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# A Survival Guide for the Creativity Economy, review of *The Dark Side of Creativity*, edited by David H. Cropley, Arthur J. Cropley, James C. Kaufman, and Mark A. Runco

Stephen J. Guastello

## Abstract

Reviews the book, *The dark side of creativity* by David H. Cropley, Arthur J. Cropley, James C. Kaufman, and Mark A. Runco (see record 2010-16278-000)

Theory and research on creativity clearly address how breakthrough ideas are formed and what happens to them next, but the present state of creativity research needs a few breakthrough ideas of its own. *The Dark Side of Creativity*, edited by David Cropley, Arthur Cropley, James Kaufman, and Mark Runco, has hit that target. It also resonates with contemporary concerns about creativity and technology. There is a long-standing ethic in engineering that a technology itself is neither good nor bad; it is what one does with technology that can go either way. Coeditor Mark Runco takes this position in Chapter 2, maintaining that creativity itself has no dark side; it is the product of that creativity that can be light or dark. *Product* in this context is the actual implementation of the ideas produced by the creative processes that preceded it. Part of the delay in recognizing the presence of

the dark side can be traced to a societal bias toward regarding “good” things as “creative” and treating things that people find morally objectionable as “not creative.” *The Dark Side of Creativity* is a refreshing book with original insights. I found it easy to go beyond its boundaries and connect to other related ideas about creativity that have been circulating lately. I would recommend the book to anyone interested in creativity. (PsycINFO Database Record (c) 2017 APA, all rights reserved)

## Keywords

creativity; technology; society; social issues; social processes

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**Theory and research on creativity clearly address how breakthrough ideas are formed and what happens to them next, but the present state of creativity *research* needs a few breakthrough ideas of its own. *The Dark Side of Creativity*, edited by David Cropley, Arthur Cropley, James Kaufman, and Mark Runco, has hit that target. It also resonates with contemporary concerns about creativity and technology that I’ll mention as we tour the central themes of the book.**

## Ethical Challenges

There is a long-standing ethic in engineering that a technology itself is neither good nor bad; it is what one does with technology that can go either way. Coeditor Mark Runco takes this position in Chapter 2, maintaining that creativity itself has no dark side; it is the product of that creativity that can be light or dark. *Product* in this context is the actual implementation of the ideas produced by the creative processes that preceded it. Part of the delay in recognizing the presence of the dark side can be traced to a societal bias toward regarding “good” things as “creative” and treating things that people find morally objectionable as “not creative.”

For example, criminals can be very creative, and their creativity can delay or prevent their being caught and punished for their crimes. In a more general vein, three chapters report on the creative works done by prisoners and the difficulty they have getting the public to view their work or recognize that they have accomplished something of artistic value. Some of the creativity is “little c,” or the “everyday creativity” that is involved in making useful objects out of discarded junk around the prison.

The societal bias toward connecting creativity with esoteric notions of “good” conveniently ignores the works of criminals. No one wants to credit Ted Kaczynski (the “Unabomber”) with contributing valuable ideas, but Klosterman (2009) identified one: Our reliance on technology produces a dependence that can undermine our ability to survive.

As the sorcerer’s apprentice learned, a benign technology can acquire a life of its own once it has been let loose. Atomic power is an example. Its original elements were rooted in Einstein’s theoretical physics, which for years was fascinating but not dangerous in any literal sense. Then world events precipitated the development of an entirely new class of weaponry. World War II was followed by a quest for peaceful uses of atomic power, which was soon followed by the top two power plant manufacturers driving each other toward destruction as they tried to build nuclear power plants without knowing how to build them safely and cost-effectively.

Arthur Cropley's introduction mentions another pathway to darkness that I wish had been expanded upon in the book: Overly simple solutions to problems in complex systems can produce what Tenner (1996) called *revenge effects*. An example is the introduction of a poisonous frog to rid Queensland of an epidemic of beetles. The solution worked—except that the frogs had no natural predators and soon spread throughout Australia, driving out indigenous and benign species. The frog story is only one of many attempts to transplant fauna or flora that have had very negative results.

## The Darker Side of the Psyche

The connection between creativity and mental illness is a long-standing enigma. On the one hand, mood disorders, alcoholism, and schizotypal disorders are overrepresented in creative professions. Yet humanistic psychology extols the positive impact of creative expression on mental health, and there are studies that report that creativity is more likely to occur in emotionally positive environments. Three chapters provide detailed reviews of the issues and some new perspectives. People who are seriously mentally ill or suicidal are unlikely to produce creative work.

However, there is growing research on variables that can explain the concordance between creativity and mental illness, such as Eysenck's (1993) psychoticism construct or the concept of emotional intelligence (Guastello, Guastello, & Hanson, 2004). The creative professional typically lives outside the box; the mainstay of work in a given topic area supports existing paradigms, and its supporters tend to be centric by definition: "Acceptance of mediocrity, conformity, and inauthenticity is too often the default choice of [Otto] Rank's 'average well-adjusted man'" (p. 270). Anyone with an idea that is big enough to rattle cages is not going to reside comfortably in the center, or might be pushed out of the center. In most cases, this conflict begins during the school years.

Can we get rid of the darkness? In Chapter 17, Robert Sternberg recommends wisdom as a potential solution. Potential adopters of creative works should be wary of the same signs associated with the dark side of leadership: egocentrism, omniscience, omnipotence, invulnerability, unrealistic optimism, and ethical disengagement on the part of the proponents. Yet Kevin Hilton observes in Chapter 8 that wisdom alone might not be sufficient to curb the dark side of creativity. Revenge effects and the sorcerer's apprentice problem are two examples. If we really are morphing into a "creativity economy," we need to enhance critical thinking skills as well as creative thinking skills.

## Further Challenges From the Dark Side

Other solutions to problems from the dark side focus on terrorism and 9/11 as examples. In Chapter 19, coeditor David Cropley deconstructs the creative process to identify those situations in which the creative works of the "bad guys" can be thwarted. For example, there is a regular cat-and-mouse game going on between those who build computer security systems and the hackers who try to defeat them.

Is unbounded creativity really wise? The entertainment industries have been fighting attempts at censorship for decades, arguing that self-regulation is an adequate solution to the problem of setting appropriate limits on the content of television programs, films, and music. The wisdom of the censors is often as dubious as the wisdom of the producers. Similarly, innovations in the financial industries after deregulation are believed to be the core cause of the global economic collapse we have seen over the last few years (Dore & Singh, 2009).

Economists have promoted the idea that creativity is going get us out of the present economic rut. Yet complex systems research shows that too many innovations too soon can produce a *complexity catastrophe* (Kauffman, 1995). An organization can produce a couple of new products a year and do a fine job with them, but if it tries to introduce too many innovations at once, it can overstretch its capacity and do a poor job of developing and promoting the new products that are being developed.

In Chapter 15 Gabora and Holmes report an agent-based computer simulation in which the agents could choose to be innovators or imitators (adopters) of the innovations. However, if all the agents are innovators, then the diffusion of innovation drops to zero!

Hari mentions (Chapter 18) that a successful innovation, like the transistor, also detracts value from its competitor technology, for example, the vacuum tube, in addition to making new value in its own right. This idea harkens back to the concept of *creative destruction*, first introduced by Schumpeter (1943), in which new technologies replace old ones because they are more efficient.

However, in an era when markets are saturated and goods are reasonably durable, the next wave of creativity is likely to promote the destruction of existing technologies systems simply for the sake of producing something new for people to buy (Jacobsen & Guastello, in press). Weed organizations—an invasive species—are likely to spring up to encroach on existing markets and products with dubious substitutes and to replace buying with renting (Dooley, 2010). If customers rent rather than buy, however, they will be forced to accept the innovations when the producers want to produce them, not when the buyer experiences genuine need. In such situations, customers also lose control of ownership and of the ability to resell used goods.

In summary, *The Dark Side of Creativity* is a refreshing book with original insights. I found it easy to go beyond its boundaries and connect to other related ideas about creativity that have been circulating lately. I would recommend the book to anyone interested in creativity.

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