

Creative conception in ordinary language

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1 Introduction

Peacocke (2023) points out that it is a familiar and well-established part of our ordinary practice to praise artists, musicians, filmmakers, and other sorts of creative actors not merely for the execution, but for the conception of great works. While the skill manifest in someone's painting or playing can certainly contribute to an audience's positive impression, in her view the thing that makes us think of an artist as great is not the production of any material artifact itself, but of the idea that informs that production.

It is an important feature of this practice that the acclaim we offer people for the conception of masterpieces presents conception as though it were something the conceiver is responsible for, as opposed to being something that merely happens to them. If this turned out to be wrong, and there were no robust sense in which responsibility claims could be justified, large and important swathes of our conceptual and social landscape would have to be rethought, if not abandoned altogether. While giving up those swathes might not quite amount to conceding that 'everything we have ever believed about anything is false and it's the end of the world', as the saying goes, that description seems to be in the right neighborhood.

For one thing, the ecosystem of expert committees, lavish banquets, and cash prizes awarded for artistic achievement would be left unmoored if achievement talk ended up being misplaced. The institutions that organize activities like these frame artistic greatness in categorically different terms from those that apply to whatever putative form of esteem are at stake in a beauty pageant or a Guinness record for having the longest femur.

More fundamentally, if there weren't a substantial sense in which the greatness of a work

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of art were an accomplishment of the artist, artworks would not provide suitable grounds for the formation of reactive attitudes towards the artists who produce them. At least on the face of things, however, great art *does* seem to provide such grounds. As Wolf (2016) puts things at one stage on her way to making the case that we ought to treat an artist's work as nothing less than the most exalted manifestation of the very faculties that make us human:

Most of us, when we respond to art, do not just judge it on a scale of aesthetic excellence (insofar as we do this at all). We like some art, some music, some novels more than others; and in many cases the way we feel about the art gives rise to, or perhaps is inseparable from, feelings or attitudes toward the artist. I love Henry James but not James Joyce, Matisse but not Picasso... (pp. 3-4)

All this motivates the question: what does it mean for an artist to be responsible for the conception of a great work? As Wolf points out, merely being causally implicated in the production of something is pretty clearly not enough to count as a creditworthy conceiver. If you learn that a painting you thought was an indisputable work of genius had in fact resulted from someone's accidentally knocking a shelf of paint cans over, that would ordinarily prompt you to withdraw your assessment. (Imagine, if you like, that your encounter with the canvas comes after it was seized and displayed for sale by the artist's landlord, who was motivated not by any recognition of artistic or aesthetic value, but by non-payment of the rent.)

Instead of advancing any particular theory of responsibility for artistic conception, I hope to show here that our everyday linguistic interactions with one another raise a similar set of questions to those raised by capital-A art.¹ In addition to parsing the truth-conditions encoded by the things our interlocutors say, calculating implicatures and so on, we treat one another's linguistic productions as aesthetic objects. We think of the things people say as funny or dull, beautiful or ugly, joyful or sombre, and we marvel (or despair) not simply at the linguistic manifestations themselves, but at the fact that someone had the idea for them in the first place. Furthermore, our evaluations of one another as small-scale creative conceivers – as people who have (possibly) great ideas for things to say – contribute to the formation of reactive attitudes towards one another and thus play a substantial role shaping our social world. We like some people and not others, and want to spend time with some people and not others, and are plausibly justified in this, partially on the basis of these evaluations.

¹Although I won't have much of a positive view to offer about artistic conception, I do hope that things I say about ordinary conversation will be useful for people interested in that topic.

I'll start the paper in earnest in section 2, by claiming that the fact that language gives us many ways of saying 'the same thing' opens up space for the particular choices we make about how to express ourselves to be read as aesthetically significant. I'll explain why I take this to mean that our everyday linguistic engagements present a version of the problem of creative conception, and then I'll turn my attention to showing how that problem can be solved. In section 3, I'll present a model of artistic responsibility due to [Peacocke \(2023\)](#); on that model, artists deserve credit for conception when the process of conception is an intentional action. In section 4, I'll look at two ways of extending Peacocke's model of creative intention to cover ordinary speech. While I think there are cases that can be neatly explained in her terms, there are also cases I think can not be, and in section 5, I'll sketch a more liberal way of answering my version of the responsibility question.

2 Creativity and praise in ordinary speech

In the philosophy of language, as well as in the areas of linguistics that are generally taken to be most closely related, like syntax, semantics, and formal pragmatics, it is typical to think of language essentially as a tool people use to exchange information, and to think of language users as agents motivated primarily by the goal of exchanging information. This conception leaves a certain degree of room open for us to assess linguistic performances as more-or-less skillfully realized – if your aim is to get me to know, believe, or entertain the proposition that *P*, you might fail to do that by choosing words that aren't well suited for that purpose, say – but we don't typically think about these performances as involving much in the way of creativity or aesthetic sensitivity. In other disciplines, of course, things are different. When we look at language from the perspective of a literature department, we see linguistic objects as objects that invite aesthetic evaluation and engagement. In this case, questions about a creator's vision and about how they managed to develop and realize it are foregrounded.²

My sense is that our folk conception of linguistic agents is a conception that hews closer to the literary than the coldly instrumental. We see one another not merely as the custodians of propositions that can be handed off or not, but as storytellers and performers, improvisational poets, comedians, and preachers. We praise and censure people not just for the things they say or don't say – even if it's true that the decision to speak up or not sometimes does matter – but for *how* they say them. In particular, we praise and censure people for successes and failures that on their face look a lot like the ones that are at stake

²I don't mean this formulation to suggest any commitment to some form of the intentional fallacy; the point isn't that an author's intentions are particularly dispositive where any point of interpretation is concerned, but rather that in general terms, we think of authors as agents guided by aesthetic sensitivities.

in the creative arts.

So, for example, it is a familiar feature of ordinary life to think, after someone says something funny, not just ‘Wow, that was really funny!’ but ‘How in the world did they manage to come up with that?’, and the generalized ‘How in the world do they (always) manage to come up with things like that?’. Although the scale might be different – no offhand remark, even a very clever one, is likely rise to the level of world-changing genius – it seems like the basic pattern is the same.³ We don’t praise merely the execution, that is, but rather the conception of the funny (clever, poignant, etc.) things people say.

A comparison with variationist sociolinguistics can help bring out some of the properties of language that make this possible. That field is built on the idea that the fact that there are multiple ways of saying ‘the same thing’ – encoding the same proposition, say – makes language a rich space for the construction of social meaning. For example, the fact that both ‘I ain’t got none’ and ‘I don’t have any’ make the same truth conditional contribution means the choice of one over the other can be read as indexing a set of social properties, from the broadly demographic to the narrowly ideological or stance-related.⁴

This very same set of facts makes language a rich space for maneuvering in aesthetic, as well as social space. The choice of one over another truth conditionally or formally pragmatically equivalent formulation, that is, presents to speakers and interpreters as a choice that involves aesthetic dimensions. Even once we’ve decided that asserting *P* is the only thing to do on an occasion, given our epistemic state, the epistemic state of our interlocutor, our goals in terms of information exchange, and so on, there is still a massive range of ways we might do it. That range is further constrained once we factor our social goals in – a certain register might be required, say, or we might have to avoid a certain cluster of sociolinguistic indices in order to maintain a coherent face in the sense of [Goffman \(1967\)](#). But even taking these additional constraints into consideration, the huge range of ways we might proceed makes the choice of one form of words over all the alternatives a discretionary exercise in a way that many have taken to be characteristic of aesthetic expression.

Although I don’t want to suggest that there is any one particular linguistic mechanism or set of mechanisms that are at stake in the production or assessment of speech as an aesthetic object, and although I think it’s instructive that any particular example, when

³In fact, I may be underselling the form of creative conception that is involved in ordinary speech here. I have on many occasions heard people tell stories about single remarks someone made years ago. Think of anecdotes of the form ‘How Morgenbesser responded when...’.

⁴For a philosophical presentation of the sociolinguistic landscape, see [Camp and Nowak \(2024\)](#). For an overview of the field in the words of one of its founders, see [Eckert \(2012\)](#).

shorn of the context in which it might have amounted to a virtuoso performance, looks as flat and dead on the page as taxidermied butterfly, having some examples in view will help to provide a sense of some of the kinds of things I have in mind.

One illustration involves a phenomenon I have not seen discussed in the philosophical literature on language, which I call ‘intertextual invocation’.⁵ Invocation, as I’m thinking about it, is a device for calling attention to or somehow activating a body of discourse distinct from the present one by means of an isomorphism that a speaker can reasonably count on audiences to be able to identify.⁶ To see what I have in mind, consider some non-invocational ways in which a speaker might direct a listener’s attention to Samuel Beckett’s absurdist play *Waiting for Godot*, in which two men wait utterly pointlessly for someone who never arrives:

Q: What are you doing?

- (1) a. Waiting... wondering if Godot will turn up.
- b. Waiting... like a character from *Godot*, I’m starting to think.

If you’re at a bus stop, say, or outside a professor’s office, and someone asks what you’re doing, replying with one of (1a) or (1b) instead of saying simply that you’re waiting, or even pointlessly waiting, gives a specific flavor of existentialist cast to the activity. People familiar with the play will recognize the distinctive strain of futility associated with waiting for someone who not only will never arrive, but who may not even exist and about whom no one seems to know anything.

Contrast this alternative way of incorporating *Godot* into the conversation:

Q: What are you doing?

- (2) Waiting... nothing to be done.

In (2), the answer to the question reproduces the structure of a prominent line from the play. Upon hearing the sentence, the right kind of listener will see *Godot* being referenced without the speaker having to make that explicit. While I think explicit allusions like the ones made in (1a) and (1b) are philosophically rich, both with regard to the linguistic mechanisms at work and their potential aesthetic significance, (2) seems to me to involve

⁵Devin Morse points out that there are some similarities here with quotation; see in particular [Kirk-Giannini \(2024\)](#) on ‘covert mixed quotation’.

⁶I am glossing over many important details here, not least involving the question of what reasonableness amounts to and whether there’s any feasible way of idealizing over audiences, which Eliot Michaelson and I have raised worries about in [Nowak and Michaelson \(2021\)](#).

a distinctive way of blending the world of the play and the world of the context. Here, the speaker doesn't merely invite the listener to consider the real world in light of the play, but presents the real world as though it *were* the world of the play.

This kind of presentation seems to me to involve the crafting of a miniature improvisational work of art, which leverages both the material circumstances of the context and our shared literary and hermeneutical inventory (we each know *Godot* and know what about it will resonate in the present context). We evaluate that work in the terms we use to evaluate other works of art – without collapsing the realization/conception distinction, we can ask about the pathos of the tone and the timing, about how funny or insightful it is, about how well the different layers at which the comparison works were woven together.⁷

Another illustrative example of invocation was recently described to me by Nat Hansen. Nat and his partner have a tradition of using the locution 'Don't worry, this recipe is extremely fast' to invoke a particular scene from the 1998 Whit Stillman film *Last Days of Disco*, where Chloe Sevigny's character is preparing dinner for guests under great time pressure. Her roommate sees her pouring a can of soup over a pile of frozen shrimp in a pan and looks dumbfounded, to which Sevigny replies 'This recipe is extremely fast'. Sometimes, on Nat's telling, he and Melody use this phrase in a quite direct sense, when cooking something whose primary virtue is speed. But the invocatory possibilities are much broader than that – if Nat ever asks me how my preparation for a talk is going, I will feel almost compelled to reply 'I'm not too worried about it; this recipe is extremely fast'.⁸

I take invocation to be interesting from a purely linguistic perspective in several ways. For one thing, it reveals a sense in which ordinary language operates like poetic language, blurring the distinction between form and content.⁹ Additionally, invocation reveals a degree of specificity in terms of what kinds of things a linguistic form can be used to index that goes well beyond the degree familiar from discussions in sociolinguistics. In addition to indexing broad swathes of a population, or some set of stable characteristics associated with a group, or even some particular ideological take on those characteristics, or

⁷A particular realization can of course be aesthetically striking, and creditworthy. See [Lewis \(2022\)](#), for example, for an exploration of some of the aesthetic properties of human voices and their significance that is relevant here.

⁸Invoking the scene from the film, with the striking imagery of soup on frozen shrimp, raises a number of interpretive questions. Should we take me to be resigned to my fate? Should we read into the comment an utter disregard for the audience? Should we see a parallel between the content of the talk and the thawing shrimp? What could it even mean to suggest there is a recipe behind all of this? And so on.

⁹I understand that Zed Adams has a draft in progress about a related phenomenon in visual art. The practice of sampling in hip-hop and electronic music might provide another potentially useful point of comparative analysis. I'll have (slightly) more to say about this below.

even a particular individual speaker, invocation allows us to implicitly pull specific previous instances of discourse into the present context. Finally, I take invocations to reveal how entire constituents, and not just phonetic, syntactic, or lexical items can serve as indices in the sociolinguistic sense – I think this has interesting potential implications where the question of what exactly we’re acquiring when we acquire a language is concerned.¹⁰

Although I think the phenomenon deserves attention from philosophers interested in the mechanics of language, there isn’t room to pursue that line here. For now, the point I want to make is simply that invocation provides a vivid illustration of how language is used skillfully and creatively in ways that respond to and manifest our aesthetic sensitivities.¹¹ As I indicated above, I take invocation to be particularly rich in these terms in virtue of the way it allows a speaker to set up an interplay between various dimensions of meaning and various perspectival elements. That interplay affords possibilities for deep engagement, for an interpreter to query the scope of each dimension, the particular layers that are meant to resonate with one another or that do in fact resonate, and so on.

Admittedly, part of the power of this device seems to be social. Cohen (1999) points out that one of the effects of telling a joke is typically to create an in-group and an out-group. Those who get the joke experience the frisson of being in the know, which binds them to the teller in at least a transient way, while those who don’t experience the chill of being shut out.¹² Something similar can happen with invocations, but I think there’s more to the story than this.

Intertextual cross-referencing, and indeed, cross-referencing that is realized by way of isomorphism is a basic feature of poetry and of a wide range of forms of visual art, music, filmmaking, and so on. Seeing that we engage in the same practice in everyday speech is a way of seeing that there is more poetry in speech than our standard models countenance. But if there is more poetry in speech than philosophers typically attend to, it is because speakers’ aims are more like poets’ than we typically acknowledge. In addition to trying to get a determinate proposition across, we often speak in ways that respond to aesthetic considerations – we present ourselves as people who saw that in these circumstances, this

¹⁰I’m not myself aware of work on constituent-level indexing, although it might well be that I’ve simply overlooked it.

¹¹To be clear: many other features of language involve possibilities for this sort of interweaving of layers of meaning – metaphor construction, local lexical semantic contraction and expansion, and much more besides. I focus on invocation here because that seems to me to have not attracted the attention it deserves, but I don’t mean the claim to be that invocations are unique in bringing artistry into daily speech.

¹²For a broader range of linguistic contexts in which ‘getting it’ has group-structuring social effects, see Camp (forthcoming) and Nowak and Michaelson (forthcoming). I take work in progress by Alex King on easter eggs and fan service to be relevant in this connection, as well.

piece of language could do double-duty, comically (or poignantly, etc.) bringing this or that work of literature, or well-known figure, or song into the frame.

While there are no prize ceremonies for being among the most creative speakers in a population, no academies with voting rules or writer's retreats to be invited to, it would be a mistake to conclude that our evaluations of one another's greatness as creative conceivers in everyday speech isn't a deeply important part of our social world. For one thing, these judgments are totally pervasive, being judgments we make all the time in our ordinary interactions with each other. For another, they're judgments that are both practically and arguably normatively significant. I don't think I'm unique in being such that the people I want to spend time with and be friends with tend to be the people I think are funny, which is directly related to who I think does a good job conceiving of funny things to say. While it isn't totally obvious what the normative status of those judgments is, it seems plausible that it's permissible for agents to want to structure their social worlds in accordance with their judgments about these matters. Someone who says 'I like witty people' seems nicer than someone who says 'I like tall people', presumably because being witty is something you're responsible for in a way you aren't responsible for your height, and the same goes for all sorts of other aesthetically-laden attributes of speakers.¹³

In any case, I think it's clear that judgments about people qua creative conceivers are very deeply integrated into our picture of ourselves and our social world. At the very least, they *seem* to us to be normatively significant – we take them to provide reasons to associate with one person but not another, to treat one person in one way and another in a different way, and so on. But it seems plausible to think there is more at stake than this. If works of art can provide grounds for reactive attitudes to artists, it seems like our aesthetic maneuverings in ordinary conversation must play at least as substantial a role in grounding the same. Even if I don't like your sense of humor or propriety, seeing that you *have* one and that it guides your speech seems likely to play a significant role in my being able to see you as a fully-fledged agent.

3 Peacocke's refinement model of creative responsibility

While I don't take the material I've presented to provide a comprehensive overview of the phenomenon by any stretch, I hope and expect that readers will have plenty of their own first-hand experiences to adduce in support of the basic idea that ordinary conversation is

¹³It doesn't seem terribly implausible to think that it is not only permissible to do this, but indeed to think that it would be weird or wrong for you *not* to decide who to hang out with, like, and want to be like on the grounds of these judgments. It might be, that is, that assessments of people qua creative conceivers aren't just de facto grounds for association, but that they're good grounds.

a locus of creative possibilities and thus a potential source of acclaim for those able to make the most of them. If what I've said is right, ordinary speech presents us with a challenge that is similar to the challenge presented by capital-A art – how should we justify the credit we give people for having good (clever, etc.) ideas for things to say?

For the rest of the paper, my aim will be to develop an answer to that question. I'll start by considering a proposal about art that I ultimately think is only partially successful when applied to the case of ordinary language, but which puts a number of useful resources on the table. Then I'll use some of those resources to develop my own, more liberal explanation.

The proposal I have in mind comes from [Peacocke \(2023\)](#). Peacocke thinks that at least in many cases, the sense in which artists are responsible for the great ideas they come up with is the sense in which someone who intentionally ϕ -s is responsible for ϕ -ing. On her understanding, that is, the conception of works of art is an intentional (mental) action artists engage in. In addition to its prima facie plausibility, Peacocke points out that treating the creative process as intentional would make sense of familiar questions we ask artists, like: 'Why did you do it that way?' 'What were your reasons?' These are questions that are typically felicitous only where intentional action is concerned.¹⁴

Answering the generalized credit question in this way, however – saying that the process of coming up with ideas for works of art is an intentional action – brings with it a challenge of its own, which Peacocke calls 'the problem of creative intention'. The problem is that it is hard to see what the content of the intention that guides the action in question could be. On the one hand, it's pretty clearly not enough for someone to have the intention 'come up with the idea for a great painting'. If that were all there were, we would presumably have many more great paintings than we have (on the assumption that the technical skills of color-mixing, paint application, etc., are not the place the filter kicks in). On the other hand, it seems equally clear that the intention involved in the conception of a particular work can't be the intention 'come up with the idea for this work, in all of its particularity'. In order to have *that* intention, you'd already have to have formulated the idea. But the formulation of the idea is precisely the process we're trying to explain!¹⁵

Drawing on [Anscombe \(1957\)](#) and [Davidson \(1963\)](#)'s observation that an action can be intentional under some descriptions but not others, Peacocke offers a solution to this problem in the form of something she calls the 'refinement model'. As the name suggests, the refinement model treats creative conception as a process that unfolds in stages. At the be-

¹⁴See [Anscombe \(1957\)](#), [Hornsby \(1980\)](#), [Ford \(2017\)](#), and others.

¹⁵Peacocke points out a parallel with the general problem of whether someone can form the intention to think a thought with a certain content. See [Strawson \(2003\)](#) for related discussion.

ginning, the artist confronts an object whose provenance is unimportant as far as the model is concerned. It could be a draft initiated by absent-minded doodling on a page, or it could be a sketch that springs from a flash of inspiration. It could be an imagined scene or melody, or it could be a sensory experience or perspective on the world that the artist stumbles across or seeks out.

Peacocke presents the heart of the refinement model in the following passage:

There is a way of evaluating an object aesthetically that takes on the standards that an object *sets for itself*. The way an object sets up some such standard is not a simple matter, but it is familiar enough that we speak as though objects do this. Knowing nothing about the artist's own states of mind, we speak metaphorically of an operatic passage "needing" something, of a novel "wanting" to do something, or a painting "demanding" something. These are all metaphorical expressions of an evaluative standard, something which can be met or not, as the case may be. (2023: 14, emphasis original)

The idea that objects set aesthetic standards for themselves opens space for the artist's initial encounter with an object – a 'proto-work', in Peacocke's terms – to be a productive one. While it might in principle be possible for some object to achieve perfection by its own lights on the first go, typically a process of iteration will be required to coax something into the fullest realization of its potential. But this process of iterating – adding some color here, a bit more cowbell there – is a process that could be guided by a non-self-obviating intention, i.e., the intention *to do justice to the standard set by this object here*. If we think of an artist's successive elaborations of a work as being carried out under the aegis of such an intention, we have a way of explaining how creative conception could be something that a person *does*.

One strength of the refinement model is that it fits with descriptions many artists have offered of their own experience of the creative process as searching for a way to give a draft its due. Peacocke presents several examples of a phenomenon that I imagine will be familiar to many philosophers – the idea that there's something this piece wants to be, and the sense that all the time spent on it is time spent in the service of bringing it into a particular form that you grasped constantly, even if only dimly at first.

This comparison brings out another strength of the model, which is that it makes the activity involved in creative conception contiguous with activity involved in intellectual problem solving more generally. Peacocke finds significant similarities, that is, between the way an artist might conceive of their task as the task of figuring out how to meet the standards imposed by a proto-work and the way an engineer might approach the task of

figuring out how to meet the constraints imposed by the desired function, the materials at hand, the economic limitations on their use, and so on.

I take Peacocke's refinement model to be a plausible solution both to the specific problem of finding a non-obviating intention that could guide creative conception, and to the more general problem of how an artist could deserve credit for their ideas, and I take it to be a substantial virtue that both the problem she describes and her solution promise to cover a broad sphere of related activities. Although I don't think her solution can explain all of the cases in which we'd want to give credit to speakers for their contributions to casual conversation, I think extensions of it work in some of them, and I think that looking at where the model comes up short can help us to see how it could be supplemented by a different approach in others.¹⁶

4 Applying the refinement model to conversation

On its face, Peacocke's model might seem like a strange place to start if what we want to explain is how someone could deserve credit for having had the idea to say a certain funny (poignant, duly sombre, etc.) thing when speaking extemporaneously. Since our individual conversational contributions do not seem to be iterated, there doesn't seem to be much room for explaining credit in terms of our intention to improve on a rough draft.

If we broaden the way we think about our explanatory target somewhat, however, we can begin to appreciate ways in which the model might find a degree of purchase. In personal correspondence, both Peacocke herself and Nat Hansen have urged me to think about how we might take not only particular utterances, but entire conversations to be a locus of creative activity and appraisal.

It seems to me that there is a lot to recommend this approach. Think of the feeling you have after a particularly lovely conversation. This can really be a rush, the kind of thing you come home and excitedly tell your partner about – 'omg I just had the most amazing conversation!' – and which makes you want to spend more time with the person involved.

What makes a conversation like this? There are many different virtues that a conversation can involve, and not all of these have much to do with what I'm interested in here. So, you

¹⁶To be clear, I don't take myself here to be offering a competitive alternative to Peacocke's solution to her problem – while I could imagine someone with unifying instincts being tempted to claim that one or the other of our approaches could handle the data in their entirety, it seems to me that the two complement each other by operating at different levels. In a way, then, although I will not explicitly take up questions about art, literature, etc., I hope that the present contribution will be read as bearing on creative conception as it occurs in its more rarefied instances.

can get a buzz from simply having a conversation involving someone you antecedently like, or from getting to talk about a topic that's one of your special interests, or from hearing great news about a loved one. Often, however, and I think crucially in the greatest conversations, factors like these will converge with more squarely aesthetic features of the discourse as a whole. The tension built where it was supposed to, something that happened at the beginning provided a fruitful point of reference that was returned to a few times in different ways the way a musical phrase might, the conversation had just the right balance between light-hearted fun and serious business.

The fact that we can and do evaluate conversations globally in these dimensions means that we are often able to think things like 'Hmm, things are getting a bit heavy here...' after a long stretch of seriousness or 'This business will get out of control...' as increasingly far-fetched bits of levity threaten to pull the conversation into chaos. Such evaluations can drive us to behave in ways that aim at pushing things in a direction that seems better to us. Sensitivity to the interlocutor, the topic, the history of the conversation so far, and so on help us come up with possible interventions that seem like they might lighten the mood, or tamp things down in ways that promise to improve the conversation as a whole.

If someone should judge, after we make such an intervention, that we've nailed it, we could plausibly explain the credit in Peacocke's terms. The task as framed here gives us a Peacocke-style structure, with a way of getting a non-self-obviating intention that we could use to guide our search for a good thing to say. You think: 'This conversation would be better if it were a bit lighter'. (Or, if you're inclined to preserve Peacocke's notion of standard-setting: 'What does this conversation want to be?') Then you form an intention to make the conversation lighter.

That gives you enough guidance to get started, but leaves open how to go. So you start to think. Would a *Simpsons* joke fit here? Look at your audience. Do they seem like they'd be into that? If so, lead with the first one that comes to mind. Then begin to iterate. You might do this silently to yourself, A/B testing some options and choosing the best. Or you might vocalize one, check its effect on the conversational vibe as you see it, and then re-evaluate.

I think this is a plausible take on one way we approach conversations, and on one way in which credit as a creative conversational conceiver can be earned. Regardless of exactly how much everyday conversation this approach might fruitfully explain, however, I think it's clear it can't be the whole story. While fashioning the perfect lighthearted riposte after noticing that a conversation was becoming a bit too heavy and reflecting on the sort of thing that would fix that seems sufficient, an intention with this structure does not seem to be *necessary* for creditworthiness. In fact, my own sense is that the conversations that

play the most substantial role in shaping our public reputations as the sorts of conceivers we are, and thus shaping the way our lives go, are conversations that don't involve much in the way of reasoning or iteration of this sort.¹⁷

In many cases, in fact, it seems like we'd take someone who engaged in the kind of search just sketched to be trying too hard, overthinking something we'd prefer to see come naturally. We often laud people for intuitive responses that seem to us to spring forth authentically and effortlessly, and feel particularly drawn to those whose contributions to a conversation flow smoothly instead of presenting as a series of set-pieces.

This points in the direction of a different way we might try and extend Peacocke's model. One way of earning credit for being funny (or whatever quality you prefer) is to be the sort of person who is able to come up with funny (etc.) material on the fly, pulling in bits of the local extra-linguistic context and the way the conversation has gone so far, and to be able to do this in a wide variety of circumstances. Conversational creators of this sort seem more like jazz musicians, improvisational actors, or high-level athletes than they do like an artist who labors unrelentingly towards the precisification and realization of an idea grasped only dimly at first.

While we often use the word 'vision' to describe the guiding idea an artist struggles to bring to fruition over the course of months or years, there is a different sense of the term that seems more fitting in the case of improvisation. The praise that we offer in the case of improvisational creative activity is praise offered for someone's seeing that a certain move was possible. What makes a hockey or chess player brilliant is their ability to see holes in the defense no one else could.¹⁸ A brilliant jazz artist is able to see how a phrase someone else has just played could set up a particular response few others would have seen, and so on.

Of course, it must be true that to a certain extent your vision in this sense is determined by the gifts you're born with (or aren't). The sorry fact is that nothing I could possibly do would put me in a position to be very good at playing an instrument, much less improvising musically on the fly. At the same time, however, it seems like there is substantial room for us to change the scope of the possibilities we are in a position to appreciate by engaging in different sorts of activities.

This is a point made nicely in the aesthetics literature by [Isenberg \(1946\)](#), who is concerned with issues about creative conception very similar to the ones we have discussed here.

¹⁷For my own money, this seems like a model that we employ most often when speaking with people we really don't know that well, or in conversations with specific aims like passing an interview or coming off well on a first date.

¹⁸Of course, in some domains, being able to exploit the holes matters, too, but more on that later.

While Isenberg endorses the view we began with – that the greatness of an artist is hardly exhausted by their technical skill – he points out a sense in which the acquisition of certain competences shapes the artist’s ability to come up with ideas for work: “The technical studies which taught [the artist] how to make what he conceives taught him to conceive what he makes.” In other words, while mastery with the brush or chisel is not the thing we praise, developing skills with those tools is one way that an artist can put themselves in the position to be able to see what might be done in painting or sculpture.

As I understand things, a line very similar to this one runs through much of the literature on 4E cognition, descending from Gibson (1977, 1979)’s notion of an affordance. In a nutshell, the idea of affordance theory is that we don’t merely perceive objects in the world, but rather possibilities for action. Of course, what possibilities for action are available to us on an occasion depends a lot on which objects are around and how they’re arranged. But the space of possibilities also depends on the set of skills we ourselves bring to the table. Think about what you see on a rock wall before you learn how to rock climb. Nothing! It looks like a blank face. But once you have learned a few moves, you start to see things you didn’t before. You see fissures as forming systems that would allow movement in a certain direction, tiny protuberances as possibilities for a high foot, or a micro-rest.

If we accept that learning new skills changes the set of possibilities for action that we are able to perceive, then we can set up a new version of Peacocke’s model. We can say that in addition to objects setting standards for themselves that might only imperfectly be met, the same goes for *the artist herself* – her vision, and the range of tools available to her to manifest it. An artist might, that is, be a more or less perfect manifestation of what she could be, qua conceiver. If she learned some new skills she might put herself in a position to have better ideas for art than she does now. If she thought this were true, she could form the intention to improve herself by learning, and have that intuition guide her in a non-self-obviating way.

In fact, something like this seems to be a common feature of artists’ and authors’ autobiographical reporting. Poets’ notes often say things like ‘I was determined to read more of the romantics, so that I might open myself to inspiration in ways I was not at the point open to.’ Painters explain trips they took in order to become better painters, by exposing themselves to the movement of the sea at Yalta, say, or the midsummer light on Lofoten. A musician might say ‘I’m pretty good at jazz, but I’d be better if I had a bit more exposure to the classics ... or if I could play the trumpet’.

A Peacocke-style approach to the development of skills, then, seems both to fit the phenomenon as artists describe it, and to explain what needs to be explained. Suppose we hear an incredible piece of improvisational music, and are inclined to credit the musician

for having the idea behind it. We think ‘How in the world could they have managed to see that possibility?’ If the answer to this question involved the sort of intentional activity described just above – i.e, if it were the case that the musician was able to have the idea because they aimed at improving their musical range by exposing themselves to music of a certain sort, or by learning to play a bit of gamelan on the side, it seems pretty clearly like the intention would be credit-justifying.

But what’s true of our hypothetical musician is true of all of us to some extent with regard to the nature of the particular aesthetic vision we are able to bring to bear in ordinary conversation. We can and do change the space of conversational affordances that is available to us by acquiring new tools (words, phrases, literary references, and so on). Often, those acquisitions are the result of activity we engaged in with the explicit aim of improving ourselves in one or another way. The availability of ‘Great Books’-style lecture series on YouTube, introductions to classical music, guides for the person interested in learning to read poetry, and the success of the Criterion Collection all speak to people’s sense that there is a way they might be that is better than the way they currently are. I don’t take it that the intentions present themselves in terms like ‘I would be a better conversationalist if I read the *Economist*’, but in the end, I think the upshot is the same: you learn some things, and when you do, you gain the ability to see jokes (etc.) that you wouldn’t have seen previously.

To summarize, here is a way that a Peacock-style seeking intention could justify credit-giving for creative conversational contribution on the fly:

Q: How did that person manage to see that it would be possible to slip a *Ulysses* reference in there?

A: By realizing that they would be a better version of themselves if they had a wider range of literary references on tap with a corresponding vision for deploying them, and then setting out to acquire those by reading a ton of stuff.

There are plenty of quarrels we might pick with this model of credit-giving. Do selves really project standards in the way works of art do? Even if they do, it doesn’t very often *feel* like my actions have the character of those undertaken by someone trying to coax a sculpture out of a block of marble, sensing that it’s already in there, somehow. Moreover, it seems like it might be particularly hard to evaluate a self until the end of life (cf. [Camp 2024](#)), and that deciding what skills to acquire in the way described here might be perversely over-rationalizing a la [Yao \(2023\)](#) – thinking too much and trying too hard. Instead of pursuing any of these threads here, however, for now I simply want to register the point that, as with the idea that we might treat whole conversations as a locus of aesthetic evaluation,

the real issue is not that this form of explanation couldn't work, but that it can't be the whole story.

5 Self-crafting by attentive accretion – no standards required

I take it that a person would indeed deserve credit for their conversational vision – their ability to see aesthetic opportunities in the warp and weft presented by a particular discourse context – if that vision were something whose particular contours were the result of the person's intentional self-improvement. That much is compatible, however, with it being the case that a person could come to deserve credit *without* any such overarching intention. Once we see that vision is something that can be cultivated – shaped and structured by acquiring skills, the corresponding patterns of attention they bring, and indeed tools for manifesting them (like the words and phrases that make up invocations), then we are in a position to ask how crucial the role played by an intention like 'improve on this version of me' really is.

Although there is unfortunately no space here for me to develop a theory of self-cultivation, I'd like to say a bit about one way in which speakers might come to deserve credit for their ability to see aesthetically valuable opportunities in conversation that doesn't involve any long-term or 'seeking' intentions at all. Essentially, my claim will be that a history of attending to some things as opposed to others will equip you with one sort of vision as opposed to others you might have had, and in a way that you are responsible for. I'll start with a non-aesthetic analogy that I think brings out some relevant features of the terrain.

On February 24, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. Observers of all stripes, from the heads of major Western countries' intelligence agencies, to defense ministers, to academic analysts assumed the war would be over quickly, and many were shocked when a week into the war, the invasion stalled and elite Russian units found themselves bogged down along nearly every major axis. On March 2, 2022, a Twitter user called Trent Telenko published a photo of a top-of-the-line Russian anti-aircraft vehicle stuck in the mud, with several tires that had come off their beads, together with text "explain[ing] the implied poor Russian Army truck maintenance practiced based on this photo of a Pantsir-S1 wheeled gun-missile system's right rear pair of tires and the operational implications during the Ukrainian mud season".

Over a series of posts that ended up earning him a significant following and which were widely reported on in international media, Telenko explained how what he saw in the photograph spoke to a pervasive culture of record falsification, underperformed maintenance,

underperformed exercise, and so on.¹⁹ While the details don't matter here, Telenko saw visual evidence to suggest that tires hadn't been rotated or protected from the sun, that cheap substitutes for real military specification tires had been used, that the tires hadn't been inflated to the right pressures for the conditions, and so on.

To some extent, this is a story about the remarkable power of globally-distributed networks to connect a photo of something very niche to a person who happens to know a lot about that niche, and to some extent a story about someone's in the right place at the right time. But I think the case is interesting and relevant for us here because it also seems to me – and I imagine both to the ordinary people and to the professional reporters that engaged with him – that there is a sense in which Telenko deserved some form of credit for his ability to make the observations that he did. Those observations raise a question like the one we've grappled with here: how was he in a position to see something others weren't? (Indeed, if the public narratives are to be believed, something even trained intelligence professional weren't?)

The answer is simple: the 'Twitter tire guy' was able to see the signs of poor maintenance in the Russian vehicle tires because he had spent a lot of time around tires, and specifically around tires for military vehicles during a 20-year army career. Some of the things he knew about tires may have been things that he learned during explicit training, and potentially during training he sought out intentionally in order to be promoted or to make himself more attractive for a certain assignment. But my understanding of the case is that a lot of it came simply from exposure – from spending many years just looking at tires of all sorts of shapes and sizes and compositions, in all sorts of conditions, being used in all sorts of ways.

All of us have skills like these, to a greater or lesser extent, in one or another area. Some of us can tell birds apart where others would see nothing distinctive. Some of us can taste wine really well, or coffee. Some of us can see the differences between various sorts of locomotives. Sometimes we acquire abilities like these intentionally, because we thought they'd be useful, or fun, or edifying. But very often, we end up able to see what we are able to see simply in virtue of the way we attend to the world. If you spend a lot of time looking at birds, you will end up recognizing them, gaining an ability to quickly categorize them in terms of the shape of their beaks, the shape of their bodies, the pattern of their flight, the way they stand, and so on. Drink a lot of coffee and you'll end up able to discern flavors and textures you previously wouldn't have. And so on.

Although a lot of work would have to be done to properly make the case, I think something

¹⁹The story took a less charming turn when Telenko's prior history of posting racist memes and comments was revealed.

similar is true where our ability to see what kind of thing we might say on a certain occasion is concerned. Simply attending to some things over others shapes the space of possible affordances that is available to you. This is true in an instant – if you’re focused on the window, you might miss the door as an escape option – but it’s also true over long intervals, where our choices about what to attend to accrete.

If you read a lot of manga, you will end up with lines of manga at your disposal, the world will present you with opportunities to deploy them, and you will see those opportunities in the conversations you participate in. The same is true if you read a lot of James Joyce, or Shakespeare, or indeed, if you listen to a lot of classical music, or London dancehall, although I take it that the fact that verbal media (poetry, literature, film, etc.) provide us ready-made linguistic vehicles that we can reuse in invocation makes them particularly powerful as an influence on our impromptu creative abilities. But if this is right, then we have a way of answering the credit-question we closed the previous section with that doesn’t invoke any intention aimed at self-improvement:

Q: How did that person manage to see that it would be possible to slip a *Ulysses* reference in there?

A: By spending years reading *Ulysses*, attending to that text over other things, and by attending to certain features of that text over others.

To the extent that we are responsible for what we attend to, I think we deserve credit for the downstream consequences of our acts of attending. If one of those consequences is that we are in a position to see that a certain conversational contribution could be made, then I think we deserve credit for cultivating that vision.

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