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Edited by David H. Cropley, Arthur J. Cropley, James C. Kaufman and Mark A. Runco

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The Dark Side of Creativity: What Is It?

ARTHUR J. CROPLEY

FAILURE TO RECOGNIZE THE EXISTENCE OF THE DARK SIDE

In everyday usage as well as scholarly discussions, it is almost axiomatic that creativity is good. Indeed it cannot be denied that it often leads to beneficial advances in art and literature, science, medicine, engineering, manufacturing, business, and other areas (the bright side). Unfortunately, the enchantment with creativity is so intense that, as James, Clark, and Cropanzano (1999) complained, people, including researchers "... typically ignore the fact that a great deal of creative effort is done in service of negative ends" (p. 212). James, Clark, and Cropanzano argued that this has led to an absence of consideration of negative creativity or, as the editors of the present volume would put it, a failure to come to grips with the dark side of creativity. This means that little has been worked out about the "... triggers, processes, outcomes ..." (p. 212) of the dark side. The result is obvious: Approaches to recognizing the dark side, avoiding circumstances that foster its growth, discouraging its manifestation, redirecting it, protecting against its negative consequences, and the like, are not well developed. The purpose of this book is to increase both awareness of the dark side and understanding of the forms and processes of negative creativity, begin to develop the necessary conceptual framework, and set in motion a discussion of how to deal with it in practical settings.

In pursuing this goal, the book contains chapters by people from disparate fields of study (e.g., psychology, criminal justice, sociology, engineering, education, history, and design) and different areas of focus (e.g., personality development, mental health, deviant behavior, law enforcement, and counterterrorism) in order to illustrate the nature of the dark side of creativity, examine its variants, draw attention to its dangers (although even

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the dark side has its bright side), and draw conclusions about how to prevent negative creativity or protect ourselves against it. Examples of practical programs are found in several chapters, including those by Gamman and Raein, Sternberg, Hilton, D. H. Cropley, and Hari.

THE BRIGHT SIDE OF CREATIVITY

Creativity is widely seen as so good that in his seminal discussion, from which the title of this book is derived, McLaren (1993) points out that it has a “quasi-religious function” (p. 139). He cites Tsanoff, who referred to creativity as involving “some divine principle,” (p. 137) and Plato, who wrote of “divine influence” (p. 137). Nietzsche (1947, p. 407) argued that creativity involves “*deification* of existence [emphasis added]” and is above all moral considerations. Gammel (1946, p. 140) emphasized that for many people creativity is the new way of finding solace in an imperfect world in which religion no longer offers such consolations. This tone of almost religious fervor was already present at the beginning of the modern creativity era. Bruner (1962) saw creativity as the last bastion of the human spirit in an age in which electronic devices are taking over most noncreative functions: It thus marks the boundary between the human being and the intelligent machine. Discussions along these lines have not infrequently argued that creativity is a principle of nature and that it is, by definition, a universal beneficial force fostering growth and rebuilding in all organic systems.

In addition to the inherent spiritual goodness just outlined, various writers such as Rogers (1961), Maslow (1973), and May (1976) also emphasized that creativity is good for the individual. It was typically associated with positive personal properties such as flexibility, openness, courage, or high ego strength. As a result, it is often thought to be connected with favorable psychological development of the individual, such as achievement of a high level of self-actualization, personal fulfillment, or improved mental health. The making of art or production of works of prose or poetry has often been assumed to be therapeutic for people suffering from mental health problems or incarcerated for criminal offenses (see Chapter 10 by Singer). Cropley (1990) attempted to develop a model of the mechanisms through which creativity has beneficial effects on mental health. By contrast, Gabora and Holmes (Chapter 15 in this volume) discuss the pros and cons of the argument that creativity may even be *bad* for mental health, citing Coleridge’s warning in *Kubla Khan*, “Beware!”

Discussions such as those just outlined have tended to equate creativity with artistic creativity: fine art, literature, music and dance, and the like.

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More recently, however, it is also commonly being seen as good in that it fosters material prosperity: D. H. Cropley (Chapter 19 in this volume) cites José Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission, who in a 2009 speech identified creativity as essential for collective and individual well-being, long and sustainable economic growth, and answers to the current financial, economic, and social crisis. As Oral (2006) put it, creativity is vital “for shaping ... future orientations and actualizing reforms in political, economic and cultural areas” (p. 65). Other business-oriented writers, such as Buzan (2007) or Florida (2004), see creativity as the key to meeting the challenges of the early twenty-first century arising from technological advances, social change, globalization, and now the global financial crisis.

This view of creativity as crucial for social and economic well-being goes back at least to the Chinese Emperor Han Wu-di, who reigned until 87 BCE. He was intensely interested in giving innovative thinkers high rank in the civil service because of their importance for the well-being of the society, and he reformed the method of selection of mandarins to achieve this. Both Francis Bacon (1909 [1627]) and René Descartes (1991 [1644]), two of the founders of modern science, saw scientific creativity as involving the harnessing of the forces of nature *for the betterment of the human condition*. Cropley and Cropley (2005, p. 169) refer to practically useful creativity that serves society by leading to the production of useful objects, devices, machines, or processes as “functional” creativity, contrasting it with aesthetic or artistic creativity.

THE DARK SIDE

McLaren (1993) contrasted the extremely positive view of creativity just spelled out with the facts of its misuse in, for instance (a) advertising, where it is employed to promote the sales of, among other things, unhealthy food or dangerous products, (b) entertainment, where it is used to promote repulsive values, glorify crime, and so on, (c) politics, where it has been used to promote, for instance, racial hatred, or (d) science and technology, where it is applied to developing and building weapons of mass destruction (see the discussion of the development of such weapons in Chapters 4 and 5 in this volume), or polluting the environment. Interestingly, McLaren pointed out that the harm generated by technological creativity is not confined to physical destruction. He refers to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century figures such as Coleridge, Dickens, and Victor Hugo, who already then were warning of the destructive *social* effects of technological innovation. To

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these can be added (e.g., James, Clark, & Cropanzano, 1999) negative use of creativity in (e) business or production, for instance, to evade regulators or to steal competitors' secrets, (f) social life or at work, for instance, to avoid work, curry favor, gain unfair advantage, or steal from an employer without being detected, (g) crime in general (e.g., Cropley, Kaufman, & Cropley, 2008), (h) war, and (i) terrorism. The dark side of creativity is so pervasive that we can paraphrase Graham Greene's words in his book *The human factor* (1978, p. 130): "... it is the *creative* person we need most to fear [emphasis added]."¹

The variety of settings in which what James, Clark, and Cropanzano (1999) called "negative" creativity can manifest itself is large. At an everyday level it is seen when, to take those authors' example, a person finds creative ways to get others to do the hard work in a factory. This may be regarded by observers as no more than annoying cunning. More obviously dark, however, is the application of creativity to manipulate other people or to profit at other people's expense, without regard to possible negative consequences for the people concerned: An obvious, legally permitted example would be the use of creativity to persuade children to eat foods that are harmful to their health (as in advertising). Another example is the field of crime. As Gamman and Raein argue in Chapter 9, "resourceful offenders" (p. 161) constitute a group "whose creativity is rarely acknowledged" (p. 158). As they point out, some "criminal 'projects' may exhibit the 'wow' factor" (p. 158), and represent paradigm-breaking creative breakthroughs. They mention the Great Train Robbery, which is often cited in the relevant literature as an example of a criminal breakthrough with the "wow" factor. Ronald Biggs, probably the most famous of the Great Train robbers, showed enormous ingenuity in escaping and evading capture for many years, until old age and physical infirmity persuaded him to surrender. Eisenman (Chapter 11 in this volume) gives simple examples in the form of brief case studies of the use of creativity by prisoners in the correctional system to manipulate supervisory personnel to their own advantage, for instance to make it easier for them to smuggle drugs, whereas Singer (Chapter 10 in this volume) gives the example where prisoners creatively use unusual materials to make, for instance, a knife.

Most obviously dark is the application of creativity with the conscious and deliberate intention of doing harm to others, the harm being the main purpose of the creativity, not just a spin off. This is what Cropley, Kaufman, and Cropley (2008) called "malevolent" creativity. Intentional negative

¹ In fact Greene wrote "educated" person.

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creativity may be seen not only in some crime, but also in business, as well as in war. Fully intended negative creativity may be widely applauded as positive by one side (often the victors), even though it is devastatingly negative for the other. One example from war is Nelson's highly effective novel tactic of sailing inshore of the French fleet at the Battle of the Nile in 1798. The tactic caused the loss of 12 out of 14 French ships of the line and death or captivity for thousands of French sailors, results that were adjudged good by the British but bad by the French. Another example is the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 (see Chapter 5 in this volume), which was greeted with delirious gladness by some – especially allied soldiers whose lives it may well have saved – but ultimately killed hundreds of thousands of Japanese civilians.

Unfortunately, even creativity intended to be entirely benevolent may have a dark side in the form of unintended or unforeseen negative consequences: For instance, the discoveries of Jenner and Pasteur, although extremely beneficial for all humankind, laid the foundation for germ warfare. McLaren (1993) gave the example of the building of cathedrals in the middle ages: These may still stand as creative triumphs of architecture and civil engineering that add beauty to the world even today, but their dark side is that they often caused great misery and hardship to the poor at the time of their construction. At a more down-to-earth level, in 1935 the cane toad (*Bufo marinus*) was introduced into the sugarcane fields of the Australian state of Queensland as a novel way of combating the gray-backed cane beetle and the frenchie beetle, great pests for the sugar industry at that time.

The deliberate introduction of a natural enemy to combat the pest was novel at the time and well intentioned. It promised an environmentally friendly remedy that avoided, for instance, the use of harmful pesticides.² Now, however, the toad itself has become a major environmental threat in Australia and is slowly spreading throughout the country, where it is a serious danger to the survival of native Australian fauna. Because it is extremely poisonous, it has no natural enemies (no predator can eat it), and it is extremely cunning, so humans find it difficult to hunt or trap. Introduction of the toad was a novel and well-intentioned approach to combating insect pests, to be sure, but it is ultimately having negative effects, despite the good intentions.

² Unfortunately, the novelty proved to be ineffective mainly because the cane toad is a ground feeder, whereas the beetles just mentioned live well above the ground on the plant's foliage! This fact, however, is not relevant to the present discussion.

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Even where an undesirable outcome is foreseeable, negative creativity is not necessarily the result of deliberately evil intentions. Some people may even create evil despite generally having benevolent motives. They may, for instance, be unable to, unaware of, or unwilling to anticipate the dark side of their work, deliberately or subconsciously blinding themselves to negative consequences. This may occur, for instance, because of their fascination with what they are doing, or because they are deceived or coerced by factors such as the prospect of money and fame or the manipulation of a despotic government. Zaitseva (Chapter 4 in this volume) gives an example of how this happened with some participants in the Soviet Union's program for the development of weapons of mass destruction.

INHERENT NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF CREATIVITY

The traditional approach of psychological research on creativity (e.g., Barron, 1955; Rhodes, 1961) has examined it in terms of the 4Ps (Person, Product, Process, and Press). Discussion in this chapter has focused until now on the *results* of the creativity, that is, on the *P* of Product, or on the *intention* or *motivation* of the creative individual, that is, on one aspect of Person. However, as was pointed out in the opening paragraph, some writers have argued that creativity is above such considerations. Runco (Chapter 2 in this volume) focuses on a different *P*, namely, Process. He points out that creative processes are neither inherently good nor inherently bad. The dark side is a property of, for instance, human motivation or the use made of products, not of the process of creativity itself.

Negative Aspects of Process

However, as I argue (Chapter 16 in this volume), not only Person and Product but also Process has an *inherent* dark side, independently of the motivation of the people involved or the nature of the product. Process involves procedures such as seeing the known in a new light, producing multiple answers, shifting perspective, giving surprising answers, and opening up risky possibilities (often referred to as “divergent” processes). Gamman and Raein (Chapter 9 in this volume) sum up divergent processes as involving “rejection of mechanical approaches” (p. 157). While it is true that processes such as these are in themselves neither good nor evil, it is clear that under certain circumstances they lead more or less automatically to disruption and introduce intolerable levels of uncertainty. In

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Chapter 16 of this volume, I give the example of the classroom; Cropley and Cropley (2009) described the case of the French mathematician, Evariste Galois, who was expelled from secondary school despite being a brilliant and, as we now know, highly creative mathematics student who wanted to learn, admired his mathematics teacher, and produced excellent work in math lessons. Galois was not a more or less innocent victim of unreasonable attitudes, values, or demands of those around him but contributed substantially to his own downfall. He was simply too divergent to fit in. In Chapter 9 Gamman and Raein give another educational example: The adoption of the “nonmechanical” processes described above can be associated with failure to master “mechanical” processes, such as making fine distinctions, adhering to strict rules, or being accurate, all necessary for acquiring skill in reading. As a result, a one-sided preference for “nonmechanical” processes in itself increases the likelihood of dyslexia, which in turn increases the likelihood of difficulties in social functioning stretching all the way to crime.

In Chapter 7 Goncalo, Vincent, and Audia draw attention to another dark aspect of the creative process: Past creativity may actually block further creativity. For instance, successful production of effective novelty in the past may lead a person to continue to work along a particular line of attack that has ceased to be novel in the present. Furthermore, as Amabile (1983) and Csikszentmihalyi (1996) pointed out, a product is only publicly acclaimed as creative when it is accepted by those who are knowledgeable in a field and it becomes integrated into the field. Thus, almost perversely, creativity not infrequently changes the current paradigm in a field and thereafter redefines the norm – on the one hand ceasing to be novel itself (the process of acclamation as creative makes a product familiar and therefore no longer novel, at least to insiders), and on the other hand, not only rendering redundant earlier products that may, in their own time, have been novel, but also destroying the novelty of potential new products by anticipating them or directing attention in a new direction and thus denying new products the seal of approval.³

³ One consolation is that a new product can reopen assessment of the creativity of a product previously dismissed as uncreative, for instance, by making observers look at the old product in a new way. An example is the impact of the work of Galois at the time of his early death. He left a body of writing that was judged to depart from the conventional but to lead nowhere because of its lack of a basis in existing mathematical knowledge (i.e., it was judged to involve at best quasi-creativity). Only several years later, when mathematics had advanced sufficiently through post-Galois creativity, was it possible to recognize the creativity of Galois's previously rejected ideas in group theory.

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Negative Aspects of Person

Creativity is also connected with negative phenomena in the area of Person, as has been shown repeatedly by many researchers. For a summary, see Simonton (Chapter 12 in this volume) and Gabora and Holmes (Chapter 15 in this volume). Creativity appears to be linked with both cognitive disturbance, as in schizophrenia (e.g., Schulberg, 2000–2001), and mood disturbance, as in bipolar disorder (e.g., Andreasen, 1987; Jamison, 1993). Simonton examines this relationship in Chapter 12, and concludes that there is some truth to the idea that creativity is connected with mental illness. However, there is no simple, linear causal relationship according to which mental illness would make a person creative (the more serious the illness the greater the creativity) or creativity make a person mentally ill (the more creative the person, the more acute the illness).

Focusing on literary creativity, Gabora and Holmes (Chapter 15 in this volume) examine the “shadowy swamplands of the creative mind” (p. 277). Among other things, they give examples of numerous twentieth-century poets, writers, musicians, and painters who committed suicide. They also review discussions of the question of whether creativity causes psychological disturbance or psychological disturbance leads to creativity. One possible dynamic of the relationship is that creative artists may delve deeply into the unconscious in a process of “deep mining into the darkness” (p. 285), and bring to the surface material that uncreative people – wisely – leave undisturbed. Gabora and Holmes suggest that precisely this process of going where others fear to go may lead to an “allure of darkness” (p. 283) that makes the dark side attractive to some creative individuals as well as to some of the people who admire their work.

The essence of creativity is going against the crowd. The development of an individual identity by each person also involves becoming different from the crowd by “creating” an individual self and a unique identity. Thus, personality development itself can be seen as a creative process. According to Barron (1963) and Moustakis (1977), not infrequently this self-actualization requires resisting pressure from the surrounding society to conform, and Burkhardt (1985) argued that the creative individual must fight against society’s pathological desire for sameness. Sternberg and Lubart (1995) called this fight “defying the crowd” and labeled the tendency of certain individuals to resist society’s pressure to conform “contrarianism” (p. 41).

However, at some point the process can go awry. The positive, desirable breaking away from the conventional to form a unique personal identity can cross the line and become pathological, leading to maladjustment

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and neurosis, or manipulation, antisocial behavior, crime, or terrorism. In fact, creativity seems to be inextricably bound up with not only positive but also negative consequences for the individual and society: Gascón and Kaufman (Chapter 13 in this volume) examine personality, deviance, and creativity, looking as they say at “both sides of the coin.” Deviance may be perceived as a place where creativity and crime can meet; just as deviance from the norm may lead to creative ideas, so too can it lead to crime. Some of the same personality traits that are associated with criminal thinking are also associated (albeit not as strongly) with creativity. Some concepts, such as mood and impulsivity, illustrate ways that someone primed to be creative may also be more at risk for the dark side. Averill and Nunley (Chapter 14 in this volume) analyze the relationship in a closer and more differentiated way by examining the nature of the link between creativity and neurosis. Essentially, they conclude that neurosis is creativity gone wrong, that is, neurosis is an example of the dark side of creativity.

MORAL DARKNESS

Early in modern thinking, Amabile (1983) emphasized that creativity does not occur in a vacuum but in a social context. It always involves subjective judgments made by observers. These judgments may well involve formalist qualities (e.g., “unity,” “harmony,” or “complexity”) or technical properties (e.g., “high quality of construction,” “skillfulness,” or “professional finish”), as Slater (2006) pointed out, or practical considerations such as usefulness, practicability, or marketability. However, the approval of external observers also results from a creative work being judged beautiful or pleasing (i.e., aesthetic criteria) as well as admirable and worthy of emulation (moral criteria). Morality, in particular, involves judgments of good and bad, virtuousness and wickedness. According to Sternberg (Chapter 17 in this volume), the moral dimension is essential to any discussion of creativity.

However, even monsters of evil, such as Hitler and Stalin – cases where the moral verdict seems to be indisputable – are regarded by some people as having been great leaders. Sternberg makes the point that both these men introduced high levels of effective novelty (including systems for suppressing opinions differing from their own and previously unknown systems that worked well for murdering people) and had a very substantial impact on their societies. However, those who praise them as great men focus only on the novelty and impact (effectiveness) of what they did. Sternberg argues that people like Hitler and Stalin produce what he calls

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“originality,” to be sure, but that in the absence of moral goodness they cannot be said to be creative. This accords with the intuitive feeling of many people that it is disgusting to refer to such monsters as “creative,” despite the fact that they generated effective novelty and, in a strictly formalistic sense, *were* creative.

In the context of this book, creativity without morality is part of the dark side. Nonetheless, different observers’ ideas of what is morally good and bad are highly subjective, and may differ sharply from person to person and, indeed, from era to era. Galileo’s publication of the thesis that the earth rotates around the sun (and not vice versa) was regarded in his own time as so morally reprehensible as to be heresy and led to years of house arrest. Thus, the moral goodness or evil of effective novelty is not a clear-cut matter: What is needed are guidelines on how to recognize moral creativity. In Chapter 17 Sternberg offers insights into the distinguishing characteristic that renders creativity moral: According to him, the crucial element is what he calls “wisdom.” When creativity is tempered by wisdom, it is of necessity moral. The central characteristic of wisdom is concern for the common good: A wise person seeks to maximize the common good, not just to seek his or her own advantage. From an American point of view, the 9/11 attack can then be seen as not displaying wisdom, since its intention was not to serve the common good,⁴ and thus can be seen as being immoral and ultimately not creative.

A second aspect of the moral side of creativity is described by Hilton (Chapter 8 in this volume). One person’s creativity may inspire another person’s antisocial behavior. An obvious example is the copying of evil deeds depicted in imaginative works. Hilton gives the examples of a murder committed using a technique described in the novel *Shibumi* and a double murder committed by copying a scene in a Clint Eastwood film. Thus, an artistic creation that is successful in entertaining, even informing or inspiring readers, listeners, or beholders (the bright side), may simultaneously encourage, promote, or provide models of wicked behavior (the dark side). It seems plausible that the more effective the creativity in such situations, the greater the likelihood that it will promote antisocial behavior, so that, perversely, the stronger the bright side, the worse the dark side. Is such a work moral or immoral?

⁴ Nonetheless, it may well have seemed (rightly or wrongly) to the attackers to be advancing the common good of some other ethnic or national group(s), so even wisdom is obviously relative. Disagreement among beholders on what is dark and what is bright does not negate the general principle that creativity can have a dark side.