Being Creative
A Different Kind of Science-Engaged Theology

Abstract

Drawing on work in three major areas of psychology's engagement with creativity—1) creativity and affordances, 2) cultivating creativity, and 3) the intimacy of creativity and spirituality—this essay suggests the rich inheritance creativity studies has for theology. Psychological work on creativity can help theologians think better about both the how and the what of theological work: *how* to think and write theology more creatively and *what* creativity studies might reveal about particular theological topics. This conversation about creativity, moreover, can be dialogical, for as much as the psychology of creativity can suggest possibilities for theology, so can theology offer conceptual clarity to creativity studies. Adopting a more hermeneutic and interpretive register than typically characterizes science-engaged theology, this essay also insists on more expansive modes of theological engagement with the sciences. To press the case for an interdisciplinary exchange on creativity is also, it turns out, to press the case for more and diverse forms of interdisciplinary engagement.

Keywords
Creativity, theology, psychology, affordances, science-engaged theology, spirituality, sociocultural model, Glăveanu, arts, possibility studies

As the field of theology and the arts has matured and expanded, so has theological research on art, aesthetics, and the imagination.[1] Less attention has been paid to a related concept: creativity. It is not that the subject has been entirely neglected. Late twentieth-century theologian Gordon Kaufman famously identified God with creativity (Kaufman 2004); in her book on architecture and theology, Elise Edwards recently hailed creativity as one of the five important values of transformative justice (Edwards 2024); and among the most famous living theologians, Rowan Williams weaves the subject throughout his writings on art and language (Williams 2005; Williams 2014; Williams 2015; McGlinchey 2024). And it is scattered through in some important 20th century theology in texts by Nicholas Berdyaev, Jacques Maritain, and Howard Thurman. But in general, creativity has not received the kind of widespread and sustained treatment other arts-related subjects have in theology. Psychology, on the other hand, has devoted significant attention to understanding creativity, even developing a subdiscipline of creativity research in the mid-twentieth century. In this paper, we argue that psychology's work in creativity studies can help theologians develop more robust conversations on the subject.

Psychological work on creativity can, we aim to show, help theologians think better about the how and what of theological work: *how* to think and write theologically, particularly in the current time of crisis, as theologians reckon with the declining institutions and the church's colonialist, racist, and misogynist history, and *what* theologians might say about the doctrines and topics we reflect upon. Drawing on work in three major areas—1) creativity and affordances, 2) cultivating creativity, and 3) the intimacy of creativity and spirituality—this essay suggests the rich inheritance psychology of creativity has for theology. This conversation about creativity, moreover, can be dialogical, for as much as the psychology of creativity can suggest possibilities for theology, so can theology help creativity studies by offering definitional clarity, which will be explored in a final section of the paper. Before initiating this conversation between creativity studies and theology, we lay the groundwork by contextualizing it via the history of creativity studies in psychology. And before telling that history, we begin with a note on method and style.

Humanistic Forms and Styles in Science-Engaged Theology

Following their hugely influential grant from the John Templeton Foundation to launch post-doctoral cohorts of science-engaged theologians, John Perry and Joanna Leidenhag published their Cambridge Element titled *Science-Engaged Theology*. They describe the process of science-engaged theology as "start[ing] with theological questions on which empirical studies may shed some light," which means, they explain that there is a high "level of specificity, both in terms of the theological question asked and the scientific insight drawn upon" (Perry and Leidenhag 2023, 63).The form of thinking and writing best suited to this vision of science-engaged theology is that of puzzles. Puzzles are concrete but vexed questions in theology that science can help resolve. Perry and Leidenhag have a website currently filled with sixty puzzles from science-engaged theologians in which they ask and resolve questions like, "Can Dual-Process Theory Explain the Ambiguity of the Notion of Faith in the New Testament?" And, "How Can Bread and Wine Change into Flesh and Blood?" And Perry's own puzzle, "Can Intersex Person's Be Ordained as Catholic Priests?" ("Theological Puzzles").

Perry and Leidenhag's understanding and method of science-engaged theology has clearly been generative, and yet this essay's engagement with psychology from a theological perspective takes a different approach, one currently underrepresented in the science-engaged theology conversation. It draws on

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psychology's subfield of creativity studies to think with and alongside that work as a theologian, by identifying the way that creativity studies evoke new theological questions, layer texture into theological descriptions, frame possibilities for underused modes of theological work, and connect theological ideas not commonly considered together. In other words, the interdisciplinary payoff this paper offers is more about opening new areas of thought than about adjudicating past disputes.

There are three reasons we take a more open-ended approach to engaging the sciences. First is the status in theology of the topic of creativity, which has not been a major concern for the field in the way, say, the topics of the faith, the Eucharist, ordination, and gender have. The kind of concrete, specific questions that characterize the forms of science-engaged theology Perry and Leidenhag commend seems to require a more mature literature filled with disputed points. Second, this paper has a different sort of purview than one puzzle or set of issues. Because theology's creativity conversation is relatively underdeveloped, we want in this paper to introduce theology to the broad field of creativity research, including several insights the creativity field yields for theology, in the hope of provoking more work at the intersection of theology and creativity. The purpose of this paper, then, is generating future theological work on creativity rather than elaborating an in-depth theological appropriation of a specific set of studies. The third reason is the local nature of interdisciplinary work. An approach to science-engaged theology that understands science as intervening in a theological conversation to resolve a particular question is well-suited to forms of writing and thinking informed by analytic philosophy, but it is less well-suited to some other theological approaches. It is especially ill-suited to theology that is hermeneutic and interpretive, that works in a register more akin to literary scholarship or critical theory. Historically, those theologians who have taken this more interpretive approaches to theology (arguably, most theologians) have looked to more humanistic disciplines for their conversation partners. But what might it mean for this hermeneutic-interpretive theology to engage a more scientific discipline like psychology *without* giving up its own writing forms and registers? This paper attempts such an experiment, its form arguing, implicitly, that such work is not only possible but generative. It is worth expanding our collective imagination to include such theology among other instances of what science-engaged theology looks like—which may also expand our conversation to include theologians who do not see their own theological styles reflected in current forms of science-engaged theology. Expanding a conversation, after all, is how creativity studies began.

Creativity Studies in Psychology: An Overview

In his 1950 presidential address to the American Psychological Association, Joy Paul (J.P.) Guilford urged his colleagues to turn their attention to creativity. "The neglect of this subject by psychologists," he chided, "is appalling" (Guilford 1950, 445). This is the moment psychologists claim as the beginning of creativity studies in psychology, and in considering what this moment entails, how it shaped what creativity is in psychology, and how the picture of creativity has changed in psychology since, we will in this section trace the major lines of thought in this subfield and set up the conversation we pursue for the rest of the paper. For Guilford has something particular in mind when he goads his fellow researchers toward this new subject.

Making his case for creativity, Guilford points to how those he calls creative "personalities"—scientists, researchers, inventors—drive industry forward. Forms of the term *productive* show up a dozen times in his speech, and in recent years, scholars have pointed to how the Cold War context shaped Guilford's interest in and conceptualization of creativity (Van Eekelen 2017; Zbainos and Lubart 2020; Bycroft 2012; Taylor 2023). Amidst the race to become the dominant global power, the creativity Guilford wanted to study was product-based, individualistic, elite, and emphatically novel. His conceptualization of the subject shaped the first wave of creativity research. As psychologists responded to Guilford's call to take up creativity as a major subject of study, they operated with what psychologist Vlad Glăveanu calls the "He"

paradigm of creativity present in centuries of philosophical and literary writing about creativity and implicit in Guilford's own work: the genius individual who stands over and against the uncreative masses (Glăveanu 2021).

As more psychologists entered the conversation, including those representing different subfields like cognitive psychology, educational psychology, and organizational psychology, the discourse on creativity democratized. In the next wave of creativity research—characterized by what Glăveanu calls the "I" paradigm—everyone was thought to have creative potential. Creativity was something to be cultivated, educated, aspired to. This understanding of creativity was less elitist but still individualistic, dominated by cognitive and personality psychology as researchers sought to understand what makes an individual creative and how a person might grow in creativity. During this time, a standard definition of creativity emerged, coalescing not just around novelty but usefulness as well—a definition usually attributed to Runco and Jaeger (Runco and Jaeger 2012). "Usefulness" indicates that a novelty must be meaningful in some way if it is to be considered creative. Otherwise, novelty could be mere randomness or nonsense, something that can be produced, as one researcher put it "by monkeys on word processors" (Brandt 2021, 81). While some scholars modify "usefulness" to "appropriateness" in an effort to shed utilitarian connotations around creativity, Runco and Jaeger's standard definition continues to hold the scholarly consensus of the field today. (Other definitions do exist, even if they are not as prevalent. In particular, a group of researchers has recently articulated a "process" definition of creativity (Green, Beaty, Kenett, and Kaufman 2024).)

Even as the "I" paradigm still structures much psychological research on creativity, another paradigm has been emerging. Responsive to Lev Vygotsky's influence on psychology and championed in creativity studies by Vlad Glăveanu, the "We" paradigm understands creativity as a sociocultural phenomenon (Glăveanu 2015). Creativity, in this view, is not primarily an individualistic, mental act that can be reduced to cognitive concepts like divergent thinking (outside-the-box idea generation) or neatly mapped onto psychological profiles of openness (a personality trait of receptivity to new ideas and experiences). Creativity arises in a particular environment, through relationships with materiality, cultural symbols, social forms, and other people. The story we told about the beginning of creativity studies in psychology exemplifies this, as creativity was given meaning and direction through the American hopes and anxieties of Cold War competition with the Soviet Union. Political, economic, and cultural forces and agents intersected and combined to generate a context in which the concept of creativity took shape as it did. As this narration suggests, for the sociocultural model, creative action is distributed; creative products co-created; and relationships are the primary unit of analysis (Glăveanu 2014; Glăveanu 2021). In this "We" paradigm, society and culture give the conditions for the possibility of creativity, and any creative act, even when performed alone, is also a collaboration. It is sociocultural even when also individual.

Today researchers diverge over exactly how committed they are to the sociocultural view, but as a whole, this perspective has seeped into creativity research (Sternberg, Glăveanu & Kaufman 2024). Even researchers like Sternberg who were reluctant to claim that creativity is sociocultural all the way down have found themselves in a conversation that acknowledges the sociocultural context as at least relevant to creativity. No longer are divergent thinking tests seen as the sole proxy for creativity tests, and the conversation has moved from the Four P's (persons, products, process, press), which track a somewhat linear process of creating a product, to the Five A's (actors, audiences, actions, artifacts, and affordances), which unpack creativity as a dynamic and contextual unfolding of distributed action (Glăveanu 2013). Some researchers have even realized that what creativity looks like and where it is found will differ between cultures. A study on cultures historically steeped in Confucianism, for example, outlined a model of creativity they found emerging from core Confucian concepts like harmony, functionality, righteousness, smoothness, timing, and beauty and saw that creativity is encouraged in some domains, like the moral and political domains, more than in other domains, such as technological progress (Pang and Plucker 2024, 109,

116). Taking seriously the sociocultural model of creativity means taking seriously the different embodiments and inflection points of creativity in different settings.

The sociocultural framework has altered the way creativity is studied, the questions that are asked, and the relevant field of inquiry—but it has not entirely changed how research is conducted. Even with a sociocultural theory of creativity, it is still meaningful to ask, for example, how individuals become creative. Sociocultural theorists of creativity just recognize that producing creative ideas or creative products is never an act of the individual alone, and the very ways we judge something to be creative (novel, appropriate) are socioculturally influenced.

The sociocultural approach to creativity is growing in interesting ways, giving birth to activities and collaborations no longer wholly contained by the field of psychology. Palgrave Macmillan hosts book series called Palgrave Studies in Creativity and Culture, with over 30 titles by psychologists, sociologists, and artists since 2015, including titles like *Hong Kong as Creative Practice* (Tay 2022) and *The Creative Gesture: Contexts, Processes, and Actors of Creativity* (Bellini 2024). This work in creativity and culture led Vlad Glăveanu to write "Possibility Studies—A Manifesto" in which he declared possibility studies "a new and emergent multi-and trans-disciplinary field" that "invites us to consider how people, cultures and nature are transformed by becoming aware of, engaged with and active within an expanded field of psychological, social, economic, political, material, technological and artistic possibilities" (Glăveanu 2023, 3). Like the sociocultural model of creative action, "the possible" is distributed. And rather than drawing from "individual-centric, mind-based approaches to the possible," Possibility Studies scholars locate possibility in "the relational space of action and interaction between person and world." That means that achievements are understood with reference to embodiment, materiality, relations, and that possibility is enacted "within the evolving interdependence between person and context" (Glăveanu 2023, 4). Following this article, Possibility Studies took shape via the Possibility Studies Network, which hosted seminars, a lecture series, and major conferences in Dublin (2023) and Cambridge (2024). The network comprises scholars from the fields of psychology, sociology, policy, education, design, literature, and ethics. It has not, so far, engaged theology. But what might happen if theologians entered this conversation?

What Psychological Research into Creativity Has to Offer Theology

In its seven-plus decades of researching creativity, psychology has gained insight that could prove generative to theology, particularly in work emerging from the sociocultural perspective. Theology could benefit from psychology's understanding of creativity at two different levels. First, psychology's creativity research can help theologians in their own practice of theology, as theology as a field seeks to find ways of reckoning with the horrors of its complicity in colonialism, slavery, and patriarchy while moving into a more just and hopeful future. Second, such research can help theologians find new ways of articulating the substance of their various concerns and doctrines, like eschatology, mysticism, pneumatology, and creation. In what follows, we trace three broad areas in which creativity has gifts for theology: affordances, the cultivation of creativity, and the intersection of creativity and spirituality. For each of these, we will note salient insights from psychology and then suggest how those insights might open up possibilities both in the practice of doing theology and in the substance of theological concerns.

Affordances

A concept that has become in the last decade-plus an important part of creativity studies, "affordances" was coined in the 1970s by James J. Gibson (1904-1979), an ecological psychologist working, not on creativity, but on perception (Gibson 1979). Evading the behaviorist's and cognitivist's binaries of

animal/environment, subjective/objective, mind/body, and perception/action, Gibson described perception as embodied and situated, as reflecting a mutuality of the animal and its environment (Lobo, Heras-Escribano, and Travieso 2018). The ecological approach to perception describes the animal as directly perceiving the external stimuli in its environment as possibilities for action—possibilities Gibson terms affordances. Eschewing the dichotomies of previous approaches, the concept of affordances centers the relationship of organism and environment as the primary unit of analysis. Affordances, in other words, do not inhere in the environment, nor are they projections of the animal. They arise in the relationship between them, which will be different for different organisms. Water affords bathing and drinking for humans; movement and respiration for fish; and a surface for walking for water striders. What water affords is relative to the size, needs, desires, and capacities of the organism.

Since Gibson's time, "affordances" has proven a fecund concept, finding its way into many discourses outside ecological psychology. It has even achieved a kind of mainstream popularity, due in no small part to the work of Donald Norman, who adapted the concept in his 1988 book *The Design of Everyday Things* to speak to industrial design. For Norman, "affordances" offers a way of considering what actions the structures, objects, and signifiers of designed objects enable and suggest to a user. In the wake of Norman's interpretation, many other fields have found their way to "affordances," including ones as diverse as computer programming and literature. Recently, it has even received attention from theologians, including Andrew Davison, Hanna Reichel, Ted Smith, and others, including one of the present co-authors, who have found "affordances" a helpful way to frame theological conversations about method, education, and possibility. The concept of affordances shows up in discussions about how to move forward in apocalyptic times (Smith 2023) and amidst ambivalence (Carnes 2024) in a way that cuts through methodological debates (Reichel 2023).

In the last decade or so in creativity studies, the term affordances has been recouped into psychological discourse as a way of further elaborating a sociocultural approach to creativity. In one way, the concept of affordances allows the field to make explicit something creativity researchers already thought about. An implicit consideration of affordances is as old as the field of creativity studies itself, predating even Gibson's writing about them. In 1967, Guilford himself devised one of the original tests of creativity, the Alternate Uses Test, which assesses divergent thinking by asking participants to think of possible uses of a simple object beyond its typical use—what we might call the object's unusual affordances. A brick, for example, is typically used to build a wall, but it might also be used as a door stop, a paper weight, or a step.

While the Alternative Uses Test implies a concept like affordances to assess a version of creativity indexed to the older, cognitive model of creativity, the one that assumes creativity is virtually synonymous with divergent thinking, the idea of affordances has recently been elaborated and typologized under a sociocultural model of creativity. Like so much work in creativity studies operating from a sociocultural framework, the insights from affordance theory are elaborated and extended by Vlad Glăveanu. Articulating Vygotsky's claim that artifacts, whether material like chairs or immaterial like language, mediate relations to the world and others (Glăveanu 2012, Vygotsky 1978), Glăveanu draws on the way the concept of affordances captures the mutual dependence of individuals and environment and then highlights the way that relationship is socioculturally constructed and mediated by objects and artifacts that are themselves products of and interpreted through sociocultural contexts (Glăveanu 2012, 195). Because affordances name relationships, they are dynamic; they shift as the environment and individual shift. New objects and artifacts with new affordances arise; new affordances of familiar objects emerge, and older affordances of familiar objects can atrophy or fade (Glăveanu 2012 quoting Heft 2003, 175-6).

The incredible dynamism and plurality of affordances becomes evident through returning to the example of water, where we can see how one affordance can beget another. Building off water's affordance of bathing, humans have also perceived and constructed new affordances for water in many religious and

cultural traditions that feature ablutions and other purification rituals, like baptism or footwashing in Christian traditions, tevilah or handwashing in some Jewish traditions, and wudu or ghusl in Islam. And many other water rituals have over time been lost as the cultures and tradition that sustained them has been lost, modified, or erased. Or, to take a meta view of this discussion, the concept of affordances has itself afforded new possibilities for framing, illuminating, and provoking conversations forwarded in a variety of fields, as Gibson's "affordances" afforded Norman the opportunity to see something about design, and Norman's slightly reformulated version of "affordances" then provided computer programmers with a term that brought into view the kind of work they hoped to do—and so on.

Bringing the dynamic and socioculturally inflected version of affordances into creativity studies, Glăveanu describes three types of affordances unavailable to the individual—those unperceived, uninvented, or unexploited—and then describes creativity as "the process of perceiving, exploiting, and 'generating' novel affordances during socially and materially situated activities" (Glăveanu 2012, 199). These affordances may be unavailable with respect to a particular individual (as a child learning affordances through trial and error) or to an entire group, which renders possible, Glăveanu believes, a way of speaking about different degrees of creativity (Glăveanu 2012, 199). He traces the various ways affordances may become available as he marks the innovations in the folk art of decorating Easter eggs during a period of increased religious freedom in Romania. What is at one pointed unperceived, uninvented, or unexploited, becomes at another point part of the regular practice itself as makers "actively and directly engage with their symbolic and physical environment," both in terms of its possibilities and constraints (Glăveanu 2012, 203). Therefore, "affordances" offer a way of thinking about creativity that supplements rather than replacing previous cognitive models by "adopt[ing] a fundamentally dynamic, relational, and action-oriented approach to the phenomenon" (Glăveanu 2012, 205). Riffing off Gibson's claim about human's capacity to alter affordances while remaining creatures of their situation, Glăveanu ends his article, "Within limits, the human animal constantly and creatively alters the affordances of the environment to an extent that makes him or her, at once, become a creature *and a creator* of any given situation" (Glăveanu 2012, 206, emphasis ours).

Theology has already begun to benefit from this concept that comes from the world of psychology, and Glăveanu's sociocultural formulation of affordances as well as his use of the concept for thinking about creativity offers theologians still more possibilities for action in their own field. First, it helps theologians to think better—more generatively and concretely—about the work they do and should do in theology. This is the first level of work we wrote about earlier. If theologians might be able to think about their own work as building, developing, cultivating (and perhaps intentionally losing) affordances of texts, artifacts, doctrines, and conversations, then how can Glăveanu's typology help us consider what that work means in a tradition soaked in patriarchal and colonial projects and impulses? What does it mean newly to perceive, invent, or use a possibility for action more generative of a just and hopeful future?

One of the present co-author's work in feminist theology has exposed her to the incredibly creative ways feminist theologians have moved the field forward through perceiving, inventing, and using affordances. She explored one example of perceiving a new affordance in her own writing, which is found in Elizabeth Johnson's classic feminist text *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (1992), when she draws on the logic fourth-century theologian Gregory of Nazianzus's refutation of a heresy to argue for why women should not be excluded from the priesthood. When Gregory of Nazianzus argued that what Christ did not assume, Christ did not heal, he was making a case for why Christ had a human soul. Johnson turns the argument to a different issue, arguing that if Christ saved women no less than men, Christ assumed womanhood no less than manhood. Women can be priests for they can stand *in persona Christi* in the priesthood since the relevant description of what Christ assumed is not "manhood" but "humanity" (Carnes 2024, 82). Or we could find an example of inventing an affordance in Mary Daly's

work, like *Gyn/Ecology: The Meta-Ethics of Radical Feminism* (1978) or *Websters' First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language* (1994), where she invented new words (like "gynergy" for female energy) and etymologies (like a woman who likes to spin and participate in the whirling movement of creation for "spinster") as new affordances that might generate a de-patrified imagination of the world. Or again, the way feminist theologians have used an unused or under-used affordance by adopting genres and styles foreign to contemporary theological discourse, like when Margaret Miles wrote her memoir *Augustine and the Fundamentalist's Daughter* (2011), which reframed Augustine's story by centering a woman's experience.

The creative work of attempting to transform an unjust field and unjust world is also found in theologians reckoning with the ongoing legacies of colonialism, slavery, and white supremacy. Shawn Copeland draws on the work of Delores Williams to call attention to the "aural traditions" of the sung spirituals in the slave quarters. Members of the enslaved community heard the texts preached at white churches and selected and shaped a life-affirming canon reimagined in songs that vividly present Christ in solidarity with the enslaved person and unequivocally against slavery (Copeland 2018). W.E.B. Du Bois reimagines Scriptural passages of Christ Scriptural encounters in the context of a stranger who comes in judgment of white supremacy and in merciful solidarity with the oppressed, including a man who was lynched, in his short story "Jesus Christ in Texas" (Du Bois 1921). James Cone finds Christ crucified reclaimed in the Black literature (Cone 2011). All of them in various ways embody the exhortation of Howard Thurman that theologians should creatively interpret Jesus as speaking to those with "their backs against the wall" in our own various times (Thurman 1949). Thurman wants us to ask: What does Jesus afford? As theologians continue to reckon with the theology's complicity in injustice and exploitation, they can consider how theologians might creatively move forward through inventing new affordances in their field, perceiving affordances previously unnoticed, or using affordances that have not been used in theology. And this way of doing something new is also a way of reckoning with what is there, with finding even continuities as sites for newness. Affordances can in this way frame how theology can move forward in continuity with its identity while taking its wounds of misogyny, racism, and ableism seriously.

Affordances can do much work at the second level of theological substance as well, helping theologians reflect on the broad scope of history of theology, which stretches back, of course, long before the particular reckonings of this present moment. It can give us a vocabulary for thinking about allegorical reading, for example. In allegorical reading, Scripture, other sacred texts, and the natural world are "read otherwise" (*allo*) to have new, previously hidden or unperceived meanings. The story of Noah's ark, for example, in which God sends a flood upon the world in judgment for its wickedness, saving only Noah, his family, and two of every creature, becomes a story about baptism in early Christian readings. Something here is both perceived and invented in this Genesis text, which then becomes a way to think about God's saving judgment, not as a line that divides person from person, the righteous from the unrighteous, but (also or instead) as a line that runs through the heart of each person, drowning her unrighteousness, birthing her new righteousness. And allegorization pertains not just to Scripture. For much of the Christian tradition, animals, birds, and other creatures could be allegorized as well (De Lubac 1959). In the rich tradition of medieval bestiaries, the serpent is Christ; the serpent is Satan; the serpent is a human in need of the church. The serpent can afford seeing many different things about the Christian story of redemption. And the language of affordances helps theologians to describe this way of seeing the world as itself and more than itself; and of reading texts as their story and more than their story. Scripture and nature can give rise to multiple affordances because materiality speaks at multiple levels and Christ can be present in multiple modes. Not every affordance is a positive one—colonialists saw in the texts and traditions of Christianity affordances for the justification of domination and extractivism—and in even these cases, naming the negative affordances in Christianity can be a way of coming to terms with a sinister past without necessarily replicating that past.

Parts of what's generative for Christian theologians is the way "affordance" can hold together polarities that generate conundrums for theologians. (How can something be both idol and gift? Is this task my responsibility or God's action? Is doing this new thing an evasion of the past or a reckoning with it?) Affordance names both givennesss and possibility, the objective and the subjective, the past and the future To see the world, texts, and artifacts through the concept of affordances, then, is in Christian theological terms to hold together gift—creation as a set of givens—and, even in its very givennesss, a site of human vocation and possibility. And affordances can help articulate why the givenness and agency of creation is more than human. For the sociocultural view of creativity, "affordances" makes visible relationality, pointing to the way creative human action is always operative with and within the actions, constraints, provocations, and amplifications of other individuals, social resources, cultural norms, material objects, historical knowledge, etc. In the case of Christian theology, this leaves much room to discuss the work of the Spirit in making all things new together with the vocation of humans in this act of re-creation. Human creativity is sustained within a world of creativity that extends beyond the human to include the divine as well as the objects, texts, and artifacts—and even animals, plants, and other creatures—that comprise the world in which humans live. Even the most solitary acts of writing frequently involve the object of a computer, a text offering both possibility and resistance to the writer's mind, and even paper manufactured from trees. Human creative action is never human alone. What might this mean for thinking about the doctrines of creation and the kinships it implies, or eschatology and the kinships that continue?

Cultivating Creativity

The sociocultural model of creativity does not erase individual agency but reframes it in ways that shift what it means to cultivate creativity. In the section on affordances, we explored how creative action is distributed, operating with multiple agents and within the constraints and gifts of the material and immaterial conditions of a particular sociocultural context. This is not an individualistic account of creativity, nor is it a mentalist one. Yet it is an account within which we can still meaningfully speak of individuals exercising creativity, performing creatively, and growing in creativity. And the way psychologists have spoken about cultivating creativity—particularly insights from the triangular theory of creativity and the centrality of perspective-taking—might yield further approaches for theologians.

To describe the cultivation of creativity in a way adaptable to different sociocultural frameworks, psychologists need a broad frame. In the field of creativity studies, Robert J. Sternberg's triangular theory of creativity has provided such a frame. Describing creativity as "an attitude toward life and one's work" (Sternberg 2018, 59), Sternberg proposed the triangular theory as a way of describing how creative individuals express creativity by 1) defying the crowd (including the values and beliefs of one's peers and colleagues), 2) defying the Zeitgeist (the unconsciously-held beliefs around which our world is built), and 3) defying the self (particularly one's own entrenchments and self-understandings) (Sternberg 2018, 54, Table 3). At first blush, the triangular theory seems inhospitable to the sociocultural model we are elaborating. Sternberg himself admits beholdenness to a Western "folk conception" of creativity that privileges defiance and opposition (Sternberg 2018, 50). And yet we think this inhospitableness is largely rhetorical. There are other, better ways of framing the tensions and changes Sternberg calls "defiance" that better accommodate sociocultural differences while retaining Sternberg's fundamental insight.

In his work on affordances, Glăveanu shows how creatively challenging one particular cultural norm never means overthrowing a particular culture's norms *tout court* (Glăveanu 2012). It is the use of one or more norms to modify, challenge, or de-center another. Glăveanu draws on the example of Romanian folk art of egg-painting—a tradition that, like all traditions of egg-painting, draws on the affordances of an egg both in its formal shape, color (particularly the white eggs that take color so well), and texture (the ability of the surface to retain dye) as well as the biological life of the egg (its role as a site of birth) as well as

the affordances born from traditions of egg-painting. Accidental changes in egg-painting practice from, for example, differences in temperature or the slip of a pen from a tired decorator, afford decorators the discovery of new combinations, themes, and motifs. Some changes are more intentional—for example, expanding the range of "pens" used to write on the eggs, leading to the possibility of new designs. But the changes happen not in defiance of tradition but in continuation of it. With the example of egg-painting, then, Glăveanu shows how creativity can, while introducing novelty, change, and "defiance" of certain practices, also introduce new forms of continuity over time. "Traditions change," as Glăveanu writes, "in order to continue," and "all…forms of creative expression are ultimately rooted in tradition" (Glăveanu 2016a, 33). There is an internal plurality of the Zeitgeist, the self, and even the crowd (how else would a new idea gain traction?) that means pushing against or even rejecting one aspect of any of them does not necessarily mean "defying" it as such. So while "defiance" is a word loaded toward a particular Western folk understanding of creativity, the idea in the Triangular Theory that something is challenged, altered, or innovated in at least one of these three areas is helpful in understanding how creativity works.

At one level, the very practice of theology exemplifies the newness and continuity Glăveanu sees in the Romanian egg-painting tradition. Though different theologians with different commitments will negotiate this tension differently, theologians are always saying new things in an effort to join a millennia-old conversation and move it forward in some way. Something is altered; something is conserved. And theologians can benefit from thinking about their practice of theologizing more in the terms of this Triangular Theory and the trajectories it opens. What does "defiance" require, for example? For Sternberg, creativity is fundamentally an attitude, and his insight supported by the effectiveness of telling scholars in studies to "be creative" in showing creativity and innovation (Wei, Shen, Long, and Lu 2024). When an individual embraces the mandate to be creative or an understanding of herself as creative, she "defies" some aspect of the triangle and acts in more creative ways—an insight that has become a truism in creativity studies (Sternberg 2018). Given that insight, what would it mean for theologians to embrace understandings of themselves as creative *because* they are theologians? What if creativity were part of their vocational understanding? Might this open up ways for theologians to reckon with the traumas and difficulties of their field creatively rather than managing or avoiding them? What if that self-understanding of theological work as creative work was also elaborated through affordances? Could theologians think about themselves and their creativity in ways that attune them to perceiving, inventing, or using affordances? If a theologian understands creativity as internal to her vocation, might she be more willing to risk creative ideas her peers may disapprove of? Might seeing risky creative work as part of the task of theology help her claim continuity with her field, even when many in her field might see her particular proposals as problematically discontinuous? Might embracing theology as a creative field be a way of managing the difficulty of "defying" the crowd? How might this research on creativity recast Jesus, the central figure Christian theologians seek to both understand and imitate, as creative?

Cultivating a self-understanding of one's theological identity as creative is one way of creating a new perspective on oneself and one's work. Glăveanu's broader work on perspective-taking has shown the importance of taking multiple perspectives to cultivating creativity. Glăveanu writes that "micro-moments" of building and changing perspective are "at the core of what makes us creative beings" (Glăveanu 2016b, 105). Engaging in the exercise of taking other perspectives "facilitates the emergence of novelty in both thinking and action since we are able to *de-centre* from one way of doing things and embrace *multiplicity*" (Glăveanu 2016b, 105). These perspectives lead to gaining a new understanding of a situation such that novel affordances can be perceived and used as these new perspectives are then related to one another and the experience is integrated (Glăveanu 2016b, 107). Sternberg recommends something like this when he commends scholars to interdisciplinary work as a way of de-entrenching and incorporating the insights of another discipline (Sternberg 56, 2018). For Glăveanu, adopting, relating, and simultaneously considering

multiple perspectives is an important way to perceive a new affordance, and he sees this perspective-taking as so significant that he elaborates it further as he develops the interdisciplinary field of Possibility Studies (Glăveanu 2021, 106; Glăveanu 2015). Relating perspective-taking to both creativity and possibility, Glăveanu writes of the importance of the symbolic: "The capacity to use symbols opens up the possibility of detachment from the here-and-now of perception and makes human action flexible. If the child or adult would be necessarily bound to her position in and perception of the world then all her action would be more or less mechanically determined by external stimulations. Humans, however, break this direct circuit between stimulus and response with the help of symbolic constructions such as memories of the past, imaginations of the possible, and anticipations of the future" (Glăveanu 2021, 168). Symbols—the currency of religion—are for Glăveanu sites of possibility. What could this mean for theology?

One way theologians might cultivate creativity through perspective-taking is through the interdisciplinary work Sternberg commends. Another intentional practice of perspective-taking is an internalized dialogism that might provide theologians with better approaches for negotiating ecumenical conversations as well as discussion of any number of vexed issues, particularly as a mode of repair with respect to communities who have been excluded from theological work. And these forms of perspective-taking give a kind of intentionality to that work: Given the way that theological work—like all creative work—is sociocultural both in the way it arises from a sociocultural context and also contributes to making that context, how might theologians understand the urgency of their work in terms of how it shapes the world they want to understand?

Psychological insights into cultivating creativity, particularly perspective-taking, might also give theologians tools for thinking about an inclusive final hope, the relation of mysticism and action, and attention to the marginalized. We might ask how taking and integrating multiple perspectives from and about humanity, creation, and the church might provide a diversity of viewpoints that can be connected in ways that move toward a creative hope for our final end, what Scripture and theologians sometimes call the new heavens and new earth. How does perspective-taking on creation, in other words, help open us up to new creation? Or we might ask how perspective-taking might provide a vocabulary for the relation between certain types of mysticism and new political-social actions? How do the multiple roles occupied by someone like Margery Kempe, for example, as she casts herself as Mary, as Mary Magdalene, and as Christ, help her perceive new affordances such that she can live in ways married women of her time were not allowed to live—traveling freely without a man, wearing a white dress, garnering public attention through loud cries, and so on (Staley 2001)? How might the perspective-taking of Hildegard of Bingen in her *Scivias*, in which she sometimes speaks in the voice of a divine figure or messenger, have helped open her up to new pictures of God and how God is acting in her world, in ways that not only enriched her theology but also authorized her to challenge episcopal orders about moving her convent (Hildegard of Bingen 1990)? How does perspective-taking illumine the famous "Ain't I a Woman?" speech of Sojourner Truth, in which she leverages the colonialist perspective on her Black flesh against the patriarchal perspective on her female flesh to generate a different way of coming to terms with her presence in the world, one congenial to women's suffrage and abolition?

In addition to tracing threads through mystical modes of knowing and acting, perspective-taking and its relationship to creativity might help theologians reframe different doctrines as well. How might it reframe eschatology or ecclesiology by reimagining the diversity and connectedness of ecclesial life and hope? If imagining oneself as creative or desiring creativity opens up the possibility of becoming creative, then what new frames and insights emerge for creation, anthropology, or doctrine of God? How might the desire that begets the creativity echo and signify a desire for God that receives the presence of God (the desire for the Creator that receives the presence of the one who always creates, who makes all things new)? As that work of "making new" is often associated with the Holy Spirit, what potential theological lines might

be pursued regarding the intimacy of the Spirit's work and creativity? This last question takes us into the next section.

Spirituality and Creativity

In light of the increasing prominence of sociocultural models of creativity, it makes sense that creativity scholars have been interested in religion, a particularly vital sociocultural force (or cluster of forces). In addition to research on "religion" or a particular religion, researchers have studied the relationship of religion and creativity through two distinct concepts, religiosity and spirituality. The two appear to have divergent relations to creativity. While religiosity correlates broadly negatively with creativity, spirituality seems to have a positive relationship with creativity (Acar, Runco, and Ogurlu 2018). The measures themselves give some clue as to why this may be so. Measures of religiosity generally track conformity to religious doctrine or adherence to institutionally-oriented worship life (Pearce, Hayward, & Pearlman 2017), while measures of creativity often prioritize change and novelty, so perhaps the negative correlation should not be surprising. On the issue of religion and creativity, one study summarizes researcher findings: "Some researchers posit that religion hinders creativity, because rules and traditions are over stressed by religion while creativity requires people to challenge traditions and rules to seek a breakthrough…In fact, empirical studies tend to support a negative association between religion and creativity" (Liu, Guo, Sun Wang, and Wu 2018, 2). Similarly, another study found a negative relationship between creativity and religiosity "in terms of people's attitudes and values toward creativity as well as their perceptions of environment for creativity" (Acar, Runco, and Ogurlu 2018, 316). But in another study that exemplifies other possibilities for the religiosity-creativity relationship, researchers found that the domain-specific knowledge religion imparts may promote specific forms of creativity (Dandarova-Robert, Zhargalma, Cocco, Astaneh, & Brandt 2023). In this case, the researchers had been surprised by this result, as they had formulated their hypothesis for a negative relation between religiosity and creativity based on the previous studies establishing religion as an inhibitor of creativity (Dandarova-Robert, Zhargalma, Cocco, Astaneh, & Brandt 2023, 259).

While the relationship between creativity and religion or religiosity appears negative or mixed, the relationship between creativity and spirituality is positive. Not only does spirituality seem to promote creativity but the reverse seems also to be the case: creativity appears to promote spirituality as well (France 2020; Urpí, Reparaz, and Echarri 2022; Alma and Zock 2005; Portenier 2012). Indeed, the two ideas have been seen as so closely allied that they have recently been conjoined in the transformative coping hypothesis, which proposes "that the inherent human capacities of creativity and spirituality form a construct that can be applied in coping" (Corry, Lewis, & Mallett 2014, 89). Such work describes creative expression as an important aspect of growth and healing (Calhoun and Tedeschi 2006) and suggests "creativity and spirituality are mutually interrelated concepts whereby spiritual consciousness functions as a means to creative pursuits while art, in return, can generate a spiritual attitude" (Coleman 1998). The work on transformational coping harmonizes with James C. Kaufman's work on the transformational nature of creativity, which may be oriented to the self (as in self-actualization), others, or both. The transformational nature of creativity, Kaufman argues, is correlated to meaning of life—a sense of purpose that is personal as well as symbolic, social, and cultural (Sternberg, Glăveanu, & Kaufman 2018; referencing Kaufman 2023). Perhaps, then, we should be unsurprised by creativity's positive relationship to spirituality, for when creativity is related to the "meaning of life," we are already very close to spirituality here, which on measures like The Spirituality Scale asks about agreement with statements including, "I find meaning in my life experiences" and "I see the sacredness in everyday life" (Delaney 2005). Some scholars have identified a "via creativa" as "a spiritual path in which creativity becomes a focus for experiencing and forming relationships with a divine entity, entities, or the universe itself" (Edwards 2000). The close association of

creativity and spirituality led to an edited volume by psychologists and religion scholars alike, called *Creativity and Spirituality: A Multi-Disciplinary Perspective* (Dowser and Miner 2017).

How might theology reflect on these divergent relations of creativity with religiosity and spirituality? A theologian or religious studies scholar might ask whether the category of "religion" is at all helpful to relate to creativity, inasmuch as the concept itself is born of Protestant Christian theology and lumps together many diverse practices, beliefs, and cultures. One potential role for scholars of religion working within the field of creativity studies might be to help psychology scholars tease out the implicit biases in their measures, as religious studies scholars have spent the last hundred years attempting to exorcise their own biases as an academic field formed in Protestant Christianity. In fact, the Protestant Christian bias has been recognized, though not rectified within psychology. As early as 1999, Hill and Hood wrote that Protestant Christianity was overrepresented in religiosity scales, and in 2007, two clergywomen psychologists added to their observation, "one or more segments of American Protestants are overrepresented, and other segments are ignored." (Hill and Hood 199; Cutting and Walsh 2008, 140). In recent years there has been a proliferation of religiosity measures for different religious groups, like the Indic Religiosity scale and the Muslim Attitudes Toward Religiosity Scale, which show promise for reflecting the sociocultural differences among religiosity and yet render it difficult to assess religiosity across different groups. What it means to adhere to a particular religion or cultural system will vary depending on what that religion values. Additionally, the mixed findings from Dandarova-Robert et al's study suggest that more culturally sensitive studies are needed on religiosity to reflect on their significance from the perspective of another discipline. Once religiosity is disentangled from Protestant Christianity or supplanted by a more ecumenical concept, what might scholars learn about the relationship of religious practice or adherence and creativity? Might it look closer to the relationship of creativity and spirituality?

Given the difficulties around "religiosity," we want to focus on the close association between creativity and spirituality in psychological studies and research. As with the other two areas of affordances and cultivation, we consider the implications of this work at two levels, process and substance. At the level of process, the intimacy of creativity and spirituality might reframe acts of theological creativity. Such acts do not signal departures from historical theology, which was for centuries explicitly grounded in spirituality. They are, in a way, returns to such spiritually-grounded theology. Even more, creative theology could help theologians recover older ways of thinking about theology that have been largely lost in its current neo-liberal professional forms. Early Christian writers like Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, for example, read scripture allegorically, discovering new and creative meanings in Scripture as part of their practice of *theoria* or contemplation of Scripture. Often this practice is instigated by a negative reaction to the literal Scriptural story, so that the creative-spiritual reading really does function as a mode of transformative coping. This mode of interpretation has continued to some degree in subfields of theology like feminist theology, which has regularly foregrounded both creativity—in its reimagining of symbols, metaphors, and images of Christianity (McFague 1982; Daly 1978, 1994; Soskice 2007)—and spirituality, in its attempts to honor the spiritual practices of women and others marginalized by gender (Grant 1989; Ruether 1993; Williams 1993; Christ 1997). But what lines of continuity, what scramblings and reimaginings, might be promoted by interpreting the creative work of feminist theologians, not as a response to or attempt at faithfulness to the spirituality of those marginalized by gender but as itself a spiritual practice that is continuous with the lives it wants to honor? More generally, in more popular theological discourses where creativity is sometimes aligned with unfaithfulness and spirituality with faithfulness, how might the intimacy of spirituality and creativity help shift that narrative, so that creative interpretation can be seen as itself an act of fidelity? And finally, given the way theology is riddled with wounds and scarred by its complicities in violence, how might foregrounding creativity as a spiritual practice help theologians find a transformative way into the next era for the field?

Theologians might also reflect on the theological significance of the intimacy of creativity and spirituality. It seems fitting that, as both the term spirituality and the term creativity are etymologically connected to names for God—God as Spirit, God as Creator—the concepts themselves would be linked in the ways they are. How might theological understandings of God as Spirit and Creator inform how we think about the relationship and possibilities for human spirituality and creativity? And what does it mean for how we conduct theology? Should we expect texts and artifacts about God to reflect in a finite way the qualities of the God they want to describe? Might we think it is fitting for creatures made in the image of God to strive for embodying these qualities in themselves? And for theology to exhibit the qualities that embody a vision in which the creature becomes like the Creator it wants to know?

What Theology Can Offer Creativity Studies

For most of this essay, we have considered what creativity studies might offer to theology. In discussing the way "religion" is invoked or "religiosity" is constructed in psychology, we have also suggested a way theology or religious studies might speak back to this field. The fields of religious studies and theology could continue this act of texturing and contextualizing psychological work on creativity, extending insights from the sociocultural theory. Different theological traditions, for example, could help inform how the sociocultural context cultivates, hinders, or otherwise changes creative abilities or creative processing. Because religious traditions are spread across the globe, studying different religious communities in different contexts provides opportunities to reflect on and distinguish the roles of specific religious communities from the local communities, regions, and countries. Considering faith communities in fact, provides a new array of research settings, providing opportunities to study the impacts of creativity in specifically religious settings. In this penultimate section, we want to turn more intentionally to the question of theology's contributions to outline another way theology might enrich the creativity conversation through a definitional clarification.

In the second edition of the *Cambridge Handbook on Creativity* (2019), editors Sternberg and Kaufman, along with the contributors, reaffirm the standard definition of creativity as novel and useful. (Kaufman and Sternberg 2019, 481). In their 2024 article laying out their three perspectives on creativity, Sternberg, Kaufman, and Glăveanu all affirm that definition once again (Sternberg et al 2024, 170, 171). There is strong consensus in the field around this definition, even when researchers have misgivings about it. And some do have misgivings. It is not infrequent that creativity researchers articulate the definition and rush to clarify that "usefulness" need not mean "utility," that the term can, in fact, be used meaningfully to talk about the creativity of artworks, for example. Their use may be, as one researcher explained, "beautifying existence or understanding it better" (Cropely 2017, 239). But if an artwork can be "useful" by providing beauty and understanding, the word "useful" has expanded quite a bit beyond its usual range of meanings, to the point where it is perhaps not entirely clear what "usefulness" notes beyond being valued or valuable in some way. To add to the confusion, "usefulness" has a fraught history in aesthetics, where the aesthetic has been opposed to the useful and "fine arts," which are consolidated over and against the "useful arts" (Carnes 2014, 42, 51). Given the way creativity has a history of intimacy with art and aesthetics, what is one to make of this divergence over "usefulness?" Usefulness seems unlikely to illumine art, aesthetics, or, frankly, the "meaning of life" associations with creativity so prominent in James C. Kaufman's latest research (Sternberg et al 2024; Kaufman 2023). Finally, there is the problem of the term "useful" tempting creativity researchers to assimilate creativity to the judgments of neoliberal capitalism, particularly as industry is an important site and driver of creativity research. And given that political-economic competition with Russia was the context for the birth of creativity studies in psychology, perhaps the field wants to take particular care not to let creativity be reduced to its market value or how it can give a competitive advantage in capitalist and neo-liberal political systems.

One way some scholars have responded to the inadequacy of "usefulness" has been by taking up "appropriateness" instead, particularly as "appropriate" suggests contextual interpretation (Pang and Plucker 2024). As a term, "appropriate" is, we think, an advance over "useful." And yet is not entirely unproblematic, either, particularly given the way "appropriate" connotes the mannerliness entangled with the respectability politics that has been used to police racial lines and gender roles (Harris 2014). There is a still better way.

Instead of usefulness or appropriateness, we suggest a term from deep in the history of Christian theology and also occasionally present in some form in psychological discourse on creativity: fittingness. For centuries Christian theologians have invoked "fittingness" in assessing arguments about God. It is difficult to make persuasive deductive arguments about God, so theologians have asked what would be "fitting" for God to do or be given prior commitments and understandings we have about who God is. But "fitting" is not just valuable for its capacity to speak to something as empirically unavailable as God. It is also valuable for describing and visibilizing different sociocultural understandings and commitments. A present co-author has herself argued for the value of fittingness in the way it can be contextually elaborated (Carnes 2014, 47-59). We might ask: Fitting for what purpose? Fitting with what context? The word embeds a flexible frame within it, allowing for different valuations of creativity in different sociocultural contexts. And it is already at least marginally present in creativity discourse in psychology. Teresa Amabile, for example, glosses "appropriate" as "useful, valuable, correct, or somehow fitting to the purpose that the individual creator intends" (Amabile 2018, 1). If creativity studies want to move away from usefulness and appropriateness while also embracing the insights of sociocultural theory and maintaining some conceptual continuity with past work, "fittingness" would be an excellent complement to "novelty" in the definition of creativity.

Conclusion

Who belongs in science-engaged theology? Can a theologian engage in interdisciplinary conversation without giving up her distinctive voice as a theologian? In this paper, we have attempted to answer these questions with "*more*" and "*yes.*" More people can and should feel they belong in science-engaged theology, including those of us whose styles of writing and thinking are quite unlike science, social science, or their discursive analogs in the humanities: analytic philosophy and analytic theology. We have made this argument by performing our point, the theological co-author showing herself as a non-analytic theologian learning deeply from work in psychology of creativity and the psychological scientist co-author learning from theological approaches and identifying key points for intersection between our disciplines. Engaging work on affordances, on the triangular theory and perspective-taking, and on the intimacy of creativity and spirituality, we took up the insights of psychology on two levels: exploring how they can help theologians in the actual work of thinking and writing theology, as well as identifying where they can open up fresh perspectives on topics of theological interest, including pneumatology, eschatology, mysticism, and feminist theology.

The next stage of theological work following along the lines of inquiry this paper traced could move in multiple registers. It could, for one, engage psychological studies, collaborate in studies, or interpret conceptual work directly to investigate how, for example, perspective-taking in Ignatian reading practices cultivates (or doesn't) a person's sense of new possibilities for actions or whether an understanding of God as "creative"—as working in a way that is "novel" and "fitting"—might provide a way of approaching questions of pneumatology, especially related to the work of God in history. Or, in another direction, the psychological work could remain submerged, informing from the background theological work on how affordances might provide a model for theological progress, for example, or how perspective-taking in certain mystical narratives opens unseen pathways of action. A third option is for the conversation to take a multi-disciplinary turn, as in Possibility Studies, where theologians join with psychologists, sociologists,

artists, and theorists to ask about how new possibilities emerge and how we can notice, explore, activate, and create them. We hope, in other words, that this theological engagement with psychology generates future theological work on creativity in which the forms, questions, and insights are conceptually plural and stylistically diverse—and in these ways symptomatic of the topic they purport to study.

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