In this rejoinder Cropley et al. respond to commentaries made regarding the article “Malevolent Creativity: A Functional Model of Creativity in Terrorism and Crime.” Each commentary adds valuable additional insight into the issue of creativity that does harm. The four commentaries on our article (Malevolent creativity: A functional model of creativity in terrorism and crime)—by Eisenman (this issue), by James and Drown (this issue), by Spooner (this issue), and by Walczyk and Griffith-Ross (this issue)—each provide further interesting and relevant insights into the issue of creativity that does harm. This is all the more pertinent in the light of the April 2007 massacre of 32 students and faculty at Virginia Tech University by student Cho Seung Hui. The commentaries make it clear that the misuse of creativity is found in all elements of criminal behavior, from dishonesty and gangs to fraud, rape, and mass murder.

The events at Virginia Tech reinforce the applicability of the functional model of creativity to criminal activities, demonstrating, for example, that the perpetrator’s novel tactic of locking doors to trap potential victims caused students to jump from windows and sustain injuries not from gunshots, but from falls, thus increasing the effectiveness of the attack. Such examples are a truly sad, but clear, demonstration of novelty, effectiveness, and elegance, and their interrelationship. This also highlights the most important aspect of the work on malevolent creativity—how can a better understanding of the misapplication of creativity be used to minimize the effects of those malevolent acts that deliberately draw on novelty, and other characteristics of functional creativity, to enhance their effectiveness? News reports indicated that the shooter studied creative writing and wrote plays that reflected a preoccupation with violence. Can malevolent creativity be harnessed before it becomes evil? Can malevolent creativity be detected early and turned into benevolent creativity—or, at least, benign creativity?

By far the most substantial and differentiated comments are those of James and Drown (this issue). Their remarks are marked by grudging acceptance of some points, but are largely critical, almost dismissive. Their commentary consists, in effect, of two parts: A critical discussion of our article and a separate article of their own, centered on a discussion of hazardous material trucking, accompanied by a discussion of antiterrorist training. This latter material is of great interest to us, but we do not dwell upon it here, because this would turn our rejoinder into a set of comments on the completely new article embedded in their comments. Early in their commentary, James and Drown criticize our article for not reviewing a wider range of concepts and...
techniques from the psychology of creativity that are relevant to the topic of combating terrorism. We can only plead, in this regard, that we were constrained by the narrow framework of a journal article. We intend, in the future, to devote an entire book to the topic of terrorism, and hope to deal better with the literature in this forthcoming work.

We discussed in our article how knowledge of malevolent creativity might be used to counteract it. This concept of action and counteraction is a critical element in the functional model of creativity, and we are happy to see James and Drown’s (this issue) acknowledgment of the importance of this topic. Unfortunately, we created something of a red herring by implying that the intelligence and security communities knew nothing whatsoever of the possibility of the 9/11 attacks, whereas James and Drown give several examples of evidence showing that they were far from completely ignorant. Our example of the lack of “anticipation” of the attacks thus requires some clarification. The success of the attacks (from the point of view of the hijackers) serves to illustrate the key issue that it was not sufficient simply to be “generally concerned that terrorists were planning a multiple jetliner hijacking” prior to 9/11, the state of affairs that James and Drown documented in their commentary. The key to our functional model of creativity is the ability to foresee an event and to act (successfully) in advance of that event, preferably not in an ad hoc, purely reactive manner that might be good for a single defense, but by developing solutions displaying further properties of functional creativity (e.g., generalizability), or that show a long, slow decay function in novelty or effectiveness (or both).

James and Drown (this issue) also conclude that our ideas will be more novel to creativity researchers and theorists than to members of the intelligence and security communities. If, indeed, practitioners are already familiar with what we say, we can only rejoice, as we certainly want to be able to go about our normal business without fear of being attacked by terrorists. On the other hand, James and Drown also call for greater collaboration between scientific workers and practitioners, suggesting that the latter may not be as totally familiar with theory as their comments seem to imply. In any case, although theorists should undoubtedly consult more with practitioners, it seems to us that practitioners also have a responsibility to reach out to theorists, and not simply pooh-pooh what they have to say by arguing after a catastrophe that they (the practitioners) or their apologists actually knew all about it, and already have everything under control. One place to start would be for the relevant industries to sponsor theoretical, as well as applied, research in areas of particular interest. The crucial thing here is to avoid the “Vietnam syndrome” (which involves, in effect, clinging to what already exists), and showing openness to attempts to generate novelty in the discussion.

James and Drown’s (this issue) remarks about our use of the term malevolent, instead of negative, creativity are the most scathing aspect of their comments. They complain that the use of competing terminology will lead to “a mare’s nest of disconnected research and micro-theoretical publications instead of a systematic effort to advance understanding.” They go further by concluding that the true purpose of our article is to contribute to the development of such a mare’s nest, rather than to advance knowledge or application. The term true purpose clearly implies a secret intent that has been revealed in the nick of time. This is a harsh conclusion indeed, because it maligns our motives: If it is true that our article has actually obfuscated the issues and done harm to the discussion of terrorism and creativity—instead of giving hints on new perspectives, as we had hoped—this has occurred because we missed our mark, not because we deliberately set out to do something bad. This example seems to demonstrate the importance of the distinction between negative creativity (which may or may not involve deliberate intent to do evil), and malevolent creativity (which does involve such intent).

In any case, James and Drown’s (this issue) whole objection to our addition of the term malevolent to existing terminology is difficult for us to accept. In many areas of knowledge, there is a steady movement from the use of broad and undifferentiated terminology to the introduction of increasingly differentiated terms: The idea of, let us say, homicide has been differentiated to include accidental homicide, manslaughter, and murder, no doubt introducing uncertainty (to the advantage of lawyers), but at the same time allowing for a more differentiated discussion of the topic. Early in the modern creativity era, it was even argued that the very term creativity was unnecessary, because a term already existed for intellectual functioning (intelligence), but researchers have succeeded in coping with the mare’s nest this has produced. Returning to our specific topic, the term the dark side of creativity already existed before the 1999 paper that James and Drown mention, but we do not see their use of the expression negative as involving an evil intent to muddy the waters (i.e., as malevolent creativity), but welcome it as a further timely and insightful differentiation of the whole idea of creativity, as we had hoped they would welcome our efforts. We certainly feel no guilt in this regard!

All in all, however, whether the construct is called negative or malevolent creativity seems to us to be far less important than encouraging people to study and analyze the concept of using creativity for undesirable ends. Although James and Drown (this issue) express a legitimate concern, i.e., that the terminology used to describe creativity in this area must not proliferate to the point of
hindering progress, further research is nonetheless required to extend, not only the understanding of the creative process in this negative sense, but also in how to use that knowledge to protect society from its effects.

REFERENCES


