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FREEDOM AND NECESSITY OF THE CREATIVE ACT: THE COSMOLOGICAL ASPECT OF KANDINSKY'S PRINCIPLE OF INNER NECESSITY

ISABELLE MOULIN

Abstract

This article argues that freedom in the divine creative act is better understood as a freedom of consent rather than freedom of will. However, even if some conundrums are thus avoided, one has to face the apparent antinomy between both God's creative act from His very nature and God's absolute freedom. Freedom of consent, as defined in David Burrell's works, finds a resonance with the French spiritualist philosopher, Henri Bergson, who resolves the apparent antinomy by showing that the necessity of the action springs from the nature of the self in a way that does not contradict the free perpetual auto-creation of the consciousness. Notwithstanding its defects, the artisan model found in Genesis allows one to draw a parallelism between the divine creative act and artistic creation. Kandinsky faced precisely such an antinomy, for his principle of inner necessity combines both the absolute free creative power of the artist and the necessity emerging from the different levels of the cosmic order. To exemplify Kandinsky's solution, this article offers an original reading of *Painting with White Border*, based on Kandinsky's analysis in *Reminiscences*.

Introduction

The Mystery of Creation is defined as the divine act of the Trinitarian God, who creates alone—without intermediary or mediation—through his Goodness and Wisdom, without pre-existing matter (*ex nihilo*), as transcendent though present to his creation, freely, and who governs the created world through his providence, all the while without undergoing any change in his act. In this essay, I focus mainly on the notion of God's freedom in the creative act, though elements of clarification concerning this notion will have important ramifications for the whole action of God, especially the ways in which we conceive of the relationship between Creator and creatures, the conception of matter, and the absence of mediation in terms of co-creation, which ultimately leads to pantheism.

When considering the question of the freedom of God in the creative act, one needs to hold together both God's simplicity and goodness with his free will; in other words,

Isabelle Moulin
Faculté de Théologie Catholique de l'Université de Strasbourg, Palais Universitaire 9, Place de l'Université,
67000, Strasbourg, FRANCE
Email: imoulin@unistra.fr

the theological challenge is to present such an act of creation as emanating from God's own substance without at the same time claiming that such an act is determined by his very nature. Appeals to freedom of choice, however, do not help here, i.e. asserting that God could have refused to create at all, for the theological implications of such a declaration would be dire indeed. How, then, would God's unwillingness to create be compatible with his goodness? Moreover, does not such a freedom induce an intricate conception of many possible worlds? How to avoid construing God's relation to the world as 'dualistic' (God on the one hand, the world on the other), while at the same time preserving his transcendence? Finally, how to focus on God's creative act without reducing creation to a 'result' or 'product', thereby doing an injustice to the providential ordering of God's creative act as continuous creation, as an ongoing gracious *gift* instead of a good *gifted*? Perhaps one way of circumventing these problematic issues would be to follow David Burrell's leading insight: namely, that 'creation can only be creation if God can be God without creating. No external incentive nor *internal need* can induce God to create'.¹ In other words, in order to dissolve the antinomy, Burrell, following Aquinas, proposes that we consider the freedom of God's creative act more as an expression of freedom of *consent* than of *choice*.²

Following Burrell's lead, I aim to shed light on the main features of the notion of freedom of consent. I will supplement Burrell's insight, however, by drawing a parallel with artistic creation, especially through the theory and works of Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), who constantly dealt with questions of freedom and necessity through his notion of the principle of inner necessity. I suggest that putting forward artistic creation advances a better understanding of the divine creative act as depicted in the Scriptures. For example, it enhances the artisan model as portrayed in the opening chapters of Genesis. Such a model, of course, is not without certain deficiencies, i.e. the problem of pre-existing matter, along with the anthropomorphic dimension of the parallelism; the relationship of intellectual and practical dimensions of the creative act; the association of creation and mere production; the introduction of a certain problematic conception of time suggesting at least some kind of 'before' and 'after' that could be misinterpreted, together with a possible misleading conception of the notion of humans created in God's 'image', implying some analogy of similarity and exemplarity, all of which could be falsely understood.³

While keeping the inadequacies of the model in mind, indeed the inadequacy of any created model to penetrate the Mystery of creation, I nonetheless suggest taking up anew some features of the craftsman model through the eyes of an artist in order better to understand God's creative activity construed in terms of freedom of consent. I shall first outline—with the help of two philosophers, David Burrell and Henri Bergson—some features of freedom of consent before introducing the cosmological dimension of Kandinsky's theoretical and artistic works. I introduce the latter in order to show how Kandinsky's original conception of the principle of

¹ David B. Burrell, 'The act of creation with its theological consequences', in *Creation and the God of Abraham*, edited by David B. Burrell, Carlo Cogliati, Janet Martin Soskice, William R. Stoeger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 40-52, at 42 (after Robert Sokolowski, *God of Faith and Reason* [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995]). Emphasis added.

² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-1.15.3; David B. Burrell, *Faith and Freedom: An Interfaith Perspective* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 187.

³ See, for instance, the redefinition of the Aristotelian formal causality into exemplar causality, with the use of the Platonic and Neoplatonic analogy of similarity in the Middle-Ages, introduced by Albert the Great.

inner necessity helps to solve the issue of freedom and necessity, thereby illuminating the divine creative act.

Freedom of Consent of the Creative Act

I borrow the notion of ‘freedom of consent’ from David Burrell’s works, and especially his evaluation of Thomas Aquinas’ *complacentia*, an interpretation itself borrowed from Frederick Crowe.⁴ Such a notion implies that being endowed with intellect, will, imagination and sensation acts according to their whole being, without any separation from their different faculties, especially intellect and will. Notwithstanding any close analysis of Thomas Aquinas’ elaboration of the relationship between will, intellect, consent, assent, etc., two main features of freedom of consent emerge from Burrell’s analysis: first, all faculties in the human being harmoniously concur towards action; second, such concurrence of action derives from the end that is pursued:

So freedom is less a question of self-determination of what otherwise remains undetermined than it is one of attuning oneself to one’s ultimate end. There are plenty of choices, of course, but these are to be made rationally, by taking counsel regarding the way perceived goods relate to that to which we have already consented. Ends function like principles, guiding the inquiry in which we must engage while taking counsel [...] At that point we can no longer properly speak of *choosing*, but of consenting to (or refusing) the end which presents itself as ultimate.⁵

Instead of conceiving one’s freedom as a permanent series of choices constantly questioned and incessantly fragmented by crossroads, alternatives and indifference, true freedom appears to emanate from the whole self continuously oriented towards one’s end. This functions as the principle of the act. Moreover, as created being—namely as having a nature existentially open to grace and oriented towards goodness—humans possess both the capacity to be ‘determined’ by such an orientation and to increase it while creating themselves: ‘for if one’s ultimate goal be inscribed in one’s nature, then freedom is no longer indifference but contains an orientation and capacity for growth’.⁶ Freedom of consent thus overflows the capacity of choice originating in the will. To consent is to summon all one’s faculties aligned to a unique goal identified as good and corresponding to one’s nature. It is worth noting that following Aristotle (*sustoikeia* of goodness) or Augustine (unsubstantiality of evil), such a unity is not required in the case of an orientation that is contrary to human nature or contrary to the tendency of one’s own self.

Such a conception of freedom is the core of Henri Bergson’s conception of the self. From the very beginning of the reception of his first publication, the *Essay on the Immediate Data*

⁴ Frederick E. Crowe, ‘Complacency and Concern in the Thought of St. Thomas Aquinas’, in *Theological Studies* 20 (1959): 1-39, 198-230, 343-95, reference quoted by Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, 107, n. 54. I take Burrell’s interpretation of Thomas Aquinas’ notion of *complacentia* at face value since I globally agree with him and do not have the space here to deal with a full analysis of this notion in Thomas Aquinas. The characteristics of this notion are my sole interest here (see *Faith and Freedom*, 108, n. 55, in which are quoted some different interpretations of Thomas Aquinas’ text).

⁵ Burrell, *Faith and Freedom*, 110.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 109.

of *Consciousness*, Bergson dealt with two misunderstandings of his thought: unsubstantiality and determinism.⁷

But for Bergson, it is possible to hold both the relative necessity of action springing from the nature of the self and its perpetual auto-creation with absolute freedom. Dissociating the psychological nature of the self from its acts even appears to be contrary to common sense, according to Bergson: 'All philosophers would agree on this point, namely, even if one establishes a relation of appropriateness or inappropriateness between a given conduct and the present personality of someone we know this does not bind the future to the present'.⁸ Conceiving freedom otherwise amounts to constructing a given personality progressing along a line originating in M towards a fork O leading to either X or Y.⁹ A conception of freedom as solely freedom of choice, in other words, puts the self at the alternative O with two open options. But, for Bergson, such a conception is affected by the retrospective illusion that a choice is offered based on a spatialization of time. The true self is a living being endowed with a life which is more 'in the process of executing than executed. Living properties are less *states* than *tendencies*'.¹⁰

A tendency or orientation is precisely the basic element when it comes to freedom of consent. Nonetheless, to consent does not imply a true determinism. As Bergson points out, causality is not determinative in any straightforward, predictable way because there is no reiteration of exactly the same causality for the conscience,¹¹ which is the case for any being possessing life: 'it is possible to say that life, like consciousness, creates something [new] at any moment'.¹² No predictability is possible, since no one internally

⁷ For the condemnation of Bergson's Heracliteism (unsubstantiality), see B. Jacob, 'La philosophie d'hier et celle d'aujourd'hui', *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 6, no. 2 (1898), 170-201, J. Benda, *Le bergsonisme ou une philosophie de la mobilité* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1912) and Jacques Maritain, *La philosophie bergsonienne* (Paris: Téqui, 1948) and *De Bergson à Thomas d'Aquin: Essais de Métaphysique et de Morale* (Paris: Harmattan, 1948) (edited and adapted but unchanged in the English version, *Bergsonian Philosophy and Thomism* [New York: Philosophical Library, 1955]); see Isabelle Moulin, 'Le bergsonisme à l'épreuve du thomisme: la métaphysique de Bergson lue par Jacques Maritain', *Revue des Sciences Religieuses* 94, no. 2-4 (2020): 313-40 (such a conception of Bergson's philosophy has been abandoned). Bergson extensively demonstrated the specific substantiality of change in *La pensée et le mouvant* (Paris: PUF, 1934) (*The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics*), 164-65 (Oxford conference, 1911). For a certain form of determinism in Bergson's conception of freedom, due to its derivation from essence, preceding its existence, see Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Être et le Néant* (Paris: Gallimard), 77-78. For Sartre, such necessity is similar to that of the father generating his son. Bergson thus describes the reassuring freedom of the Other and not the absolute freedom of the self (see H. Pommier, 'Le sens de la liberté chez Bergson', *Cahiers philosophiques* 122, no. 2 [2010]: 57-88). For the global context of determinism, see H. Barreau 'Bergson face à Spencer. Vers un nouveau positivisme', *Archives de philosophie* 71, no. 2 (2008): 219-43. The literature on Bergson's conception of freedom is vast and increasing. Of these I draw attention to two quite old but remarkably clear accounts: J. Chevalier, *Bergson* (Paris: Plon, 1926) (a student and friend of Bergson) and L. Husson, 'Vers une métaphysique positive. La philosophie de Bergson', in J. Chevalier, *Histoire de la pensée*, t. IV (Paris: Flammarion, 1966), chap. XII (a disciple of the latter).

⁸ Henri Bergson, *Les données immédiates de la conscience* (*The immediate data of consciousness*, hereafter DI) (Paris: PUF, 1889), 138 (all translations are my own).

⁹ For a schematic representation of freedom ensuing in a fragmented temporality of the self, typical of a retrospective illusion, see Bergson, DI, 133. A continuous line originating from M to O, X, Y (ibid., 144) is better, but no more correct since it implies also a spatialization of duration but, more decidedly, a contemplation of the act from an external point of view, whereas true duration is experienced within the self. See also Henri Bergson, *La pensée et le mouvant* (*The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics*, hereafter PM) (Paris: PUF, 1934), 1-23.

¹⁰ Henri Bergson, *L'évolution créatrice* (*Creative Evolution*) (Paris: PUF, 1907), 13.

¹¹ Bergson, DI, 150. The 'pseudo-problem of freedom' springs from such a misconception of time (see PM, 20).

¹² Bergson, *L'évolution créatrice*, 29.

lives the life of another consciousness; there is no retrospection either. Rather, the self lives in a constantly enlarged present.

Within the sphere of the living conscience, freedom of consent reveals a self oriented towards its own tendencies, turned to the end and enlarged by its past experiences. All of this reveals a self that belongs to the realm of quality, instead of quantity. With respect to creation, freedom of consent gives an insight regarding the eternal 'duration' of God and eliminates the pseudo-problem of the multiplicity of possible worlds—a blatant effect of the retrospective illusion applied to the cosmos. Lastly, relating to the artistic creative act, freedom of consent indicates how an artist can feel both absolute freedom as well as a certain 'shade' of necessity given by the tendencies of the idiosyncratic personality.¹³ The three levels of consciousness, artistic creation and Creation are central features of Bergson's *The Immediate Data of Consciousness*, *Creative Evolution*, and *The Creative Mind* respectively for the first two. I quote an illuminating text:

We are free when our actions emanate from our personality as a whole, when they express it, when they possess with it this indefinable resemblance that we sometimes find between the artist and their work.¹⁴

The relationship between artistic creation and duration leading to a better understanding of freedom shall not be considered as simply juxtaposed but is organically built as an analogy between personality and actions, on the one hand, and the artist and their work, on the other. The artist is one of the privileged examples of a free personality by dint of the artist's relative detachment from the practical and analytical side of life, and to their redirection to the core of reality,¹⁵ a process that, for Bergson, emulates the very act of the philosopher. The similarity of the freedom of creation of the human being and the artist is, first and foremost, a similarity of methodology.¹⁶ But it is also a similarity of capacity to reach a natural and ontological dimension through a qualitative process foreign to the analytic mind based on pure quantity.

There are, to be sure, differences between Burrell's conception of freedom of consent and Bergson's definition of the self. But they both rule out a conception of freedom reduced to free will and think anew a certain conception of 'necessity' that is not in conflict with freedom. Freedom of consent and tendency of the self both express a freedom oriented to the good emanating from the whole 'nature' of the self. I do not have the space in this essay to deal with Plotinus and Proclus, but such conceptions

¹³ I use the Bergsonian vocabulary of colour, which is more consistent with quality than quantity, as one can find in the expression of 'relative necessity' as opposed to 'absolute necessity'. For a re-evaluation of quality over quantity as a metaphysical methodology, see Isabelle Moulin, 'Repetition and Re-presentation. Reaching Eternity through Beauty and the experience of qualitative difference', in *New Trinitarian Ontologies*, edited by John Milbank, et al. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, forthcoming).

¹⁴ Bergson, *The immediate data of consciousness*, 129.

¹⁵ Bergson, PM, p. 153.

¹⁶ See F. Worms, 'L'art et le temps chez Bergson. Un problème philosophique au cœur d'un moment historique', *Mil neuf cent. Revue d'histoire intellectuelle* 21, no. 1 (2003): 153-66.

are more akin to the Greek *boulêsis* (βούλησις) than with a Scotist and early modern conception of will.¹⁷

Wassily Kandinsky's Principle of Inner Necessity

Artistic creation provides an insight into God's creative act, since, for Kandinsky: 'Technically, every work of art comes into being in the same way as the cosmos [...] The creation of the work of art is the creation of the world'.¹⁸ There is, in other words, an analogy between both acts of creation. Creating is a totally free act: 'there is no "must" in art. It is eternally free. Art flees before the word "must", as day from night'.¹⁹ Artistic freedom, both on the side of the artist and on the side of the viewer, seems absolute: the freedom of the artist against old forms;²⁰ the inner freedom acquired through the exercise of analysis and synthesis²¹ in order to go beyond the appearances;²² the freedom of creation that does not derive from form imposed on content, as the Kantian Copernican revolution would suggest, but where content creates the form, in a more Nietzschean manner;²³ and also, finally, the freedom of the recipient, the public.²⁴ Nonetheless, at the same time, Kandinsky holds that 'the artist obeys the voice that commands with authority, which is the voice of the master, before whom he must bend himself and whose slave he is'.²⁵ This is the voice of inner necessity. How is it possible to harmonize these two dimensions of absolute freedom and absolute necessity? In pure terms of free will, it is impossible.

¹⁷ For the Neoplatonic tradition of freedom and the creative act, see Isabelle Moulin, 'Agir par son être-même'. La question de la liberté créatrice dans le *Liber de Causis* et sa réception chez Albert le Grand', in *Reading Proclus and the Book of Causes: On Causes and the Noetic Triad*, vol. 3 (Studies in Platonism, Neoplatonism, and the Platonic Tradition 28), ed. Dragos Calma (Leiden: Brill, 2022), chap. 14, 371-88. 'To act according to one's nature' is the translation provided for Proclus' ἀπὸ τοῦ εἶναι by Trouillard ('Agir par son être même. La causalité selon Proclus', *Revue des Sciences Religieuses* 32 (1958), 347-57). For an excellent analysis of Proclus' freedom and the notion of βούλησις, see Carlos Steel, 'Human or divine freedom: Proclus on what is up to us', in *What is Up to Us? Studies on Agency and Responsibility in Ancient Philosophy*, vol. 1, edited by Pierre Destree, Ricardo Salles, and Mario Antônio Zingano (Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 2014), 311-28 (also: 'Liberté divine ou liberté humaine? Proclus et Plotin sur ce qui dépend de nous', in *Mélanges de philosophie et de philologie offerts à Lambros Couloubaritsis*, by Lambros Couloubaritsis, Michèle Broze, Boudouin Decharneux, and Sylvain Delcomminette (Paris: Vrin, 2008), 525-42).

¹⁸ Wassily Kandinsky, 'Werkschöpfung ist Weltschöpfung', Wassily Kandinsky, *Rückblick (Reminiscences)*, (Baden-Baden, Woldemar Klein Verlag, 1955), 25; in *Kandinsky, Complete Writings on Art* (hereafter CW), trans. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), 373.

¹⁹ Wassily Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst insbesondere in der Malerei* (München: R. Piper & Co. Verlag, 1912), 61 (CW, 169-70 modified, cf. *Du Spirituel dans l'art, et dans la peinture en particulier*, trans. Philippe Sers [Paris: Folio], 1989, which includes readings from the Russian version).

²⁰ Wassily Kandinsky, *Der Blaue Reiter* (Munich: R. Piper & Co., 1912), 'On the question of form', CW, 227.

²¹ Wassily Kandinsky, *Programme de cours pour le Bauhaus, Écrits complets III*, ed. Philippe Sers (Paris: Delanoël, 1975), 158 (not in CW).

²² Wassily Kandinsky, *Ein neuer Naturalismus, Das Kunstblatt*, Potsdam, 1922 (*A New Naturalism*): 'The man of the future [...] is distinguished by his inner freedom, the long striven-for ability, after a long struggle, to see beyond the appearances without blinders' (CW modified, 481).

²³ Wassily Kandinsky, *A New Naturalism*, CW, 482. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik (The Birth of Tragedy, and other Writings)*, edited by Raymond Guess and Ronald Speirs [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999], 201, 79), 201: 'Music gives the innermost kernel preceding all form, or the heart of things. This relation could very well be expressed in the language of the scholastics by saying that the concepts are the *universalia post rem*, but music gives the *universalia ante rem*, and reality the *universalia in re*'. *ibid.*, 79. For Kandinsky, 'content' signifies more than 'matter'.

²⁴ Kandinsky, 'On the question of form', CW, 242.

²⁵ Kandinsky, *Cologne Lecture*, CW, 400 (significantly modified).

What is this principle of inner necessity for Kandinsky? He provides a definition in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* where it is several times rendered as ‘a principle of appropriate contact with the human soul’, a contact that commands the harmony of colours²⁶ and forms,²⁷ but also the proper effect of the object.²⁸ Any form, any colour, any object, whether natural or artistic, is endowed with a vibration, a sound, a ‘sonority’ or resonance (German ‘Klang’, Russian ‘Zvuk’) of spiritual nature, that communicates with the human soul by entering into contact with it. To explain such a principle, Kandinsky uses the analogy of a piano: the colour generates a direct influence on the human soul as a key, the eye is the hammer, the soul is the piano itself with its numerous strung wires: ‘The artist is the hand that appropriately sets the human soul vibrating by means of this or that key’.²⁹ The same can be said of form³⁰ and nature through its objects.³¹ There is, therefore, an analogy between nature and the artist. They both act as the hand that allows the soul to come into contact with objects. Forms, colours, objects are all endowed with a life of their own, as will be the case of a painting once it is created. The principle of inner necessity not only affects the artist, but also the viewer who contemplates either a work of art or a work of nature.

Kandinsky is clear that such a necessity, far from preventing a freedom of choice, actually enables it, insofar as the artist is free to choose whatever colour, form or object in order to produce such a ‘sounding’. The artist’s choice is nonetheless dependent upon the principle of inner necessity that commands the inner vibration generated by colour, form or object—and even word. All elements concur to set the soul in motion. Kandinsky’s abstraction must therefore be clearly understood. In light of his experience of having one of his paintings set on the wrong side, he came to realize that ‘objects harmed my pictures’;³² nevertheless, despite this ‘harm’, its concurrence was not entirely deserted. The artist must therefore allow himself to feel such a vibration deriving from the represented object; otherwise, they risk being too limited in choosing the means of their expression.³³ In other words, the artist must follow the spiritual orientation of the consonant world. Such a necessity thus derived from the created world and artistic creation is, for Kandinsky, a way of returning to the Creator.³⁴

Kandinsky distinguishes three levels to the principle of inner necessity, each of which derive from three mystical necessities: first, the level of the personality of a given artist, which expresses itself through their power of creation; second, the level of the epoch in which the artist lives that provides the ‘style’ its inner dimension; third, the level of the element of art itself, namely, the universality of pure art that is

²⁶ Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, my translation, which differs from CW, 160; cf. *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, 49. My translation: ‘appropriate contact’ stands for ‘zweckmäßigen Berührung’, which means, for the first, both effective (‘wirkend’) and pertinent, and, for the second, both contact and touch.

²⁷ Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, CW, 165.

²⁸ Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, CW modified, 169: ‘So it is clear that the choice of the object (= a contributory element in the harmony of form) must be based only upon the principle of appropriate contact of the human soul’.

²⁹ Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, CW modified, 160.

³⁰ Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, CW, 165.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 169.

³² Kandinsky, *Reminiscences*, CW, 370.

³³ Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, CW, 169.

³⁴ For Kandinsky, the artist participates in creation, see *On the Spiritual in Art*, CW, 130.

common to any artist and any period of time and that transcends time and space. This last and highest level, universality of pure art, is difficult to apprehend and needs the mediation of the previous two levels in order that the 'spiritual eye' might exercise itself to catch a glimpse of it.³⁵ It is eternally alive and the only genuinely 'objective' level, the first two levels being truly subjective. Real beauty proceeds from the last mystical level of the principle of inner necessity.³⁶ The principle of inner necessity is a true necessity since it impels the artist 'forward and upward',³⁷ who is in turn able to provide a 'prophetic vision' of art and creation.³⁸ Prophet, mediating co-creator, and slave of beauty, the artist renders their art to 'the service of the Divine'.³⁹

For Kandinsky, the question is not whether the artist should be enslaved by religious objects, or even religious themes, although biblical texts such as the Apocalypse of John are recurrent in his works. The principle of inner necessity is spiritual in its process: from externality (vibrations of the elements), then from interiority to externality, and then return again. A passage from the *Spiritual in Art* is particularly luminous: 'the effect of inner necessity, and thus the development of art, is the advancing externalization of the eternal-objective in the temporal-subjective'.⁴⁰ It is proper to art to point out the *noumenon*⁴¹ (what he calls the eternal-objective), since it summons all the human faculties—intellect, imagination, sensation and will, the latter being one faculty among others. We are therefore presented with the process of 'incarnation' of the eternal into the individual, whether that individual be an artist, a viewer, or a whole epoch. To make this possible, the artist progressively and externally expresses their inner sensations in a work of art in order to allow the viewer, through their senses, then globally through all their faculties, to experience retrospectively through that artwork the same process and to reach the essences of things, the third objective level of mystical necessity.

The inner/outer process follows a typology in Kandinsky's works: the outer and direct impression of 'nature' on the artist is expressed through artworks called *impression*, whereas the purely inner expression, derived from the subconscious, dreams, etc. takes the form of *improvisation*.⁴² Only *compositions* bring together the inner rational faculty and the external elements towards the finality of art directed to beauty and truth revealed in the essence of things. Real beauty emerges from the equilibrium of inner and external dimensions of the artwork. Once that is realized, it then possesses a spiritual life of its own.⁴³

The concept of inner necessity is therefore complex and specific for Kandinsky. He invites us to redefine our notion of necessity in a different way than pure

³⁵ Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, CW, 173.

³⁶ See for instance, Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, CW, 214: 'Whatever arises from internal, spiritual necessity is beautiful. The beautiful is that which is inwardly beautiful'.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 131.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 175 (significantly modified since the translation is really defective here; cf. 'die Wirkung der inneren Notwendigkeit und also die Entwicklung der Kunst eine fortschreitende Äußerung des Ewig-Objektiven im Zeitlich-Subjektiven', 68).

⁴¹ W. Kandinsky, *Punkt und Linie zu Fläche, Beitrag zur Analyse der Malerischen Elemente (Point and Line to Plane)* (München: Verlag Albert Langen, 1926), CW, 659.

⁴² Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, CW, 218.

⁴³ Kandinsky, 'Malerei als reine Kunst' ('Painting as Pure Art'), *Der Sturm*, 1913, CW, 350.

determinism. Indeed, a true necessity is seen as an obstacle. It is external in its nature and its effect amounts to the impossibility, for a given artist, to overcome their epoch and the boundaries of space and time. But such a necessity needs to be overthrown by the true artist who can detach themselves from the conventional: such a detachment amounts to a kind of liberation.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, for Kandinsky, such freedom is not a freedom to create randomly or arbitrarily. Rather, it has to be attuned to the three levels of inner necessity described above. For an artist to be free is not purely an expression of free will: it is a process of spiritual harmonization with themselves and with the surrounding created world. It is how an artist can produce a 'beautiful' artwork, even if such a 'beauty' can be considered as ugly by the public, because beauty shall be defined by its capacity to reach the essence of things through the 'command' of inner necessity to which the artist must consent in order to create a masterwork:

Between the two [limits]—unlimited freedom, depth, breadth, a wealth of possibilities, and beyond them the realms of pure abstraction and pure realism—everything today is, thanks to the current moment, placed at the service of the artist. Today is a day of freedom only conceivable when a great epoch is in the making. And, at the same time, this very freedom constitutes one of the greatest losses of freedom, since all these possibilities between, within, and beyond these limits stem from one and the same root: from the categorical call of inner necessity.⁴⁵

There is then a true freedom of the artist in their act of creation, which can be compared to Bergson's conception of the self. But such a freedom is not merely free choice, as Burrell's definition of freedom has underlined. Freedom and necessity are irremediably linked together in the issuing of the creative act. Freedom therefore has to be rightly understood as the concept of necessity. Inner necessity has nothing to do with external constraint. Any true necessity for Kandinsky surges up from the inside towards an externalization and a return. To be free is always to consent to see beyond appearances,⁴⁶ and the principle of inner necessity stems from an 'inner desire' that is able to triumph over 'every [and all] known rules and borders',⁴⁷ namely, it must be able freely to create.

Freedom and Necessity in Kandinsky's Creation

In his paintings, but also in his poems and scenographies, Kandinsky presents a work of art built upon tensions, emanating from forms, colours, and objects, according to the 'grammar of art' that he theorized in his courses at the Bauhaus and in his essay *Point and Line to Plane*. His *Painting with White Border, Moscow*,⁴⁸ is an evocation of Moscow, a city that had a decisive impact in Kandinsky's experiences. It

⁴⁴ Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, CW, 177.

⁴⁵ Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, CW (modified), 208. Considering the three mystical levels of the principle of inner necessity, what is applicable to the second one is, of course, fitting to the other two other (the self and the essence of art).

⁴⁶ Kandinsky, *A New Naturalism*, CW, 481-82.

⁴⁷ Kandinsky, *Reminiscences*, CW, 372, including the Russian version, n. 73, 894.

⁴⁸ Kandinsky, *Bild mit weißem Rand (Moskow)*, 1913, oil on canvas, 140.3 x 200.3 cm, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

progressively led him to discover the meaning of his art. Moscow at sunset, before the final uniformity of red, magnifies all colours in a symphony where each possesses its own vibration at its highest level.⁴⁹ Two later paintings *Moscow I* and *Moscow II* exemplify this feeling.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, the title of the painting, together with the two later more figurative paintings about Moscow, should not mislead us. Whereas *Moscow I* and *II* evoke the 'joy of life and the universe',⁵¹ *Painting with White Border* is built differently.⁵²



Painting with White Border (*Bild mit weißem Rand (Moskow)*), 1913, oil on canvas, 140.3 x 200.3 cm, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

⁴⁹ Kandinsky, *Reminiscences*, CW, 360 (slightly modified): 'The sun dissolves the whole of Moscow into a single spot, which, like a wild tuba, sets all one's inner being, all one's soul vibrating. No, this red uniformity is not the most beautiful hour! It is only the final chord of the symphony, which brings every color to highest life, which allows and forces the whole of Moscow to resound like the fortissimo of a giant orchestra. Pink, lilac, yellow, white, blue, pistachio green, flame-red houses, churches—each an independent song—the garish green of the grass, the deeper tremolo of the trees, the singing snow with its thousand voices, or the allegretto of the bare branches, the red, stiff, silent ring of the Kremlin walls, and above, towering over everything, like a shout of triumph, like a self-oblivious hallelujah, the white, long, graceful, serious line of the Bell Tower of Ivan the Great. And upon its tall, tense neck stretched up toward heaven in eternal yearning, the golden head of the cupola, which among the golden and multicolored stars of the other cupolas, is Moscow's sun'.

⁵⁰ W. Kandinsky, *Moskau I, Roter Platz (Moscow I, Red Square)*, 1916, oil on canvas, 51.5 x 49.5 cm, Moscow, Gallery Tretiakov; *Moskau II (Moscow II)*, Oil on canvas, 52.8 x 30.0 cm, Private collection, 1916.

⁵¹ Kandinsky, *Letter to Gabriel Munter*, 4 June 1916.

⁵² I wish to thank Philippe Sers for drawing my attention to this painting.

There is a first tension between two centres that are globally interrelated: the first centre, on the left, is multicolored,⁵³ though the colour red prevails. It appears to be circularly in motion towards the second centre, predominantly blue with, at his heart, a blue 'egg' related to its environment as a growing flower. The first centre is boiling internally and externally, whereas the second centre has the effect of an 'inner boiling'.⁵⁴ The two boiling centres are appeased by a series of colours where green prevails—not some sort of green which evokes by association the joys of summer, but a green that would be able to alleviate the agitations of the two centres. As Kandinsky notes, his intention in this painting was 'to express rest through unrest'.⁵⁵ The real dynamic of the artwork, however, is represented by the *troika* (three horses) following the diagonal from bottom-right to top-left.

The *troika* is clearly indicated by Kandinsky in his analysis of the painting. It is represented by three lines that follow the dorsal lines of the horse team. The *troika* initially appears in Kandinsky's early paintings as an evocation of the Russian culture of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as one can see in *Painting with Troika*.⁵⁶ But it acquires a spiritual meaning under the influence of the art of the Byzantino-Slavic icon. The *troika* is then endowed with the spiritual content of Elijah being taken up into Heaven in a chariot (2 Kings 2:1-25), as we can see in the painting *Black Spot*⁵⁷ or *All Saints Day II*.⁵⁸ The theme is rendered anew in a very abstract way in the painting *Red* in 1924.⁵⁹ The diagonal followed by the *troika* passes through the blue mountain (see *Blue Mountain*, 1908),⁶⁰ spiritual by nature, and seems to reach the white cloud of the unknown. The direction is then clearly an elevation beyond the boiling world of materiality and the inner impediments towards the real essence of things and the divine.

On the left corner the curling white and black serrations work as an obstacle, albeit an obstacle that cannot prevent the impetus of the *troika*. They do not yet belong to the white border. White for Kandinsky is defined as 'the silence of the origins', 'the pure possibility'; it implies a new birth whereas the engulfment of black is the absolute silence, related to death.⁶¹ The other diagonal from bottom-left to top-right shows the obstructions and difficulties, enhanced by the short lines going in the opposite direction of the *troika*. Nevertheless, as Kandinsky states, the top-right obstruction is less dramatic since the blackish triangular form already belongs to the white edge, created by Kandinsky at the end of his work. The white edge does not appear on the different sketches of this painting. The artist clearly had the sensation that something was missing. The white border is the key to the painting after which it is named. It introduces a final circular motion in the eye of the viewer from the

⁵³ Cf. 'multicolored' in the extract of *Reminiscences*, quoted n. 49.

⁵⁴ Kandinsky, *Reminiscences*, CW, 390.

⁵⁵ My translation ('durch Unruhe Ruhe zum Ausdruck bringen', 42). Cf. Kandinsky, *Reminiscences*, CW, 391: 'to use turmoil to express repose'.

⁵⁶ Kandinsky, *Bild mit Troika*, 1911, oil on cardboard, 69.5 x 97.2 cm, Chicago, Art Institute.

⁵⁷ Kandinsky, *Schwartzter Fleck I*, 1912, oil on canvas, 100 x 130 cm, Saint-Petersburg, The Russian Museum.

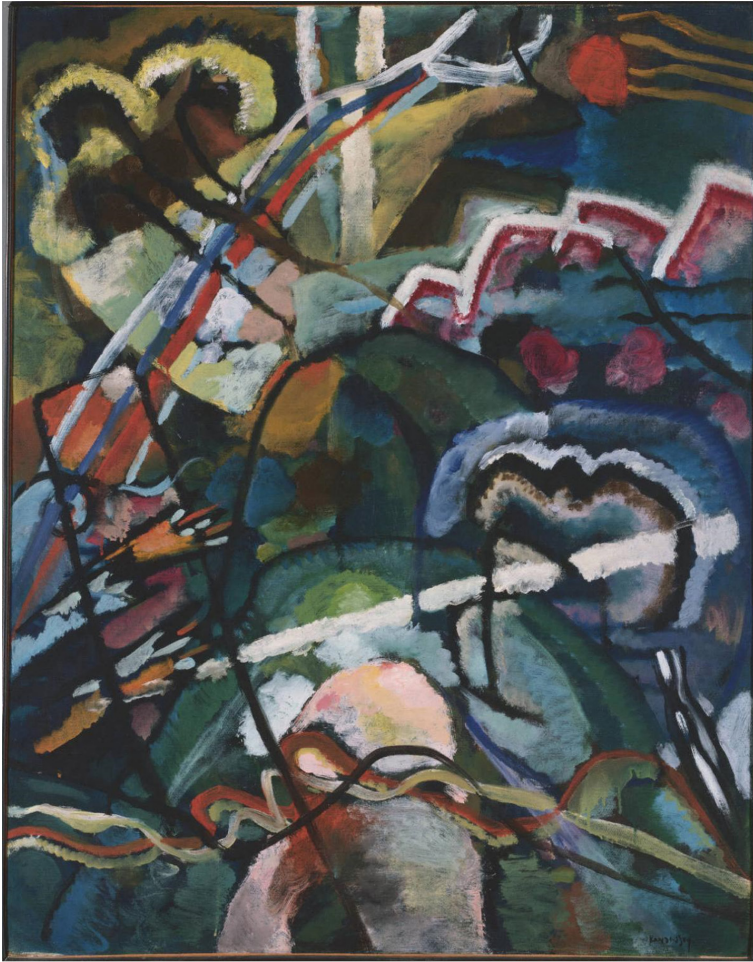
⁵⁸ Kandinsky, *Allerheiligen II*, 1911, small glass painting, 31.3 x 48 cm, Munich, Städtische Galerie. I borrow this analysis from Ph. Sers, *Résonances: Kandinsky et la nécessité intérieure*, album *Klänge. Résonances* (Paris: Hazan, 2015), 78-79.

⁵⁹ Kandinsky, *Rot*, oil on canvas, 72 x 42 cm, Basel, private collection.

⁶⁰ W. Kandinsky, *Der blaue Berg*, 1908-1909, oil on canvas, 106.0 x 96.6 cm, New York, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

⁶¹ For a close analysis of Kandinsky's theory of colours, see Philippe Sers, *Kandinsky: the elements of art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2016); *Kandinsky, philosophie de l'art abstrait: peinture, poésie, scénographie* (Milano: Skira, 2003).

white spot below, towards the final obstacle higher up to the right, and reappears in the form of the white divine clouds at the top-left. The process includes the passage from the red circle upward, nearly in the middle, evoking Kandinsky's spiritual decisive experience of Moscow at sunset, but also reminiscent of Elijah's chariot of fire.⁶²



Sketch I for Painting with White Border, 1913 (*Entwurf I zu Bild mit weißem Rand, Moskow*), Oil on canvas, 100 x 78.4 cm, Washington, DC, The Phillips Collection.

⁶² Cf. *Sketch I for Painting with White Border* (*Entwurf II zu Bild mit weißem Rand, Moskow*), Oil on canvas, 100 x 78.4 cm, Washington, DC, The Phillips Collection, where the sun is clearly noticeable at the top right (but only evoked in *Sketch II for Painting with White Border* [*Entwurf II zu Bild mit weißem Rand, Moskow*], 1913, oil on cardboard, 70 x 104 cm, Saint-Petersburg, The Russian Museum); cf. also the circle and the flames in *All Saints Day II* quoted above, and the ascent of Elijah in *The Last Judgement* (*Jüngster Tag*), 1912, small glass painting, 32 x 45 cm, Paris, Centre Pompidou.



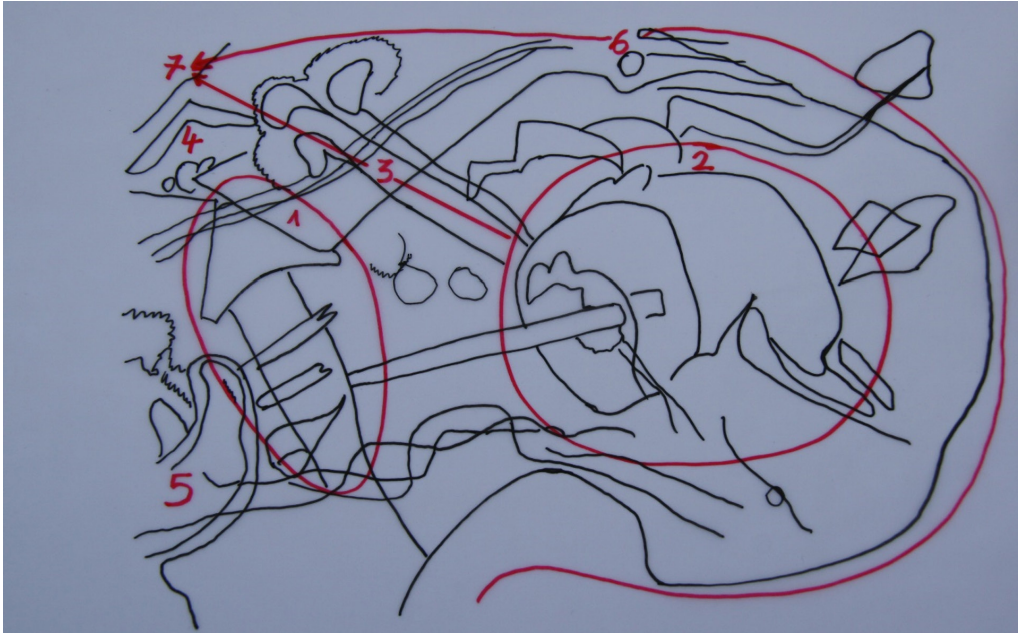
Sketch II for Painting with White Border (Entwurf II zu Bild mit weißem Rand, Moscow), 1913, oil on cardboard, 70 x 104 cm, Saint-Petersburg, The Russian Museum.

Kandinsky's technique is in itself spiritual, as he consciously veils the object and the meaning through little touches. Here such touches are distinguishable in the different spots in the middle (by the use of what is called a 'squashing technique'),⁶³ but also through the veiling of the white border. Together with the 'sound' of the colour white, the white veiling below shows the full possibility of the origins towards the white veiled dimension at the upper left corner that manifests the divine eschatology of the ends, through a circular process that introduces time into the painting. This is a device often used by the artist. From the origins to the end, therefore, the viewer walks on the same spiritual path experienced by the artist.

The example of the *Painting with White Border* enables a better understanding of the principle of inner necessity at work and how it agrees with the artist's absolute freedom. It is worth noticing that free will also plays its role in the choice of the subject (which does not have to be religious in its nature), the objects, the colours and the forms—even the physical dimensions of the painting. But free choice is only an element of the artist's freedom which harmonizes itself with the principle of inner necessity and submits itself to this principle.⁶⁴ The artist needs to consent to the sounds and vibrations of the world but also to consent to her own inner necessity that unfolds through a process of inner/outer expressions. This process of unfolding is but a characterization of the creating self that always produces something new (self-creation in Bergson), even though it is grounded in the artist's own past experiences within the experience of an extended present. In short, in a spatialized artwork Kandinsky is able represent a temporal process of creation ordered and impelled by inner necessity.

⁶³ Kandinsky, *Reminiscences*, CW, 391.

⁶⁴ Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, CW, 169.



Composition of *Painting with White Border* (I. Moulin).

The composition shows a double path through the painting, starting from two centres, one multicoloured and colourful, bubbling inside and out (1), which seems to be moving towards the other, more spiritual, interior and concentrated (2). From this second centre, the *troika*, represented by the horses' crests, rises diagonally (3). This is the theme of Elijah's abduction as he rises above the Holy Mountain or Blue Mountain (4). This first journey, that of the prophet, gives rise to a second, more arduous journey, expressed in the struggle between the jagged black and white waves (5). The eye is thus led in a circular motion along the white border of the painting, encountering the sun of Moscow (6) before reaching the white cloud of the ineffable and unfathomable spiritual (7).

Conclusion

Kandinsky's principle of inner necessity throws a light on the notion of freedom in a creative act and opens a way to reconcile a conflict between two apparently contradictory notions and dimensions of the self. First, it enlarges the concept of freedom where free choice plays an instrumental role during the global process of the act. Second, it also implies a conception of the self, better understood in terms of duration than spatio-temporalization, which is helpful when figuring out an a-temporal creative act. Third, it also partly solves the issue of a creative act emanating from the self oriented towards beauty or goodness without implying a necessity of nature.

I have only touched briefly—with Kandinsky's help—on the ways in which artistic creation can only be compared to God's creative act analogically. My intention has been to provide further elements to the admittedly defective 'artisan model'. For Kandinsky's principle of inner necessity presupposes that the world is already given, that spiritual

harmony is already at work. There is no absolute creation *ex nihilo*, even if in reality creation is always creating anew. Moreover, though an artisan, the artist nonetheless gives life to their production. As Kandinsky shows, even if the artwork comes from the artist, once created it is endowed with a life of its own. The artwork can also be viewed as possessing creative power by itself: it ‘possesses—like every living being—further creative, active forces’.⁶⁵ Creating is to give life to free creators.

While the artisan model implies a productive dimension, Kandinsky opens the path to multiple and varied conceptions of creation. By means of his notion of the synthesis of all the arts, he systematically reintroduces sounds into his paintings, while borrowing terms from music, as in his album *Sounds*. The musicality of the world—see, for instance, the Pythagorean conception of music of the spheres and the value of music in the medieval academic curriculum—seems to have been replaced by a manufacturing and productive view of the world. By contrast, for Kandinsky, ‘the world resounds’,⁶⁶ suggesting that music might be one of the privileged entries into the creative act.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁶⁶ Kandinsky, *Point and Line to Plane*, CW, 539.