

## The Creator and His life - an Ontological Study on Selfhood and Creativity

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**Abstract:** Being framed as certain skills or abilities, “creativity” as an academic hot topic in recent decades has gained remarkably significance in the area of personal development. However, from a creative product to a creative person a logical linkage has to be developed. This paper aims to establish this logical linkage by exploring philosophically the creative self whose product is the creator’s self and his own life, and redefine creativity as subjective attitudes rather than objective skills. The enquiry begins with the question about the existence of the “self”, followed by investigation on the origin and form of its existence and how it is associated with the notion of creativity. Methodologically, the paper adopts a comparative approach, reexamining the philosophical theories from Buddhism, Existentialism (of Camus, Sartre and Heidegger) and round up by Confucianism and Taoism. In answering the question whether our “self” is created by our own, the paper concludes with the fundamental quality of creative life which is predicated on belief and attitude.

**Keywords:** creativity, selfhood, personal development

### Introduction

Creativity has flourished as an academic hot topic in recent decades and the evidence of which is lavishly seen on books bearing titles “creativity” or “creative thinking” and they are put just along with other books on “self-improvement” in bookstores. Obviously the topic does not interest philosophers more than psychologists, simply because we demand a definition of creativity in a form of ABC. Our contemporary societies yearn for creative caliber which leads to the boom of creative thinking training courses and proliferation of creativity menus. Terms like lateral thinking, brainstorming, mind-mapping, bisociation emerge and we adore people like Edward de Bono for their enlightening work. Nevertheless, all these have framed the concept of creativity as certain skills or abilities. It presumes that by acquiring certain skills or gaining certain ability one *would* eventually be a creative person. If a creative being is a better self, this better self can be attained, with some effort, by practicing certain skills of creativity. The final product of the creative activity is the creation of the new/better self, perhaps reflected from his creation of new substances or ideas. This explains why “creativity” *can* improve the self. To me, this interpretation benefits less to understanding of creativity and of its significance to the “self” than complete another economical cycle to our consumer market.

It is not easy to define creativity, but what is asserted is that from a creative product to a creative person a logical linkage has to be developed. In doing so a philosophical

enquiry on creativity is inevitable. The scope of creative studies necessarily encompasses the questions on the creative product, the creative process and the creator. Our psychological interest in the creator is mainly due to our belief that these are special talents who are able to generate creative products, namely “design”<sup>1</sup> in the contemporary context. What is more, it presupposes that these talents possess certain objective (thinking) skills or methods which can be learned by others. Therefore, this is their products rather than themselves we are primarily attracted to. However, in the reality the charm of a creative work cannot be separated from the one who created it. When we enjoy a piece of music, a prose or a painting, we also want to know the inspiration, the desire and the message conveyed by the creator. It applies also to scientific invention. We admire Einstein as well as Leonardo da Vinci not because they have produced some bizarre designs but were amazed by how they believed in the impossible and treated their life extraordinary, working against all odds from the conventions. Apart from the creative process, the creator himself must be indentified as the subject of studies. Nozick has thrown illuminating light on the relationship between the creative product, creative process and the creator:

The creative work and product comes to stand, sometimes unconsciously, for herself or for a missing piece or part, or for a defective one, or for part of a better self. ...The process of shaping and crafting an artistic work has, as an important part of its impulse, the reshaping and integration of parts of the self. ...The artist herself can represent in her audience’s mind a way and possibility of articulating and transforming a life and self.<sup>2</sup>

The “self-transformation”, as Nozick put it, is a “transformation of the self and also transformation by the self”<sup>3</sup>. A new self can evolve through the act of creation. The final creation is the creator’s self. To equate creating a product with creating a self/life, the logical linkage mentioned before is hence established. The self-creation theory sets an important stepping stone which paths the way for the following discussion on creativity *for* personal development.

Imagine that a person spend his whole life just for creating himself. What would his life be? And what would this self be like? The question is: can the “self” be actually created? To answer these series of questions, one has to start with a more fundamental question: does the “self” exist at all?

## Discussion

We used to say children are the most creative people in the world, since they do not have much concept about themselves and their surroundings. Contrarily to our cognition of the world which relies on having a concept of it, our creative activities usually proceed under a condition without such concept. We also cherish our childhood, for a happy life free of social norms and values projected on ourselves. In

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<sup>1</sup> Though I regard a genuine creative product is different from a design product. Nonetheless, this does not fall into the scope of discussion here in this essay.

<sup>2</sup> Nozick Robert. *The Examined Life*, p. 39.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.39.

the hope of a pleasurable life, one could see his life as a blank paper, as a commonplace saying. Unfortunately, a purer, lighter life does not necessarily mean a happy life. In the belief of Buddhism life is a void (空). There is no such thing as a self. Life is constituted by numerous coincidences and happenings, that is, phenomenon. However, the belief does not make a person a freer man, merely because the man does not principally exist as a “man” at all, if he cannot be categorized based on self-concept! For Buddhists, a man is not much different from other living beings, for if there is difference it can only be a physical one and therefore it must be a fake. A true self is metaphysical and spiritual but unluckily it does not exist. All a man can do in his life is to observe the objective physical world(觀照) and look for the eternal pattern of the universe, which is the truth (真相). In the process he can gradually realize (領悟) and accept the way he and the world are. However, unlike scientific observation that is actively in quest for a discovery of the universe as an ordered “single significant whole”<sup>4</sup>, the Buddhists passively take in the unchangeable facts of the man’s life. Life as a blank paper can only cause pain than happiness, for how pathetic it can be to see the unyielding truth that he is unable to put some colours on it as desired throughout his life (if the paper exists at all), even though he is the artist of it!

Probably we all desire a better control of our life, and it can only be achieved through an affirmation instead of a denial of it. The basic problem of Buddhism is that all its arguments are deduced from the premise that life is nothing but a source of pain. It counteracts the pain by means of negation: the negation of a self and his life and accordingly any sense of values. The theory does not only reveal an essential logical problem (if all we perceive in the reality are fake, including the feelings of happiness and pain, how can we justify the premise “life is a source of pain” is true?), it is also counter-intuitive for human. It is fair to say we have to accept the flaws and shortcomings in ourselves and our life, but a good and wholesome life does not just stem from pure acceptance of our disabilities. A baby babbles to speak and a toddler tumbles to walk; a blind man fumbles to read with his sense of touch; a dying man struggles to live. Even the Buddhists encourage people to help others in need (another contradiction to its theory!) We all do this and try every resort to do this because we want to make life different, even though it is not always easy. We want to be the creator of our own life.

In responding to the supposition above, it is best to continue my argument by looking to the West, considering the concept of “self” from Existentialism. Close to Buddhist point of view on people’s life, Albert Camus sees a devoid of values in our mundane reality. It is true that we have hopes, desires or goals in our life, but they are purely instrumental rather than intrinsic to Camus. Since most people are indulged in their everyday trifles, a man’s existence can only be asserted through his realization of the meaninglessness and absurdity of his life. By doing so, he can stand out from infatuated mass and other illusions and be free. It sounds plausible. In our everyday life we do have moments when suddenly we feel alone, though with a lot of people (or even friends). Those moments of solitude give us good chances to reflectively think about our life and its values. It is helpful to get away from the mass sometimes,

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<sup>4</sup> Einstein Albert, *The World as I See It*, p.26.

especially our everyday life is so bombarded with (social) values. The reflection, to me, is actually a process of searching for one “self” and the process does not complete until the “me” is found. Camus would not deny that, and the self found is a freer self! But how could a man feel free when his attempt to life can only be a constant mock at it? We laugh at our boss and we ridicule our governments, but that does not make ourselves freer and our life more beautiful. No wonder he concludes this free man’s life by making the most sarcastic statement “all is well”.

To Camus, the “self” does exist but he shall do nothing with it, because all is well while obviously it is not. The problem is, by affirming the existence of the “self”, the self is not respected much. Hence the awareness of one’s existence could only induce a sense of dread for one’s self and life, for by nature no one wants to be alienated. A life of a free man must begin with a respect of himself, and a belief that it is his sovereign self. The concept that man as an autonomous self is seen from the work of another Existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre. Like Camus, his philosophical ideas were projected on his novels. His early work *Nausea* (1938) has unfolded his concept of the “self” which is neither rationalistic nor empirical. People are not born with any reason, and their life is not destined. In principal there is no intrinsic quality of a man. He *is* just how he exists. “Existence precedes essence” is his famous motto. In Camus’ *Le Stranger*, the protagonist consoled himself in facing the death penalty by “wishing” his fellow men cursing and condemning him on his way to execution. In *Nausea*, Sartre’ protagonist was not much of a hero either. Nevertheless, throughout his rather ordinary life, he came to a sudden realization in the end that he could make his life “precious or even legendary”, by writing a book:

A book. Naturally, at first it would only be a tedious, tiring job, it wouldn’t prevent me from existing or from feeling that I exist. But a time would have to come when the book would be written, would be behind me, and I think that a little of its light would fall over my past. Then, through it, I might be able to recall my life without repugnance.<sup>5</sup>

In this novel, the protagonist’s thought was actually inspired by a black street musician, who proved her existence through her creation of music. Comparing Camus and Sartre, we can identify a significant difference in their perspectives on the autonomy of the self. The “everydayness” is meaningless and inauthentic in a sense, but Sartre believes we are free to bestow it with meanings. Since there is no God or Freudian unconscious impulse and social values are nonsense, man has to be totally responsible for his own deeds and choices. The “self” is not born but created by his own. Here one can see a positive aspect of Sartre’s thoughts to personal development, with his emphasis on self autonomy and freewill. These ideas combat Essentialism from its foundation. A question follows, nevertheless. If there is no objective value or an innate self, how do we decide what decision is to make, and what kind of self is to create? Not all men can be as wise as Sartre to always make a sensible choice, even though it is a choice only for an individual. As discussed on page one, all creations should be imbued with the creator’s “personal” meanings, then, how can it be done without the creator’s knowing his original self as a “person”?

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<sup>5</sup> Sartre, *Nausea*, p.252.

The fact is, we do have certain ideas of good self, such as it is better to love than kill our fellow men, which could be quite different from the way we actually do (we have wars and we have murders). Martin Heidegger has termed this way of our existence as *Dasein*, “being there”. “Being” is different from “doing”, for it is the former term which makes a man a man:

In its uniqueness, *Dasein* is “always mine”, and “mine alone”. It is ‘entity that we each ourselves are, which each of us finds in the fundamental assertion: I am’. However, *Dasein* can forget this uniqueness, lose it or dissolves it away into the average everyday world, ... it becomes inauthentic, scattered and dissipated.<sup>6</sup>

Our everyday preoccupation is what we *do* but not who we *are*. The “being” is like an “inner call” of a man, a more original and primordial self, constantly yearn for a “totality of the subject”. For Heidegger we, as human, have deep-seated quality which makes ourselves different from each other and from other beings (animals, plants or inorganic things). However, this quality is not like the soul given by God or some kind of metaphysical form as regarded by Plato. This quality is not an independent entity from the physical being for without which its existence cannot be founded. The theory resolves Sartre’s lacking direction in life while affirming the subjectivity of the self. It would initiate another fundamental philosophical question on the ontology of the self: how can we be sure about *Dasein* if the quality of which does not objectively exist? I assume Heidegger would answer that it was what “had to be there”. It seems to me that *Dasein* is a human belief in his own nature, as if the way Einstein believes in the cosmic whole. Although “being” would evolve itself particularly in times of urgency and needs, this does not make ourselves less of a creator of our self and our life. We create it because we believe in it.

Coming back from the West, our Chinese philosopher Mou Zongsan(牟宗三) has shared a similar view on the avowal of the self. He seriously refutes the existential ideas by Sartre for his disavowal of human nature and thinks that would make a man “a rootless plant”.<sup>7</sup> Predicated on Confucianism, Mou regards self as something innate in us, which is composed of our spirit and body. This division could somewhat be influenced by Cartesian body-mind dualism but Mou has own interpretation. Spirit and body have to co-exist as a whole to actualize the self. The holistic perspective of self by Mou echoes with Heidegger’s “the totality of the subject”. Where does this self come from? The Confucians relate this to the divine pattern but this is not the same as the almighty God. My understanding of this is that it is, rather, like a pattern connects a man to the universe and all start from the man’s inner determination and action than an objective outer power. Mou calls it “actualization of the self through actions” Despite we all born with similar traits as man, it is still our effort to nurture and develop it in our life empirically. The self can be created, though according to certain orientations and standards, for an instance, virtues.

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<sup>6</sup> Collins Jeff, *Heidegger and the Nazis*, pp 18-19.

<sup>7</sup> 牟宗三，*道德的理想主義*，p.133。

## Conclusion

I have decided to use Mou's theory as a full stop to my inquiry on this topic about "self" and "creativity" here. I have also decided to exclude thoughts from Kant or other philosophers who believe "essence is prior to existence" (that associates not much to the notion of a "creative life"). It is not due to the fact that I am a Chinese and an atheist but because I truly endorse the idea of "self-actualization through actions" by Mou. Through his action, a man manifests his inner power and dignity of his kind. Perhaps the only drawback of Mou's theory is that it draws heavily on Mencius' (孟子) work which presupposes human nature is good. Since we can never logically prove it, it looks more like a belief than a truth. What is wrong with having a belief, though, if that would really benefit our personal development? If I were allowed to further improve the theory within this context, I would supplement it with Taoist concept of "change". Our good nature provides a brilliant starting point but we are free to create our own process of development and our product, our "self". The "respectful and significant self" can exist in various forms, and one does not know what it is until he has created it. This illustrates a creative and active side of Taoism when it is integrated with Confucianism. Our life therefore is not an anticipated closure, but a creative channel full of opportunity and flexibility through which meanings and values can be justly re-examined and redefined by ourselves.

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