

CREATIVITY, ETHICS & EDUCATION

An interview with Berys Gaut

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1 Philosophy of creativity

CHRIS WOERNER: I've noticed that a lot of people seem to be confused about how to pronounce your name, so I was wondering if we could start by settling that question for everyone.

BERYS GAUT: (grinning) Sure, this is an important issue actually, so . . . my first name, 'Berys,' would rhyme with 'Ferris,' as in 'Ferris wheel,' and my last name 'Gaut' would rhyme with 'taught,' as in 'someone has been taught by me.'

CW: And 'Berys' is a Welsh name?

BG: Yeah, that's right . . . it's an old Celtic name actually, related to Llanberis in Snowdonia. 'Llan' is Welsh for 'parish of.' My first name is that of a Celtic saint, after whom the parish was named, and my second name, 'Gaut,' seems to ultimately be Scandinavian. It probably comes from a root word that derives from 'Göta land' in the south of Sweden, which I take it literally means 'Gaut land.' Some of the Gaut family seem to have emigrated from there as part of the Viking invasions—there was a Gaut who was a Viking sculptor of crosses in the

Isle of Man in about 900AD. So I've always taken myself to be a sort of Welsh Viking.

cw: (laughing) Well, now that we've cleared that up—obviously you've written on a very wide range of topics over the years, but since we wouldn't have room to discuss all of them I've just chosen three from your recent endeavours, relatively speaking. First of all, I thought, we might talk about your work on creativity, so initially I should probably ask what attracted you to the subject and when you first started thinking about it.

BG: I remember reading some of Arthur Koestler's books when I was a teenager, including part of *The Act of Creation*, which is about creativity, and that piqued my interest.¹ I also found George Pólya's book, *How to Solve It*, immensely interesting and useful when I was studying maths at A-level. Though it's about how to solve maths problems, the book is more widely an exercise in heuristics, whose aim is, as Pólya puts it, "to study the methods and rules of discovery and invention."² In other words, it's a book about creative thinking in maths, and Pólya notes that his methods apply outside maths, too. The book has stayed with me and shaped my thinking about creativity quite strongly.

cw: And more recently, in terms of your academic work, what started things?

BG: Well, more recently I got interested because Paisley Livingston and I organised a conference in honour of Richard Wollheim in Aarhus in 2000. I think it was Paisley who suggested we call it 'The Creation of Art', and it resulted in the book of the same name.³ Many of the speakers, when confronted with the word 'creation', thought of creativity, including me. And that was the immediate cause of my interest: a rather nice example of serendipity.

¹Koestler 1964.

²Pólya 1945, p. 112.

³Gaut and Livingston 2003.

The more I thought about it, the odder the neglect by philosophers of the topic seemed. *The Cambridge Handbook of Creativity*, which was published in 2010, notes that since 1999 there had been over 10,000 articles published by psychologists on creativity. I would estimate that during that period there were less than 50 articles by philosophers. This neglect is particularly weird for philosophers of art, since if you ask someone what they associate with art, you can be fairly sure that, along with ‘emotion’ and ‘expression’, they will come up with ‘creativity’ pretty soon. Philosophy would certainly benefit from asking some new questions, and this is one that seems to be just crying out to be addressed.

CW: So, having told us about the origins of your interest and your recent work in this regard, can you tell us something about what you’ve been thinking about?

BG: Well, I think there are a lot of really interesting issues about creativity that very little have been written on. I’ll just give you two examples. There has been a lot of recent work by philosophers on the imagination. Most of that concerns the role of the imagination in simulating other minds or mindreading. That’s a use of the imagination, to use Greg Currie’s and Ian Ravenscroft’s nice term, that is ‘recreative’: trying to imagine what it is like to be other people, and so recreating their pre-existing situation. But what about creative imagination? That’s far less discussed, but one would have thought that it was at least as important to understand the imagination used for creative purposes as for recreative ones. In fact, the connection of imagination to creativity is so strong in popular opinion that ‘imaginative’ is very close to being a synonym for ‘creative’. And there is a lot of interesting empirical evidence about the connection, too. For instance, autistic children who seem to suffer an imagination deficit as part of their condition are less prone to be flexible and exploratory in their everyday lives. And there is also some fascinating work by Jeffrey Dansky, amongst others, which has shown that giving young children regular play-tutoring sessions, where they are encouraged to engage in sociodramatic play,

enhances their creativity, as measured by tests such as the Torrance Tests for Creative Thinking.

The other example is a more traditional, conceptual one. We use 'creative' as a term of praise, and that supports the claim that there is a value condition on creativity. Kant notes in his discussion of genius that there's such a thing as 'original nonsense,' and that for this reason, he says, the products of genius must exhibit what he calls 'exemplary originality,' i.e., we hold them up as exemplars of their kind. So, transposing from genius to creativity, that suggests that creative products have to be not just original but also valuable. And that's pretty much the mainstream definition in psychology, though with endless variations. Yet that raises a problem of whether one can be creative in a deeply immoral fashion, for instance, whether a torturer can be creative. Some philosophers, like David Novitz, have denied this, and argued that such a person is only 'ingeniously destructive,' but not in any way creative. That's not too compelling. On the other hand, the value condition is hard to jettison, since otherwise one has to allow that any saliently new activity, even if valueless or, worse, just plain bad, has to count as creative. So for instance a spectacularly badly done painting would have to count as creative provided no one had done anything that bad in quite that way before. And that's also hard to swallow. So the problem with the value condition strikes me as a really interesting one to try to resolve, but there's been very little work done on it by philosophers. Since philosophy has been so fixated on conceptual analysis, it's an indication of the depth of the neglect of the philosophy of creativity that there isn't a well-established literature on that problem. It would certainly make a welcome change from reading yet another article on the definition of art.

cw: You have recently been awarded a two-year Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship to work on a new book, *Exploring Creativity*. Obviously it's early days, but can you tell us a bit about your approach and what you'll be saying?

BG: Well, it's drawing on the six or seven articles I've already written on the topic, but I hope to go quite a bit beyond them, and I'll no doubt be modifying some of my views as well. Perhaps the first thing to say is that I got interested in thinking about creativity, as I said, through thinking about art, but one of the major aims of the book is to address creativity more widely and show that there is a good deal of commonality between creativity in different domains. In fact it's really quite strange that we associate creativity with art so prominently; now there's this term 'creatives' that is used to cover virtually any artist, we talk about the creative economy and the creative industries, which has the unwelcome implication that people outside art don't engage in creative practices at all, but merely technical ones. So the aim of the book is to advance a philosophy of creativity more generally, not just creativity in art.

The approach I'm thinking of at the moment is to treat creativity as a form of problem-solving: that's got a great deal of support in cognitive psychology and it fits well with heuristic approaches, like Pólya's. There's a lot of resistance in the philosophy of art to the thought that art-making should be thought of as a kind of problem-solving, and it certainly leads itself to caricature ('every artist has the problem of expressing her own emotions'). But there are some very fine books that consider artworks as solutions to problems in illuminating ways, for instance Rudolf Arnheim's book on Picasso's *Guernica* and Michael Baxandall's *Patterns of Intention*, both of which apply the problem-solving approach in a detailed and convincing way.⁴ If we think of a problem in the most general way as a task that presents some difficulty, then it's hard to deny that creativity involves a kind of problem solving. Of course, not all problem-solving is creative: if I'm stuck in traffic and late for an appointment, I've got a problem, but it's one that requires me to use a known routine, say of stepping on the accelerator when the traffic clears, rather than any degree of creativity. Creative problem solving is standardly required when there's no technique in a person's repertoire for solving the problem.

What the problem-solving approach gets you is a number of

⁴Arnheim 1962; Baxandall 1985.

things. For one, it shows you that creative actions standardly have some goal—and that’s something that some philosophers have denied, they think of creativity as pure spontaneity. But that doesn’t seem very plausible because when I’m being creative I can get a sense that I’m off-target, or that things are going wrong, so I must have some sense of where I’m going. So there’s a goal, and to have a problem is to have a particular sort of goal.

cw: I can see that creativity need not always be purely spontaneous, but surely we want to allow that it can be; if a sense that your creative activity is going wrong is something that can only emerge later, as you try to apply it, might this suggest that your first, initial thought or inspiration couldn’t count as creative?

BG: I don’t want to deny of course that creative ideas can ‘pop into your head’ and so be spontaneous in that sense. But you have to consider the context in which they occur. A lot of psychological evidence, together with common experience, shows that one gets these ideas after having worked on some problem and come to an impasse, so they occur in a problem-solving context. And there’s a conceptual point too. Being creative is something that we can take credit for, but we can’t take credit for things that we merely undergo or simply happen to us; we only take credit for things that we do. So I can take credit for creating the conditions which bring about that spontaneous idea, by having done work in trying to come to grips with a problem and understanding it, or, having had the idea, for developing it or minimally at least recognising its value. So these spontaneously occurring ideas are only creditable and therefore creative in a context in which I have been actively doing something.

The problem-solving approach needn’t assume that the only sort of problem is a pre-existent one. There’s another sort of problem that is finding a problem that is worth pursuing, and that’s often called problem-finding, or perhaps it would be better to say problem-inventing. The ability to come up with a problem is actually a very important part of creativity. But note, that looks more like it’s a form

of meta-problem-solving, where someone has a problem of finding a worthwhile problem, and then finds it.

Another pay-off of the problem-solving approach is that it connects with the thought that creativity might standardly involve heuristics, that is, techniques for solving problems, which is something that Pólya is very good on, and if you think of it that way then it's obvious that this approach has implications for educating people for creativity, which is something I'm very interested in. Also, it's got interesting implications for how creativity varies across different domains, since you can compare the sort of heuristics that are used; there are many common features, such as the use of analogies, but there are also differences, such as the importance of attending to particular features of individual experience in literature, which has no role in, say, mathematics. Those differences in heuristics can be explained by differences in the domains and what we value in them; in maths we are looking for general structural features, whereas in writing we also value the particular, including the writer's individual voice.

2 Art and ethics

cw: In *Art, Emotion and Ethics* you give a detailed and compelling defence of ethicism in the evaluation of art.⁵ Much of your argument rides on arguments you provide in support of cognitivism, the idea that one of art's major sources (or perhaps the major source) of value is its capacity to teach us. But while your arguments are indeed quite cogent, does this invite the danger of ethicism being reduced simply to a form of cognitivism?

BG: Just to lay a bit of background, ethicism is the claim that a work of art is always aesthetically flawed in so far as it has an aesthetically relevant ethical flaw; and the converse claim applies for aesthetic merits and ethical merits. I give three main arguments in *Art, Emotion*

⁵Gaut 2007.

and Ethics for ethicism, one of which is the cognitive argument you've just mentioned. This holds in its most general version that if a work conveys knowledge then under certain conditions that is an aesthetic merit in the work. So you're right that there is a sense in which cognitive merit is what is important here. In fact, I say in the book that I'm interested in showing that not just moral knowledge can be aesthetically relevant and important, but other sorts too, for instance knowledge about people's psychology. And facts about people's psychology are often inextricable from moral claims; a perfectly good psychological explanation for why someone did something is for instance that she is kind, and that this was the kind thing to do under the circumstances. I'm a pluralist, as well, so I believe there is a plurality of aesthetic values, and so I'm happy to agree that there are cognitive merits of works that are aesthetic, but which are not moral merits.

However, the fact that it's moral knowledge that's conveyed still plays a role even in the cognitive argument; conveying a fairly trivial piece of knowledge, say something about what a particular type of concrete structure is on the Isle of Lewis, as in Peter May's *The Blackhouse*, won't do much for the merit of a work. But the fact that moral values are important is going to help make the resulting aesthetic merits important too.

cw: As I recall, you yourself declare in *Art, Emotion and Ethics* and elsewhere that the presence of a moral truth in a work isn't sufficient to guarantee an aesthetic merit (people often refer to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in this regard), so might it still seem that the only aesthetically relevant moral claims are ones which are subtle, complex or hard to realise, in other words, ones which impress specifically by virtue of their cognitive merits.

BG: Remember, I'm not claiming that only cognitive moral merits are relevant, so if the thought is that there are things playing a role because they're cognitive, and it's irrelevant whether they're moral or not, that's true, because some of the cognitive merits, many of them, will be non-moral. But that's not to say that the moral aspect plays

no role whatsoever. If I try to convey, for instance, gross moral falsehoods, like “there’s nothing better in the world than torturing someone for fun,” then that’s actually not going to count as conveying insight, because it’s false, and it’s false about the moral domain.

Furthermore, as I said, there are three main arguments in my book for ethicism: besides the cognitive argument, there are the merited response and the moral beauty arguments. Neither of those depends directly on the cognitive claim, and in these arguments morality has weight independently of the fact that art can teach people about it. The moral response argument depends on the fact that our responses are partly subject to ethical criteria; for instance, whether something is pitiable, admirable, or pleasurable depends partly on whether it has features that morally warrant those responses to it. And the moral beauty argument depends on the claim that morally good character traits are beautiful, and that also is independent of the claim that works can teach us about morality.

CW: Could you tell us a bit more about your moral beauty argument?

BG: I’ve actually been quite struck that, while the moral response argument has been discussed endlessly, the moral beauty argument has received very little discussion at all. This is a bit strange, and I think it’s indicative of the tendency of philosophers to stick with the same old questions. It may of course be because people think it’s so obviously wrong that it’s not worth discussing. But the fact that a philosopher has said something that looks obviously wrong normally produces a mass of papers, not silence!

I suspect that part of the resistance to the moral beauty argument is the thought that beauty is a sensory property, so things like character traits can’t be beautiful, since one can’t perceive them. That’s embedded in the etymology of aesthetics; Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten took the Greek term ‘*aesthēsis*’, which means perception and purloined it to name the subject. But the view that beauty is a sensory property just seems to me to be false. I’ve been reading G. H. Hardy’s autobiography, *A Mathematician’s Apology*, a wonderful lament for his

lost creative powers as a mathematician and an ode to the beauty of maths. This is what he says on p. 85:

The mathematician's patterns, like the painter's or the poet's, must be beautiful; the ideas, like the colours or the words, must fit together in a harmonious way. Beauty is the first test: there is no permanent place in the world for ugly mathematics.⁶

It's quite clear from his book that his love of mathematics is largely grounded in his love of beauty, and he compares mathematics to a creative art. Incidentally, his love of beauty also underpins his fanatical devotion to cricket!

Another source of resistance to the possibility of moral beauty is probably evolutionary psychological accounts, which are very fashionable, and these hold that beauty is ultimately grounded on reproductive fitness, so that it's visible features such as symmetry and youthfulness in faces and bodies that we find beautiful. That's a reductive account of beauty, and as Alexander Nehamas points out in his very nice book *Only a Promise of Happiness*, the experiments that underpin these claims all show photographs of subjects with neutral expressions on their faces.⁷ But that rules out something that is central to our responses to personal beauty, as he notes: we find the expressive properties of faces attractive and we find those beautiful in turn because they reveal much of someone's personality. After all, think of the way that Rembrandt can reveal beauty in old people's faces, and that depends on his capacity to reveal character through paint. Given that there's been a recent revival of interest in beauty in aesthetics, the moral beauty argument seems to me to be something worth pursuing and probing.

CW: It occurs to me, in connection with what you were just saying, that a face might look just like a kind face, but if you know for whatever reason that it's entirely insincere in some visually undetectable

⁶Hardy 1940, p. 85.

⁷Nehamas 2007.

way that will drastically change its aesthetic properties, making it unsettling, frightening or what have you.

BG: Yes, I think that nicely supports Nehamas's point about the role of expression. He differs from me in that he thinks there has to be some sort of sensory underpinning to beauty, but it's not *just* a sensory underpinning. Whereas I take the more radical view that one can make sense of *non-sensory* beauty, which is what Hardy is talking about, and also there are plenty of other cases where we talk about say a beautiful plot, where we can't see the novel *per se*.

3 Philosophy and education

cw: Recently you co-wrote a practical book with your wife, Morag Gaut, called *Philosophy for Young Children*, and recently both you and Morag spoke at an all-day event in St Andrews on philosophy in schools.⁸ Can you tell me a little bit about how you got on to this topic?

BG: Our book is for teaching philosophy to children as young as three, although it can be used all the way up through primary school as well. Morag and I initially had very different opinions about this; I was highly sceptical about whether this was possible with children as young as three.

My interest started from listening to the Today programme in February 2007; John Humphrys was *being nice* to Paul Cleghorn in an interview—in fact, charming! Cleghorn was explaining the benefits of the Clackmannanshire programme, which involved teaching philosophy to children throughout the area, over a hundred primary schools, and was now rolling down to teaching children of the ages three and four. I remember thinking that whatever it was they were doing, it wasn't philosophy they were teaching those children. I told Morag about it, and she said that her children could do that (she's a nursery teacher).

⁸Gaut and Gaut 2011.

As you can deduce from the fact that we ended up writing a book together, Morag won the argument. She went off to hold enquiries with her children, and I gradually got drawn in as a philosophy adviser. And eventually I ended up as a convert.

One thing I ought to stress is that when we are teaching children philosophy, in holding philosophical enquiries with them, we're not teaching them what other philosophers have said about philosophical questions, but rather trying to get them to think about those philosophical questions themselves—say, what to think about Theseus's ship—and to provide them with the cognitive tools to help them think about those questions better. For instance, in the book we provide lots of possible counterexamples, principles, distinctions and so on, to various things the children might say, that allow the teacher to introduce them into the session when appropriate, and so to help the children think philosophically.

CW: And how widely applicable would you say your book is across age groups? Could it be used in secondary schools, for example?

BG: Well one probably wouldn't want to ask teenagers to discuss cases involving teddies, since they would probably think it beneath their dignity! But virtually all of the examples could easily be transposed into ones that are something that older children could want to discuss. Several of them are in fact already of that form: we have Theseus's ship, obviously, and there's also an enquiry about whether numbers are real or not, that could go very well with older children. What's *behind* the book is what we call 'the structured method' of teaching philosophy, which essentially consists of creating a flow chart; so, depending on whether children answer 'yes' or 'no' to a certain question, under those headings there are possible reasons listed that children might give, and then to some of those reasons there are objections, or counter-examples or follow-on questions. Whilst a teacher certainly shouldn't go down all those routes, depending on what the children say it gives a framework for exploring the issue, and that framework could be used at any level whatsoever. In fact in some ways it's a bit

like a tutorial plan that I might produce before giving a tutorial at university.

cw: What do you think, then, are some of the benefits for children of engaging in philosophical activity?

BG: I think they're quite striking. Morag's got a nice open source article, 'Can Children Engage in Philosophical Enquiry?', which shows that even over the course of ten enquiries, children were coming up with significantly more unprompted and relevant reasons for their views between the first and last enquiry.⁹

More generally, the Clackmannanshire study, which I mentioned earlier, is startling. The results, analysed by two psychologists, Keith Topping and Steve Trickey, showed that in four test schools there was an average gain of six IQ points over sixteen months of the programme, holding only one one-hour philosophy session a week with ten-to-twelve-year-olds. Even more strikingly, that gain was still in place two years later at secondary school, even though the children had not received any more philosophy sessions. Currently, an even larger research study is about to begin, conducted by SAPERE (Society for the Advancement of Philosophical Enquiry and Reflection in Education) over four years, involving fifty London primary schools, to investigate the benefits of philosophy in primary schools.

Part of what I argued at the conference you mentioned is that these gains are plausibly not only in critical thinking skills (the ability to evaluate arguments and reasons), but also in creative thinking skills. Here's an example: at an early stage in the Theseus's ship enquiry, Jack, who was aged four, came up with the thought that it would be the same ship, since if all his bones were replaced and then his hand, he would still be himself. That's pretty amazing for a four-year-old! He found an apt analogy that shed light on the thought experiment, and that looks like a piece of creative thinking.

Philosophy helps create a stimulating environment for thinking, where children are given challenges about what to say about situations

⁹Gaut 2010.

they may not have thought about before, and they can be helped to make distinctions, sort out bad arguments from good ones, and so on. So if you think of creativity as involving the ability to come up with ideas that are new to a person and valuable, then it's not surprising that exposure to philosophy can help people think more creatively.

cw: I wonder if some aspects of philosophy might be less suited to school than others. For instance, Rosalind Hursthouse describes it as an advantage of virtue ethics that, in contrast with Kantianism and utilitarianism, virtue ethics unashamedly suggests that young people, through their lack of experience, cannot have a proper grasp of ethics; as she says, there aren't moral prodigies in the way that there are mathematical prodigies. In a similar vein Jenefer Robinson says that great works of realist literature are, in a manner of speaking, wasted on younger people who don't have the emotional experience and maturity to properly understand what they're reading.

BG: Obviously as one gets older one's experience increases, and hopefully one gets ethically more sensitive. In our experience very young children tend to be radical absolutists; one enquiry consists of a situation in which Kirsty has an aunt who has given her a hat which is truly horrible, and her aunt asks her whether or not she likes it, where the question is whether Kirsty should lie in order to protect her aunt's feelings. Nursery-aged children are vehement Kantian absolutists, it turns out, on the subject of telling the truth—'no, you must never tell a lie, no matter what'—and it's only older children who start thinking more contextually. So that might be quite a nice example of your case where a certain degree of experience and understanding is required, because children that young are taught 'you must not lie', and don't have the experience to think it might actually be more subtle than that. Some other areas, such as epistemology, can also present problems; very young children, three- or four-year-olds mostly, can't get their heads around the possibility that they might be dreaming *now*, though some can, interestingly—and it's those sort of more radical thought experiments that they most often seem to have problems

with. Of course, none of that is to say that one can't do *anything* at a younger level.

cw: Do you have any thoughts about how the general state of philosophy as it's taught (or not taught) in the UK and beyond could be improved?

BG: I think philosophy at universities is, on the whole, pretty healthy. What I would most like to see is philosophical education rolled down much more centrally into schools; it's very odd that we teach philosophy at university, but not that often below it, though it is getting more common. After all, we teach all sorts of other subjects in schools, such as history, maths, physics, some of which are at least as hard as philosophy. St. Andrews is doing its bit to help rectify this, with our Philosophy Outreach Programme, run by my colleague Lisa Jones, but it would be good, both for the subject and in general, if more universities took an interest in promoting pre-university philosophy. There are some encouraging initiatives, though largely outside universities. Both SAPERE and The Philosophy Foundation are, for instance, doing a very good job in raising the profile of philosophy in schools.

It would certainly help the subject professionally if we had a larger, better informed intake of philosophy students at universities, and it would also help create a bigger market for philosophy graduates interested in teaching at schools. But most importantly, a wider dissemination of philosophy would, I like to think, help raise the standard of public debates about political and cultural matters. That wouldn't be a bad thing!

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE: Berys Gaut is Professor of Philosophy at the University of St. Andrews. He is the new President of the British Society of Aesthetics; an Editorial Consultant to The British Journal of Aesthetics; and a member of the Arts and Humanities Research Council Peer Review College. He has written widely in philosophical aesthetics. His publications include *Art, Emotion and Ethics* (Oxford

University Press, 2007) and *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER: Chris Woerner is a doctoral candidate at the University of St. Andrews.

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