Affirming Creativity: Playing with Concepts.

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In a characteristically provocative analysis of the relationship between the product and the author of art, Nietzsche (2003; bk 3.4) refers to the artist as 'the womb, the soil, sometimes the dung and manure, on which, out of which' the artwork grows. This richly materialist and rather anti-humanist characterisation of what today is, rather banally, referred to as 'the creative process' represents a refreshing departure from the subject-centred view of creativity that now dominates the popular imaginary. Today's talk has two purposes. The first is to outline some of the key tasks involved in challenging this dominant view of creativity as an attribute of human subjects and to indicate what, in a general sense, is involved in refiguring the concept of creativity as something other, and much more, than an expression of individual or even collective freedom. My focus here is on the problem of what it means to think creatively: how might we better avail thinking of the forces that make it creative? On this, the work of Deleuze still has much to offer. While the fashion now seems to be the citation of thinkers such as Spinoza, Bergson, Leibniz or Whitehead without reference to their Deleuzian interpretations, the particular way that Deleuze synthesizes the concepts drawn from these and other thinkers remains, I believe, one of the most vital influences in the attempt to render thinking creative. In playing with Deleuzian inspired concepts in exploring the problem of thought's encounter with the forces that vitalise it, I also want, secondly, to indicate how the theme of creativity speaks to and develops some of my own research interests and to highlight the broader directions in thinking in which these research problems are embedded.

As a widely prized value in contemporary society, creativity is commonly understood as an attribute of individuals. Artists are esteemed as unique bearers of talent and Western educationalists contemplate ways that the education process might nurture, rather than squander, the distinct gifts of individuals (cf. Robinson 2006). If the more romanticised versions of human creativity risk idealising creative talents as expressions of unfettered individuality, it is no doubt also true that creativity is increasingly necessary to the production of profit in the late capitalist economy. As Hardt and Negri (2000) and Lazzarato (1996) have famously argued, the real substance of commodities in the post-Fordist economy is their immaterial dimension, that which is intangible but vital to the creation of contemporary products but also to the production of subjectivities. If, as Lazzarato (1996) notes, the slogan of post-Fordist capital is 'become subjects!', it is clearly particular kinds of subjects that take a privileged place here; namely, subjects whose immaterial labour – whose creativity – is recuperable by capital. Hardt and Negri (2004) betray their preference for a different mode of creativity, which is at once more collective, plural and

indeterminate, when they figure the Multitude as the potential redress to the oppressive operations of Empire. Here creativity figures as an attribute of the collective subject, which promises to function not merely as the matter upon which power works, but also as a potential means of resisting its operations.

Creativity is, in short, characteristically considered as a valuable *attribute* of human subjects. Of course we also attribute creativity to nature – a wild, boundless capacity to bring forth the new, to regenerate. The very word, 'nature' evokes, not only the capacity 'to be born' (L. *natus*), but also, through its links with the Greek *physis*, that which emerges from itself, 'the unfolding that opens itself up' (Heidegger 1993). If this capacity for creative self-emergence is said to be under threat in this era of the Anthropocene it is because the human capacity for creativity (the capacity to transform nature that Marx celebrated) is assumed to separate the human from the realm of nature as such. Human creativity is supposedly somehow different from that of nonhuman nature, setting us in some sense apart.

Certainly, the 'new materialisms' of recent decades (Coole and Frost 2010), along with diverse process ontologies (Whitehead 1978; Stengers 2011) and post-humanisms (cf. Wolfe 2010), have challenged the idea that human beings possess a unique essence, which would endow them with moral autonomy and liberty with respect to the nonhuman world. Yet the question of what this means for connecting thinking to the forces that make it creative remains an open one. For Deleuze's part, the question of what a creative act is is best translated as the question 'what does it mean to have an idea?', where 'an idea' is, far from its Platonic rendering as an eternal essence, the virtual dimension of things that is inseparable from its expressions (cited by van Tuinen 2010). To 'have an idea' is to intuit and give expression to this virtuality, which is always co-extensive with the work, whether that be the work of art or indeed philosophy. What interests me here is the opening to an understanding of creativity that is oriented less to the kind of attributive schema that would privilege the subject and more to the mannerism of the event. Taking our cue from the kind of mannerist treatment of concepts deployed by Deleuze (1993) in *The Fold*, we could best translate the notion of creativity into the infinitive form, 'to create', where the latter would involve a kind of play with concepts, which for their part, are neither essences nor identities, but events that do the work of difference. Thus we might ask of the concept of creativity, not 'what is its nature?' (what is the essence of the concept?), but 'what is its manner of acting and affecting?'

It is with such questions in mind that the remainder of the paper undertakes what might be called a mannerist play with a series of concepts (capacity, affirmation, event, singularity, art, time, habit), each of which speaks in some way to the overall challenge of maximising the connection of thinking to the forces that make it creative, before it is captured as an attribute of subjects. Along the way, I outline some of the tasks involved in meeting this challenge. We need, in the first place, to bring thought into an *encounter* with the non-human forces that think in us, so that, secondly, we might actively *evaluate* forces and,

thirdly, vitalise thinking by *experimenting* with new modes of actualising force. In speaking of 'tasks', some caution is needed and, as I indicate in concluding, these tasks should not be understood as weighty ones, but require, on the contrary, a certain lightness.

1. Encountering

What would it mean, firstly, to enable an encounter with the non-human forces that think in us? I have suggested that, according to the banal view of creativity, human capacities effectively set the human apart from the chains of relation that impose themselves on the rest of nature. Human creativity is understood as an exercise of freedom, which enables us to shape and sculpt the forces of the world, as though we were – temporarily at least – independent of them. It is in light of this fallacious construction of our freedom that a kind of 'renaturalisation' is necessary. By renaturalisation we should understand an insistence that 'no volitional power, divine or human, can operate independent of the natural order of cause and effect' (Sharp 2012; p. 2). Needless to say, the idea of a renaturalisation might well make many social scientists nervous, given that we have for many years been involved in the attempt to denaturalize the taken-for-granted and to reveal the normative impulses lurking in appeals to nature. Yet, if we are to rethink the ontology that underpins the image of creativity as the product of the creative human subject we will need to go beyond naive naturalism, on the one hand, and, on the other, an equally naive constructivism that posits human agency as the ultimate author of the real. To challenge the exceptionalist assumption that human beings can transcend the laws of cause and effect that apply to the rest of nature is not to imply a mechanistic or linear causality but merely the action of a body on a body, of an idea on an idea. It is at this level of 'what causes us' that we can really rent open the question of capacities. When we recognise social forces as no different in kind to natural ones, we are confronted with the idea, both jarring and freeing, that it is not 'I' who think, but forces that think in me (Portanova 2008).

In order to give some flesh to these generalities, which might otherwise risk becoming posthumanist clichés, I would like to briefly give a sense of how such an ontological renaturalisation can reinflect a problem, hopefully with more creativity and amplitude. I am currently developing some ideas on the problem of indifference, as a political and also ethical problem, which calls for an ontological renaturalisation and, to bring us towards the second task I am outlining today, an active evaluation of force. The commonsense way of apprehending the problem of indifference is to see it as a subjective failing; indifference to pressing political, moral and ethical problems is said to arise when we lack the interest or perhaps the will to act. But such moral judgments rest on the exceptionalist presupposition of a disjuncture between the freedom that human beings are capable of exercising with respect to the nature of things and what they do. Again, the assumption here is that we can rise above the forces of nature and the causes and effects that characterise the action of bodies on bodies, ideas on ideas. If, on the contrary, we are seen as part of the natural order

of cause and effect, we are confronted with nature's profound indifference with respect to us. It is Nietzsche (2002) who really develops this thought. Nature, he suggests, is 'boundlessly extravagant, boundlessly indifferent, without purpose or consideration, without pity or justice, at once fruitful and barren and uncertain'. Nature is amoral: 'it is indifferent to mercy, justice and every other moral idea humanity creates to give value to life' (Spinks 2003, p. 43). This acceptance of the radical indifference of nature is not born of an empty romantic embrace of nature in its wild state – rather, it is simply a recognition that natures' indifference serves as the condition for human existence.

2. Evaluating

I have been suggesting that in order to connect thinking to the forces that make it creative we need to grasp the constitutive nature of those very forces – that we are not essentially different from, nor spared of, their effects. The second task, as it were, is to engage in an active *evaluation* of forces as they express themselves. Of course, the forces of the world are themselves neither good nor bad, but are indifferent to these valuations. As humans who are ourselves subject to the adventures of force, we seek, through such endeavours as science, morality, culture and politics, to differentiate ourselves in the face of the indifference of nature. Human life, Nietzsche suggests, is inseparable from valuing and preferring and the human being's essential work, its "creation of the world" is embodied in this difference-creating gesture.

If we cannot help but value and prefer, it is certainly the case that some forms of valuing and preferring are more affirming of life and others more life-denying. In the closing comments of the paper I will give some indication of the ways that I think *play* can work affirmatively. For now, I would like to briefly consider what kind of work social scientists, as opposed to philosophers, might hope to do in playing with a concept like creativity. Certainly, the widespread celebration of creativity amongst managers, media workers, designers, psychologists, marketing gurus and the like has affected the social sciences as well. The increasing pressure to innovate in teaching and research betrays those same moral imperatives and technologies of governance that accompany the generalised and often uncritical celebration of creativity in other spheres. Yet, is the only role left for the social scientist in light of the 'creativity explosion', as Osbourne (2003) refers to it, a critical one? When we speak of creativity we refer not just to the creation of something, but the creation of something that has *value* and no doubt we are left with a challenge of creating something with value when that value is so readily incorporated within the given – given modes of production and consumption, clichéd ways of thinking and being and so on. And certainly if the kind of critical thinking that we are so comfortable with in the social sciences could be seen as an expression of reactive force, there is much in the academic milieu that points this way. As Peters (2010, p. 1) writes of the academic milieu, 'to read is to construct a theatre of war, to write is to take up arms and do battle with all of those who would block the path

that leads to our own big (or not so big) idea.' Given that academic practice tends to be dialectical at best and gladiatorial at worst, there is much to be said, then, as far as thinking creatively is concerned, for the attempt to think affirmatively. What would it mean to think in such a way as to affirm, rather than negate, nature's indifference to us: the fact that values do not come to us in the world, readymade, but must be created? And how might our problematisations serve as active, rather than merely reactive, expressions of force?

3. Experimenting

I have outlined what I think are two tasks for thought that seeks to avail itself of those non-human forces that are the stuff of creativity – firstly, to renaturalise the social, so as to capacitate thinking through its encounter with the forces that think in us; secondly, to engage in an active evaluation of force as it expresses itself. I would like now to indicate the importance of recent shifts in the social sciences that work toward what I see as a third important task; namely, the task of vitalising thinking by actively experimenting with force. No doubt, the dominant tendency has been to see the social sciences as modes of knowledge production rather than modes of thinking. Knowledge, which for its part represents the moment in which that open becoming that is thought is captured, takes as its objects empirical events in the world, where an 'event' here signals the subjectivity and objectivity of what happens. While a vitalist, Deleuzian-inspired conception of thinking is long familiar to non-representational geographies, cultural and media studies, sociology has only recently and tentatively approached a more transcendental empiricism, which acknowledges the absolute ubiquity of events in a world constituted as process (in sociology, see for example, Fraser 2009; Adkins & Lury 2009; Clough 2009; Halewood & Michael 2008). As far as thinking is concerned, what is important here is that events are no longer the accidents upon which knowledge reflects, but are occasions for experimentation and vital transformation.

In suggesting that the impact of this more process-oriented view of the event is to vitalise thinking, it is clearly a philosophical, as opposed to metaphysical, vitalism that is being evoked here. As I have argued elsewhere, one of the real challenges for the humanities and social sciences in view of the colonisation of the concept of life by the biological sciences is to put such philosophical vitalism to work (Hynes 2013). As Foucault (1989) suggests in what might be seen as a precursor to his better known work on biopower, the historical process through which life becomes biological is inseparable from the establishment of 'life' as a kind of quasi-transcendental that enables knowledges. It is certainly the case that we have today become almost unproblematically biocentric in our approach to life, with a number of consequences. Among these, the reduction of life to a mere object of knowledge is especially important here, insofar as thinking assumes an always secondary position with respect to life; so, for example, the biological sciences reflect on and represent life while bioethics deliberates on the implications of biological knowledge and biomedical advances.

Thought, then, always assumes a secondary position with respect to an already determined life so that, in the same process that life is reduced to an object of knowledge, the idea that thinking itself might have vital or genetic capacities becomes increasingly unthinkable.

What is at issue here is the status of what it means to think and, here again, our available options are not between the negativity of a critical thought that would reflect on the given or a naïve acceptance of things as they are. So where Rose (2013, p. 23), for example, calls on the social sciences 'to develop an affirmative relation to the new ways of understanding the dynamic relations between the vital and its milieu', we would do well to remember that affirmative thinking is always more than a reflection on the given; the issue does not lie, as Rose would have it, in the attitude one adopts towards a life already determined as object, but in the image of thought to which one adheres. And one of the defining characters of affirmative thinking is an active evaluation and experimentation with the temporality – the duration – proper to problems. The genetic elements of such experiments, to put it in Deleuzian terms, are singularities – bifurcations or remarkable points, which can only be expressed in the infinitive form because they are not yet attributed to subjects and objects.

In suggesting that the vitalisation of thought through experimentation is an important task for the social sciences, it may be that we need to find inspiration outside our own sphere of intellectual activity. I would just like to make a very brief comment on why art might be important here, though this is certainly not an evocation of the common sense image of the artist as privileged creator. Rather, it may be in art that the autonomy of the infinitive form ('to create') from the subject in which it will come to be actualised is especially visible. For Nietzsche, the 'essence of art' concerns the affinity between thought and life: art intervenes, he suggests in the process of 'life making thought active, thought making life affirmative' (Deleuze 1983, p. 101). Guattari (1995 p. 116) puts it slightly differently, suggesting that art is characterised by a 'striving towards the ontological root of creativity' and to the extent that it is involved in the production of subjectivities, its orientation is toward processual immanence rather than the transcendental unity that defines the subject of reflection. The subject that it addresses is yet to come, belonging to a time outside the current configuration of things. Art, then, has a particular receptivity to the future, enabling it to deploy the potential of the future into the present in order to intensify it.

Here the term 'art' is being used in its broadest sense and in my collaborative work it is the art of lightness, which is sometimes made prominent in comedic forms that we argue can lead to the cultivation of new habits (Hynes & Sharpe 2010; Hynes et al 2007; Sharpe & Hynes 2012; Sharpe & Hynes 2005). Some humour, can, for example, generate new habits of receptivity, not as transformations that would happen to an already given subject, but as the production of new material dispositions and new subjective possibilities (Sharpe et al 2012). While habit has often been seen as directly antithetical to experimentation, recent interpretations of habit influenced by the philosophy of Ravaisson have highlighted that

habit is fundamentally a question of change (Sharpe 2013; Dewsbury 2012; Bissell 2012). While the more moralising traditions of thinking demean habit as a problem for the subject because it evidences our mechanistic tendencies, Ravaisson (2009) sees habit as a primary ontological phenomenon, the defining character of which is a capacity for change. Here again, time is thought as duration; habits do not represent the predilections of pre-existing subjects but the material transformations that are productive of new ways of being. Habit is thus a potentializing rather than conservative force; not simply an encounter that ruptures, but a source of future-oriented change, new material dispositions and sensibilities.

Perhaps I might have called this paper 'Affirming Creativity: Outlining Tasks' rather than 'Affirming Creativity: Playing with Concepts'! In any case, in the process of mobilising some of the concepts that I thought could open up the idea of creativity, I have found myself drawing out a small set of tasks that might help to maximise the relationship of thinking to the forces that make it creative: the task of reconnecting to the non-human forces that think in us; of engaging in an active evaluation of force; and of vitalising thinking by actively experimenting with force. I'd like to close by emphasizing that these tasks are anything but weighty. If the idea of a task might imply some sort of moral prescription, it is in fact a certain playful lightness that is required to do the kind of work I have been outlining.

Theories of play, especially those dominant in cultural studies in the 80s and 90s, have tended to celebrate play as a figure of transgression and subversion. Play is subversive to the extent that it causes mutations in existing cultural forms, potentially reversing established values whilst demonstrating the agency of the subject (cf. Hall 2002). Yet this is to tie play to the metaphysics of the subject; thought as a gesture of transgression, play remains bound to the economy of subjective agency and subjective experience, their limits and possibilities (cf. Hynes 2011). Yet, there is another, less subjective and more affirmative economy by which to think the creative potentials of play, which is always more than an efficacious vehicle for essentially serious issues, on the one hand, or a frivolous avoidance of them, on the other. If habit represents a material mannerism, play, I have implied in the paper today, involves a kind of conceptual mannerism. Its economy is not the representational one of essences and transcendent ideals but the folding and refoldings of appearances. So, for example, where critical thinking characteristically strips away appearances (the effects of ideology, forms of false consciousness) in order to preserve the essentially upright nature of thought and demonstrate the good will of the thinker, a more playful form of critique will acknowledge the very real profundity of appearances (Hynes et al 2007). As such, it may be able to avoid some of the negativity and moralism of much critical thinking, whilst being both more genealogical and productive of novelty (Hynes & Sharpe 2010; Hynes et al 2007; Sharpe & Hynes 2012).

In an incredibly rich passage of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 'Of the Vision and the Riddle', Nietzsche makes it clear that the capacity to live life affirmatively involves the ability to

throw off the Spirit of Gravity, which cripples us with its cowardice, its idealism and hatred of the present. Similarly, thinking affirmatively might involve that we approach our problems with a kind of playfulness, a lightness that will enable us to attack our own convictions and turn things around in a new light.

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