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Creativity – Not Just for Geniuses

Paul Elie reports in his NYT Magazine article of September 7, 2012, “30 Variations and a Microphone:”

Glenn Gould was booked into 30th Street Studio for the two middle weeks of June in 1955. The weather in New York was sunny, the temperature in the 60s. He arrived at the studio by taxi from a hotel near Central Park, wearing an overcoat, a beret, a scarf and gloves, and carrying a leather suitcase and his folding chair. He stripped down to a dress shirt and a sleeveless V-neck sweater. Opening the suitcase, he set out pills, bottled water and towels. Rolling up his sleeves, he ran hot water in a sink, the sort of deep-basin porcelain sink that mops are wrung out in, and soaked his hands and forearms until they were red.

Earlier that year, he paid a visit to the Steinway & Sons showroom on 57th Street: in the basement, several dozen grand pianos stood side by side, and he had played them in succession, finally identifying one he liked.

Now the piano, known as No. 174, was in the studio, with microphones arrayed around it. He set up his chair and settled himself before the keyboard. He took off his shoes, so he could move his feet without making noises that would be picked up on tape.

Arguably, this performance of the “Bach Goldberg Variations” is perhaps only surpassed by Gould’s own 1981 re-taping. An account of Gould’s arrival at the recording studio, according to Bill Morelock, guest moderator of American Public Media’s “Performance Today,” was used by CBS as part of the press release promoting the 1955 recordings. Clearly, CBS was exploiting the quintessential notion of the creative genius to market the recordings. Here we have the possessor

of an extraordinary talent who has cultivated that talent with an energy and diligence beyond measure and ... is eccentric to the extreme.

Without by any means diminishing respect and applause for such geniuses, their achievements should not distract us from the creative potential possessed by every human being regardless of physical and mental limitations. No other species can achieve (at least in degree, but it borders in kind) what the human species even at the basic level of capacities is capable of achieving. Given that humanity has been endowed with lousy instincts, it has to have the capacity and strategies for acquiring symbol systems in order to adequately understand and respond to its environment(s). A very pragmatic consequence is that there is no location on our planet that humanity is incapable of occupying unlike other species that are limited to a narrow environmental niche.

Not only are these symbol systems not acquired simply by “opening our eyes” to grasp phenomena, but they are also not discovered simply by “closing our eyes” and turning to an eternally present set of concepts and symbols somehow *already there*, naturally, in the mind. We don’t (!) possess them *by nature*, and each individual must acquire for her-/himself those symbols/concepts that are necessary for understanding her/his world *and to act in it*. Education is fundamental to our species, then, not just a true accomplishment only of geniuses. It is neither the exclusive preserve of the elite nor does it benefit merely the individual. Education is an obligation that we all have to ourselves and to one another: to make the acquisition of symbol systems possible for all according to their abilities. Education is for the mind what universal health care is for the body. Together, they constitute the basic minimum of social solidarity.

Just as education is fundamental, it is a creative possibility, even creative *reality*, for every individual and not just for the “geniuses.” This is because autonomous freedom (i.e., the ability to do things that nature cannot do on its own) is what distinguishes us as a species (to an extraordinary) degree from all other species. The capacity of autonomous freedom could not be unleashed without the power of symbols/concepts to “see things that aren’t there in the phenomena themselves.”

We are the only species that can hold itself morally responsible because of our capacities of autonomous freedom and acquisition of symbol/concept systems because we can change the world and it matters which symbols/concepts we use to do so. This responsibility comes from autonomous freedom itself, which is far more than self-determination through choice. Other species exercise choice, but the cause of that choice is natural instincts. We, of course, exercise choice, but the cause of our choice is an efficient causality not reducible to natural causality – otherwise, it wouldn’t/couldn’t be autonomous freedom.

Many today are rushing to explain the efficient causality of autonomous freedom to be an illusion (or a “causal gap” as John Searle says that allows us to hold onto first person consciousness over against the rising tide of third person, natural, causal explanation). Here we need concept clarification, however. Neither mere “choice” nor the ability to give “reasons” for something happening is the same as providing a causal explanation of events. The fact that I can say that I ate because I had an appetite and not hunger is a descriptive account of my action, not a causal explanation. However, autonomous freedom functions at an entirely different level. It

is not invoked as a causal explanation for the external realm of experience (e.g., my biological dependence on nutrition). For the external realm, we are dependent upon physical, causal explanations, not freedom. Autonomous freedom has to do with our ability to initiate an event (i.e., with an entirely, internal causality) – it does not on its own provide a complete account of the carrying out of the event, externally. To carry out the event, we have to acquire understanding of the physical universe that includes at least a rudimentary sense of its physical laws. However, our autonomous freedom allows us to achieve things through our grasp of those physical laws that the physical laws alone could not accomplish: That is autonomous freedom! Free will is far more than free choice because it is the condition of possibility for genuine, non-instinctual choice. To the extent that we define freedom as freedom of choice, we debase our freedom to animality.

Stated more technically: Practical reason (i.e., creative, autonomous freedom with its moral laws) requires theoretical reason (i.e., the grasp of the lawful order of nature). Were there no theoretical reason, there could be no practical reason. Were there no effects of autonomous freedom, there would be no question for us whether or not we are determined by nature and can hold ourselves accountable to laws other than physical and civic laws.

The exercising of the capacity of autonomous freedom according to self-legislated moral principles places humanity at the pinnacle of the natural order – to the extent that we exercise our capacity morally. Success with the assumption of our role as the “goal of nature” is far more valuable for us as individuals and as a species than all of the cleverness, empirical knowledge, and technical skills enjoyed by the geniuses.