the rules can result in the generation of new rules (Bertinetto 2011: 85).

artists work within conventions and rules, while at the same time modifying them in and through their artworks: the way conventions are applied reshapes those conventions” (Bertinetto 2011: 88f.). According to Bertinetto, moreover, the use of rules that are modified in their application is typical of art and also exemplary of non-artistic application of rules. Such a joint attribution of the concept of creativity to art and non-art seems to raise it to the status of an anthropological basic principle. Bertinetto defines creativity as an important feature of the rational as such, a feature that necessarily contributes to education, as well as to the transformation of rules. Hence, unlike Schopenhauer, for whom (on Joas’ presentation) everything rational is grounded upon creativity, Bertinetto’s view of creativity seems ultimately to run the risk to put it in a rather servile relationship to rationality.

Georg Bertram examines creativity with respect to its “connection with the idea of the normativity” (Bertram 2005: 273). He defines ‘creative events’ as “events of establishing ‘new norms’ on the basis of ‘old norms’” (Bertram 2005: 277). Taking Saussure’s post-structuralist model of language as his specific target, Bertram laments the structural prioritization of language as a norm as opposed to individual cases of its creative application and modification: “The model completely succeeds in making creative events comprehensible as the basis of the realization of norms. However, these events are always traced back to given norms. As long as the existence on which creative events should always be based is not understood, the thesis that these events are always based on given norms does not go very far” (Bertram 2005: 278). Bertram uses Donald Davidson’s account of successful linguistic interaction to introduce the idea of a practice in which the practitioners are not guided by rules that are instituted prior to the practice, but rather create and institute those norms as they are engaged in the practice itself (Bertram 2005: 278). Norms are constituted by the creative behavior of the speakers involved. Consequently, the binding effect of the norm is in a much deeper way to be traced back to creativity: “Understood in this way, normativity is based on creativity” (Bertram 2005: 279). On this account, creativity is understood as a dimension of the rational, even more than on the problem-solving and or application of rules proposals; as a condition of possibility of rationality, creativity itself is expanded to become an equivalent of rationality itself.

2. Critical Interpretations of the Concept of Creativity

2.1. General Critique of the Concept of Creativity

In strong contrast to these epistemological and action-theoretical accounts that aim to ground conventions, rules or norms on creativity, there is a critical movement against the demands for creativity in modern Western societies that almost amounts to a political campaign. People who feel themselves subjected to demands on their creativity, tend to suffer from precarity and depression (cf. Raunig, Wuggenig 2007; Menke, Rebentisch 2010). Many authors criticize the term ‘creativity’ as an ‘empty’ strategic concept, as fiction, or even as a religious concept, which refers to ‘faith in the creative potentials of the individual.’ According to Ulrich Bröckling, belief in creativity is a religious faith, specifically belonging to “the civil religion of the entrepreneurial self” (Bröckling 2007: 152): “As in every religion, that of creativity not only consists in convictions of faith, but also in social practices, as well as experts who proclaim those convictions and teach laymen correspondingly.”

According to these critical accounts, creativity is again understood as its own, particular form of action, opposed to other modes of acting, such as rational action or rule-following. On the one hand, it is imagined that rationality might be displaced or suppressed, a scenario which arises from the fictionality and irrationality of our life and work environments. On the other hand, creativity is ultimately analyzed as a component of heteronomous, rational self-conceptions, inasmuch as responsibility, structuring, adaptation and autonomy are demanded from the subjects (namely, under the conditions of neo-liberalism) and whose services somehow manage to be brought into harmony with each other.

Bröckling, who connects his view to the problem-solving action of Joas’ fifth metaphor for creativity, though from a critical point of view, stresses, unlike Joas, that there might be a social need to isolate, to grasp and to govern (or control) creative acts. The regimentation and restraint of creativity correspond to its instrumentalization; this was one of the objections that Joas himself raised against problem-solving understood as creative action. Bröckling interprets the inconsistency of this concept as its perversion: creativity is “first, something that everybody has – an anthropological *ability*; second, something that one should have – an obligatory *norm*; third, something that one can never have enough of – an inconclusive *telos*; and fourth, something that one can increase through methodical instruction and practice – a learnable *competence*” (Bröckling 2007: 154). According to

Bröckling, creative and athletic behavior in the sense of an ‘entrepreneurship of oneself’ is an adequate reaction of subjects to the generally excessive demands on them made by an irrationally acting market process (cf. Siegmund 2011). When Bröckling makes the excessive demands of the ‘entrepreneurial self’ the focus of his considerations, the concept of creativity comes to have the character of a survival strategy on his presentation. In the sense of problem-solving creativity techniques are used as means to promote efficiency, towards the end of increasing profit, both in economic, and in broader, life terms. Thus, creativity is declared to be a learnable technology through which “spaces of opportunity are created” and “variety is increased” (Bröckling 2007: 174). Paradoxically, “the technologies of creativity” that everyone can learn are bound to the actions of individual subjects, who “invent themselves” (Bröckling 2007: 35). The paradox of creativity hangs on the imperative of technology here: “The creative imperative demands serial uniqueness; difference straight off the rack” (Bröckling 2007: 174).

The sociologist Alain Ehrenberg (2010) has said that “in the course of the last three or four decades of the 20th century [...] completely new social ideals of action” were established. The ‘democratization of extraordinary people’ – Ehrenberg refers here to the “creative power or genius and irrationality” of the romantic melancholic – led to a new ‘illness of responsibility:’ depression. “Depression goes hand in hand with the democratization of the extraordinary; it is a side effect of the demand just to be oneself, which our present concept of individuality essentially determines” (Ehrenberg 2010: 54). On Ehrenberg’s view, the determination of the individual is much less important than the determination of social conditions, which “cannot be grasped through exclusive focus on the subject. Instead, the issue must be understanding the social spirit of autonomy: its social dimension” (Ehrenberg 2010: 58). According to Ehrenberg, if autonomy ultimately amounts to the ability to obey, “insofar as one takes up a task,” then – consequently – freedom and creativity must be abilities that will be used for the purpose of the final self-structuring of oneself. In such a context, creativity could be described as a social attribution of whose importance one is socially convinced (by treating ‘the creative’ as a foundational concept, one also thereby produces the idea that there are many individual selves). Under the pressure to ‘obey autonomously,’ however, creativity is made subordinate to other purposes: it becomes one of the means employed by a regime of constituting subjects as autonomous, i.e., as self-controlling. Consequently, creativity is domesticated and exists more pointedly in social memory than in reality. For in reality, creativity is in a position of dependence on those norms (of autonomy) to the fulfillment of which it contributes.

If the rational is on the side of a sense of reality, then creativity must be positioned on the side of the sense of possibility. The scenario, which Michael Makropoulos sketches, concerns a social “fictionalization of the world relationship.” Drawing analogy to artistic autonomy, to which Makropoulos connects creativity as it is related to fiction, he describes the economic competition of businessmen as one that no longer takes place in the context of the production of goods as objects of barter, but as a competition in which “the difference between reality and possibility [are] cultivated as a lasting overbidding of reality.”

The interlacing of aesthetic autonomy and competitive socialization becomes the medium of liberation of individual and collective expectations from their ties to experience [...] (Makropoulos 2010: 222).

The “economizing of the social sector” (Makropoulos 2010: 212) can meanwhile be attributed to the fact that competition, in which quasi-creative “‘new combinations’ of ‘available things and powers’ against social resistances” may be achieved, is no longer restricted to entrepreneurship in the classic sense, but has instead extended itself to other social areas.

Related to this ‘fictionalization of the world relationship,’ in the sense of a continuous creative operation aiming ultimately at economically usable innovation, are Christoph Menke’s considerations about the creative services consumers demand within capitalism at present. Menke begins with a representation of the category of aesthetic taste in middle-class society of the modern age. According to him, aesthetic taste is the aesthetic category of the objectivization of subjective judgments (Menke 2010). “Taste has a completely different shape and function in the current, post-disciplinary era of capitalism: taste is now becoming the decisive prerequisite for mass consumption” (Menke 2010: 231). According to Menke, needs are no longer satisfied by goods as they were before, but are subjected to continuous change, since they are brought forth by goods quickly coming onto the market one after the other: “Consumer taste is just as creative as it is adaptive: it’s adaptive through its creativity” (Menke 2010: 231). In this scenario, creativity is neither a quality granted only to a few (in particular, artists), nor a direction that is predefined for everyone. For Menke, creativity is a ability forced on the participants of mass culture, a capability of which we must inevitably make use: “For all its creativity, consumer taste is only about making certain that we pull through; about mere self-preservation” (Menke 2010: 233). In contrast to Bröckling’s account of the ‘entrepreneurial self,’ which concerns the demonstration of difference, for Menke, the creativity of consumer taste

is used in order to perform adaptation: “In the competent participation in mass consumption, as mass culture, the subject acquires and shows that he or she has exactly the abilities – namely, creativity of adaptation – which makes him or her into a member of the work force in demand” (Menke 2010: 233f.).

2.2. Artistic Critique of the Concept of Creativity

Most theories of creativity (whether they define the concept affirmatively or critically) naturally assume that art has some sort of exemplary status. Bertinetto writes, for example: “[A]rt production generally displays and exemplifies the way human beings act creatively in the context and in the constraints of their biological and social environment” (Bertinetto 2011: 4). For Bröckling, entrepreneurial thinking and action finds its model “in the genius of the artist” (Bröckling 2007: 124), and Makropoulos premises his account on a “systematic correspondence between artistic autonomy and the structure of competition” (Makropoulos 2010: 215). Thomä projects an image of the artist who is not semi-divine and dominant, but rather self-exposed and conditioned, and the paradigmatic case of self-expression for Herder, on which Joas bases his account, is the poet. Therefore, all the relevant theories generally refer (implicitly or explicitly) to an idea of creation that is anchored historically first on the concept of genius and then more abstractly on the notions of (aesthetic) freedom and autonomy. Explained epistemologically and/or action-theoretically, the notion of creativity concerns how to characterize subjects acting creatively; as discussed above, creativity is, in part, put to service for problem-solving or the transformation of rules or norms. However, it is interesting that the status of art as a paradigm of creativity is rejected from the point of view of artistic practice and movement. Two authors (who are representative of the debates in the domain of art) are used here, as examples of this rejection, in order then to ask what the consequences of this rejection might be for art itself.

Ève Chiapello (2010) shows how the notion of creation and its ‘aura’ is contested within artistic discourses. The (purported) difference of artists from the rest of society, as well as the difference of its products from other economic production, is critically rejected. Creativity and inspiration are criticized as inadequate notions for describing contemporary art. Instead “many contemporary artists [...stress] the effort of artistic production” (Chiapello 2010: 45). The consideration of the social conditions under which art is produced allows many artists to emphasize the ‘collective dimension’ and the ‘interactive dimension’ of their work, according to Chiapello (2010:

46). Through this professed detachment from the connotations of genius and inspiration, the concept of creativity is normalized; this normalization is not, however, interpreted as a ‘democratization’ of creativity, but rather leads to its rejection. “An artist is a human being like everyone else; his creations, just like his criticism or like any human action, are caught up in a game of the determinants, which he, like everyone else, cannot of course escape” (Chiapello 2010: 47). Works of art are accorded the status only of “subjective points of view on the world.” According to Chiapello, while artists reject the concept of creativity, management has, on the other hand, “changed in so many ways that it now approves even of creative modes of functioning” (Chiapello 2010: 48). One might criticize here the effort “still to encode the most unique manifestations of human existence, to instrumentalize, reproduce, and control them.” Such efforts are characteristic of social or economic developments, with which art generally does not wish to be identified. This “convergence of economic and creative logics” (Chiapello 2010: 48) is itself the subject of many discussions in the artworld concerning the concept of creativity. In this context, many inquire concerning the “resistance potential” of art (Chiapello 2010: 51).

In her essay *Kreativität. Drei Absagen der Kunst an ihren erweiterten Begriff*, Karen van den Berg investigates the question, “why the label ‘creative,’ which has become a kind of imperative, is nearly reflexively rejected by artists and art historians” (van den Berg 2009: 207). In addition to providing historical explanations, van den Berg attempts to clarify systematically what it is about the concept of creativity that is no longer structurally compatible with the current concepts of the subject and of artistic work, as artists understand it today. As aspects of the artists’ renunciation of the concept of creativity, van den Berg emphasizes first, the “renunciation of the [charged] importance of artistic inspiration” (van den Berg 2009: 207f.); second, the rejection of the idea of the artist as a ‘leader’ (van den Berg 2009: 210f.), associated with the concept of the modern concept of the subject and the idea of the new (van den Berg 2009: 215), which might both be “expression[s] of an ideology of progress;” and third, the defense of the economic utilization of art (van den Berg 2009: 218f.).

This artistic attack on the concept of creativity may be understood, in terms of the history of ideas, as directed against the Romantic interpretation of creativity; if understood in terms of its contemporary historical context, this attack is directed against the absorption of creativity into the economic system (cf. section 2.1). It is difficult to discern empirically whether this criticism is also directed at systematic concepts of creativity, according to which creativity is understood as constitutive of problem-solving or the

generation of new norms. However, given this approach to artistic creativity, it at least seems implausible that artistic behavior can be presented as paradigmatic of creativity, as assumed by the prevalent theories of creativity discussed above. Even if van den Berg is right that the concepts both of ‘authorship’ and of ‘subjectivity’ remain decisive for artists, her proviso to this point is nevertheless significant: “although today they are legitimized in another way than by a Romantic notion of the creator subject” (van den Berg 2009: 215).

If creativity as divine creation [*Schöpfertum*] is no longer granted a central role in art, it is important to ask, however, what art today is instead. In the context of a debate about the concept of creativity, it seems most pressing to mention that contemporary artists apparently no longer aim at creating something fundamentally new, but rather aim to react appropriately to specific historical and social contexts. Thus it may also be important for such art “that something concealed is revealed, something unnoticed is shifted into focus.” Consequently, contemporary art is no longer characterized by universal progress maintained by continuous additions of the new, a view of art that was still formulated in modern avant-garde art histories (Siegmond 2011). Art is not alone in thus opposing the historical applications of the concept of creativity in the neo-liberal market, but through this rejection of creativity it redefines itself as context-bound event.

3. Conclusion

By rejecting creativity as an authoritative concept, art and artists bring about a shift in the definition of art. This shift in the definition of art can be connected to the question, ‘What is the common element linking all of the definitions of creativity outlined here?’ For the artists reject precisely the central idea in the theological definition of creativity – the thought that something permanent can be created out of nothing.⁴ This concept of creation, which assumes that there will be ever more of the ‘new’ to add to that which already exists, corresponds to the central idea of the progress of capitalist accumulation. It is nothing more, and nothing less, than this concept

⁴ Dierich Diederichsen carries out a similar classification when he writes: “Creativity is [...] the opposite of a processing of and reworking of preexistent, pre-produced material that always offers resistance [...]” (“Kreativität ist [...] das Gegenteil einer Abarbeitung an und Bearbeitung von vorgefundenem, vorproduziertem, stets Widerstand leistendem Material [...]”). That nothing exists beyond what has already been found, whose shape and meaning merely changes, is pointedly represented in the context of art today (cf. Diederichsen 2010: 118).

that is rejected in artistic discourse, when artists wish to avoid bringing art and creativity into a substantial, constitutive interrelationship.

The core of the concept of creativity is thus the notion of progress, which is contained in both the positive and the critical accounts of creativity. The idea of what one might almost call eternally active progress is surreptitiously built into the concepts of education and expression, just as it is hidden in the concepts of creativity as anti-conventional formulation of rules or constant modification of normativity. And the same idea of cumulative progress is explicitly present in the understanding of creativity in terms of revolution and production, just as it is in the understanding of it in terms of problem-solving. The concept of life alone might be considered to connote permanent change without progress; however, it also contains a potential for progress when it is taken to be opposed to empty forms or rigid structures. By contrast, the critical treatments of the concept of creativity formulate represent the continuous efforts of subjects and of society to be adequate to this ideal of the 'new out of nothing' and describe the excessive demands placed on subjects as a result of such expectations of progress.

Such a categorical kinship of the originally theological dimension of creativity with the daily experiences of living conditions under capitalism – and this is my concluding thesis – could explain why there is such a strong need in our present society to apply the concept of creativity to practically all human activity. The diffusion of the definition of the term, which has been presented in this essay by means of examples, appears thus as a hidden expression of its actual content. Consequently, creativity also stands for the appropriation of concepts from the history of philosophy under the sign of economic progress, as the ever-new.

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