

*Juvenile fragments on genius (from 2006)*  
(Excerpt from this book)  
By Chris Wright

The word ‘genius’ has a magical sound. *Genius*. “He is a genius.” It’s redolent of the divine, or at least the über-human. A genius isn’t quite human; there is something mysterious, almost mystical, about him. People speak of him in reverent tones. Einstein is the prototypical example. All his eccentricities, his absentmindedness and childishness, even his selfishness, are forgiven him, for he was a *genius*. “What is it like to be a genius?” “It must be so hard to tolerate people!” “The genius is immortal.”

In an interview once, David Foster Wallace recalled a day in college when a professor of his had told him he was a genius. It was the happiest day of his life. “I thought I’d never have to go to the bathroom again,” he said. In my younger days, I myself used to take pleasure in basking in thoughts of self-flattery. I would read Schopenhauer’s many passages in which he waxes rhapsodic about the genius, describing him in rich detail and contrasting him with the average dullard. The genius, he says, is like a child, emotional, fickle, prone to alternating bouts of joy and melancholy, absentminded, fascinated by the world, self-absorbed, sensitive, lonely, careless with money, good-natured but easily disappointed in people. I was pleased, naively, that every facet of his descriptions was true of me. (My absentmindedness, for example, has always been comically severe.)

As I grew older (21, 22), I came to understand the silliness of Schopenhauer’s thoughts about the extraordinariness of the genius. For the reader not acquainted with his ideas, I should say that he thought geniuses had some kind of privileged access to the thing-in-itself, the inner essence of the world. In ecstatic moments of artistic contemplation other people can sometimes approximate this, but not to the extent that the genius can. He literally has intuitive “knowledge” of the way the world is in itself. –Pretty fanciful, eh? The funny thing is that our ordinary linguistic usage accords well with what Schopenhauer said. We implicitly think of the genius as possessing some sort of divine insight into reality—or, if he is an artist, as possessing a half-divine, half-mad sympathy with beauty/creativity. The word itself has these conceptual overtones.

To glance over the concept’s history is enlightening in this regard. The ancient Greeks didn’t have a word for genius, but they understood the difference between a merely talented artist and a supremely gifted one. In his dialogue *Ion*, Plato had this to say about the great poets:

None of the epic poets, if they’re good, are “masters” of their subject; [instead] they are inspired, possessed, and that is how they utter all those beautiful poems. The same goes for lyric poets if they’re good: just as the Corybantes are not in their right minds when they dance, lyric poets, too, are not in their right minds when they make those beautiful lyrics, but as soon as they sail into harmony and rhythm they are possessed by some Bacchic frenzy. ...A poet is an airy thing, winged and holy, and he is not able to make poetry until he becomes inspired and goes out of his mind and his intellect is no longer in him. ...The god himself is the one who speaks [through him].

Thus Plato originated, or at least popularized, the theory that the creative genius is a vessel for some higher force, something over which he has no control—that during his creative episodes he experiences a kind of madness. Many artists have latched onto this conception (no doubt partly because they find it flattering); Percy Bysshe Shelley, for example, was sympathetic to the Platonic

vision, ostensibly because he himself felt as if his poems came from “outside” him, or from an unconscious source. And Nietzsche described his experience of writing *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in a similar vein:

Has anyone at the end of the nineteenth century a clear idea of what poets of strong ages have called *inspiration*? If not, I will describe it.— If one had the slightest residue of superstition left in one’s system, one could hardly reject altogether the idea that one is merely incarnation, merely mouthpiece, merely a medium of overpowering forces. The concept of revelation, in the sense that suddenly, with indescribable certainty and subtlety, something becomes *visible*, audible, something that shakes one to the last depths and throws one down, that merely describes the facts. One hears, one does not seek; one accepts, one does not ask who gives; like lightning, a thought flashes up, with necessity, without hesitation regarding its form,—I never had any choice. A rapture whose tremendous tension occasionally discharges itself in a flood of tears, now the pace quickens involuntarily, now it becomes slow; one is altogether beside oneself, with the distinct consciousness of subtle shudders and of one’s skin creeping down to one’s toes; a depth of happiness in which even what is most painful and gloomy does not seem something opposite but rather conditioned, provoked, a *necessary* color in such a superabundance of light... Everything happens involuntarily in the highest degree but as in a gale of a feeling of freedom, of absoluteness, of power, of divinity... The involuntariness of image and metaphor is strangest of all; one no longer has any notion of what is an image or a metaphor, everything offers itself as the nearest, most obvious, simplest expression. It actually seems, to allude to something Zarathustra says, as if the things themselves approached and offered themselves as metaphors...

Aristotle emphasized the kinship of genius with madness. “No excellent soul is without a tincture of madness.” This brings me to the historical connection between the concepts of genius and the demonic. The latter has a complex history. Even in ancient Greece, the word ‘daimon’ already had multiple connotations. While it *denoted* a semi-divine being who interfered in human affairs, often with destructive ends, its *connotations* were more controversial. Aeschylus, for example, interpreted the daimon as essentially tragic and destructive: in *The Persians*, the Queen attributed Xerxes’ ruinous hubris, his delusions, to a daimon that had taken away his judgment. But even in Aeschylus there are ambiguities, for in the same play a ghost (a daimon itself) says that Xerxes’ daimon *is* his hubris, his hubris that led him to defy the gods. Heraclitus had this same psychological understanding of the demonic element: it arises from man’s own self. “Man’s character is his daimon” (fragment 119). And, like Aeschylus’s daimon, it determines man’s tragic fate. Socrates, on the other hand, conceived the daimon as a positive power, a supernatural element that keeps man within the fold of rational self-determination. It is an “inner voice” that warns him whenever he is about to do something irrational or harmful. In his paper “The Demonic: From Aeschylus to Tillich,” Wolfgang Zucker summarizes the conflict between Socrates’s benevolent conception and Aeschylus’s tragic one:

For the tragedies, the daimon’s distinctive power is the result of man’s alienation from the objective world order; therefore the demonic appears as an avenging and hostile force. For the rational philosopher in an age of demythologization, the demonic appears as a benevolent helper toward his self-realization, consenting to man’s autonomy as long as he

does not lose himself to his passions (ἐπιθυμία) or contentiousness (Ψιλονικία). The Latin interpreters showed a perfect understanding of what Plato had in mind when they translated the word as “genius.”

We see here that ‘genius’ denotes a benevolent spirit, the guiding or tutelary spirit of a man. In Roman mythology, every man had a genius. Originally, the genius was an ancestor who watched over his descendants, but over time the concept evolved to denote a personal guardian spirit that granted intellect and prowess. The distant origins of the modern word are evident.

In any case, the Socratic understanding didn’t last long. I won’t trace the entire history of the word ‘demon,’ but during Christian times it signified a devilish spirit, a manifestation of evil. This is what it meant throughout the Middle Ages. Finally in the eighteenth century the concept regained some of its original, Greek meaning. I’ll quote the whole passage from Zucker:

...The rediscovery of the demonic as a force that cannot be measured in terms of good and evil was due to the anti-rational cult of genius at the end of the eighteenth century. It was the expression of a fundamental opposition against the Enlightenment, against the utilitarian middle-class concept of order, and against the prevailing moralistic and intellectualistic theology. Such expression needed as its social precondition the breakdown of the old social system and the emergence of a new marginal class of artists who were no longer merely skilled artisans. It is at this time that the designations *artiste* and *Künstler* came in use, designations which did not mean simply specific occupations, but a way of life outside the hierarchy of social and economical values.

At the same time, poets began to see their kinsmen and associates in the visual artists and musicians rather than, as before, in philosophers and scholars. Precisely because secular and clerical princes lost the means for guaranteeing employment and income for the painters and musicians of their households, the practitioners of the various arts became free agents and developed their own ideology of genius.

According to this new viewpoint, the artist was no longer a man who simply had learned the use of brush and chisel or could play different musical instruments, but he now was gifted with some supernatural power; he had genius, or even he himself was “a genius.” A genius is not an ordinary human being; he belongs to a different order and can neither be understood nor judged by society. His acts do not conform to the norms of accepted behavior, but also his work has a superhuman quality that makes it incomparable with the work of other men. Thus the artist can neither share the comforts and rewards of socially useful occupations, nor does he feel compelled to submit to the restrictions and prescriptions of social conventions.

The essential point, however, is that this extraordinary, this marginal position of the artistic genius is not the result of free choice, but the effect of being possessed by a semi-divine power, namely “genius.” The exercising of an artistic endowment is therefore not an achievement, an action of man, but a painful suffering, a passion. Therefore the usual categories of good and evil, of useful and useless, do not apply to the genius. What he does and what he suffers is his fate. He is not a genius because he is an extraordinary artist; rather, he is an artist because he is possessed by a genius. Raphael would be the great artist he was, even if he had been born without hands.

Raphael was possessed by a demon, a genius. Goethe's famous interpretation of the demonic unequivocally associates it with geniuses (the people, not the spirits). The creativity of great men is demonic; the personalities of men like Napoleon and Byron are demonic; nature itself has elements of the demonic; fate is demonic. Thus the genius is intimately related to fate, to the cosmic order. In his autobiography *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, Goethe describes the demonic as "[representing] a power which is, if not opposed to the moral order of the world, yet at cross-purposes to it; such that one could compare the one to the warp, and the other to the woof. ...[People who exemplify the demonic] are not always men superior in mind or talents, seldom do they recommend themselves by the goodness of their heart. Yet, a tremendous power goes out from them; they possess an incredible force over all other creatures and even over the elements; nobody can say how far their influence will reach..." While the word 'genius' isn't mentioned, clearly Goethe would classify demonic men as, in some sense, geniuses, due to their unconscious, supernatural power. And when discussing demonic men he always refers to people like Mozart, Byron, and Caesar—i.e., "geniuses." At other times Goethe, like most Romantics, attributes to the genius special rights, exemptions from duties to which the mass of men must adhere. Ordinary morality doesn't apply to him. Geniuses are "permitted" to be selfish, immoral, cruel, for the sake of realizing themselves, simply because this is what they are *driven* to do. They *have* to do it; they have no choice in the matter. Nietzsche (who ironically was critical of Romanticism) elevated this myth into a philosophic vision, namely that of the *Übermensch*. The *Übermensch* can act immorally in the name of a higher morality, viz. that of the will to power. Realizing one's will to power is *the* imperative in life; the genius has a qualitatively greater will to power than the average man, so he has a qualitatively "higher" morality. (See, for instance, the section in the ironically named *Twilight of the Idols* entitled "My conception of the genius.") –It's a tribute to the power of all these Romantic writers that their ideologies still captivate us in unguarded moments, and that, to an extent, their ideas have seeped into the very meaning of certain words.

Such beliefs in the genius's extra-ordinariness tie into the association of genius with madness. Madness, after all, is not ordinary. This should also remind us of the ancient idea that insane people, or people under the influence of drugs, have insights into the divine, the inner essence of the world. Oracles were in fact susceptible to moments of "insanity," or at least were "beside themselves" in their oracular moments. Perhaps we moderns are not entirely free from this pagan deification of madness.

Be that as it may, one has to admit that creative "geniuses" (scientific, artistic, and philosophical) have tended to be psychologically unhealthy and unsatisfied. –This brings me to the men of genius themselves, as opposed to the ideology. We have gained some idea, hopefully, of the nature and origin of the myth; now we have to see how well the myth accords with reality. To what extent are so-called geniuses extraordinary? What does it *mean* to call them "great"? If in fact the notion of genius is misguided, where does that leave us who idealize it?

To answer the question of whether geniuses are really "different" from ordinary people, we have to ask how it is that someone is labeled a genius in the first place. And here we encounter the first premise in the debunking of the myth. For the process by which people are labeled geniuses is not at all scientific. Even if we leave aside such secondary uses of the word as "Bill Clinton has a genius for politics" and concentrate on people famous for their *creativity*, there is nothing like a consistent standard in applying to someone the coveted label. The application results from a series of cultural accidents; deserving people are often denied the label while undeserving ones get lucky. For example, in part because of accidental historical circumstances (such as the opposition of the Church), Charles Darwin is called a genius, despite the fact that his main theoretic

contribution was the single, simple idea of “natural selection by means of random variation”—which isn’t nearly as impressive as Archimedes’ or Max Planck’s or Ernest Rutherford’s achievements.<sup>1</sup> (Darwin wasn’t the first to propose the theory of evolution.) Yet Rutherford is not commonly called a genius, despite his amazing accomplishments. [...]

It will be objected that this argument shows only that popular recognition is sometimes mistaken, not that the *real* geniuses don’t deserve their title. Besides, there are many examples of public recognition that is both widespread and justified. In literature: Shakespeare, Keats, Shelley, Goethe, Heine, Nietzsche, Faulkner, Joyce, and so on. —But then what are we saying in calling these men geniuses? What do we mean? And what are the criteria?

The ideology of genius that I’ve outlined is premised on the belief in a qualitative, categorical difference between the ingenious and the merely talented. That is, they can’t be differentiated merely by *quantity*, such as the genius’s greater productivity or his somewhat greater creativity—unless, of course, the quantitative differences are so great that they amount to a qualitative difference. I doubt, though, that anyone would want to defend the Romantic ideology anymore. People might say simply, “A genius has extraordinary creativity and great intuitive powers.” But in fact I think that this definition, which does adhere to the word’s ordinary usage, itself implies that there are “qualitatively distinct” attributes of genius. “A genius is a *great human being*, ‘higher’ than the rest of us.” My goal in the following will be to refute this conception—that is, to show that nothing in particular distinguishes “geniuses,” or “great men” in general, from everyone else. Later I’ll suggest why this issue is significant.

Incidentally, I’m using the word ‘genius’ as it was used by the Romantics, and as it’s still used in most contexts. It is now also taken to denote people like Marilyn vos Savant, who have extremely high IQs but are not known for their creativity, or people like Kim Peek, who have astonishing memories. I have no quarrel with this usage, because it’s relatively empty and doesn’t involve the notion of *greatness*. It doesn’t incorporate a value-judgment—“This person is more valuable than the rest of us”—as does the other conception. It is basically the idea of greatness that I’m arguing against. To do that, I’ll first argue against the meaningfulness of the concept ‘genius,’ and then I’ll extend my critique to the notion of ‘greatness.’

Not only philosophical and scientific, but even artistic geniuses are held to have great powers of intuition. So what is this thing that everyone praises? What is intuition? Briefly stated, it is a non-visual form of seeing. A non-discursive insight. A non-tactile mode of perception. It somehow involves imagination, though not all imagining is called intuiting. Maybe it should be, but both terms are so vague, virtually indefinable, that a demand for perfect consistency in their use would be misplaced. Moreover, I think there are subtle differences in how we use the words. For example, in many contexts, ‘intuition’ seems to connote that its object is *truth*, in some non-verbal form. One can supposedly intuit another’s state of mind or the solution to a problem, intuitions that aim for truth. The contrast with ‘imagination’ is obvious.

Be that as it may, the power of imagination is at least a prerequisite for the power of intuition. Geniuses are said to have both. Because their imaginations are so active, their intuitive powers are remarkable. Mozart, for example, is said to have had a unique musical imagination, as well as an ability to *intuit* his music. In his self-descriptions he says that he could somehow hear

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<sup>1</sup> The biologist Thomas Huxley’s reaction to Darwin’s idea was appropriate: “How extremely stupid not to have thought of that!” It’s just an *obvious* theory, almost a tautology. (Essentially it says: those variations that increase the likelihood of an animal’s survival will tend to survive and be passed on.) Incidentally, Alfred Russel Wallace conceived of it around the same time Darwin did, but few people think of him as a genius.

an entire piece in a single moment, all jumbled together in his mind. This idea makes (partial) sense only if we interpret it metaphorically: he isn't hearing all the individual notes together, which would be an intolerable dissonance; he is "imaginatively" understanding the thematic development of the piece, its structure and outline. A parallel would be the philosopher's intuition of a particular theory—say, Saul Kripke's intuition of the fact that proper names are "rigid designators." (See his book *Naming and Necessity*.) Or Hegel's intuition of the fact that the self is self-consciousness. These two men, in having great philosophical imaginations, can experience potent intuitions.

To give a precise definition of intuition is impossible, because the word itself is very imprecise. Very nebulous; hard to get a grasp on. When I introspect, I experience my own philosophical intuitions as a distinctive manifestation of imagination, an unconceptualizable "seeing" of the truth (or what *seems* to be the truth), unmediated by words. I really can't say much more about them. A good way to describe them, perhaps, is to call this type of intuition *intentional perception*, as opposed to *phenomenal* perception (such as physical sensations). This definition, vague though it is, at least emphasizes the elements of *depth* and *force* in intuition, as well as the element of mental perception. When I have a quick thought about a person who isn't present I don't feel particularly as if I'm experiencing a perception, an *intuition*. I just interpret myself as *thinking* about him, that's all. When I purposely empathize with someone, on the other hand—when I "place myself in his shoes," by imagining my reactions if I were in his situation—the intuitive element is present. I'm having an intuition in the full sense, for my empathic insight *strikes* me, with a certain force. There is a "suddenness" to this kind of intuition.

Since there are not clear boundaries between the various types of intuition (insofar as there are such types), my distinguishing a particular class of thought is inevitably going to be somewhat arbitrary. It's useful, though, and necessary, for when people attribute to the genius intuitive abilities, they're tacitly doing the same thing. They're demarcating a class of "full" intuitions from the commonplace thoughts we all have most of the time, which themselves have intuitive features. This fact itself should make us wary of positing a categorical difference between the genius and the ordinary person. But at the moment I want only to emphasize that, even under the restrictive definition I gave in the last paragraph, "ordinary people" commonly have intuitions.

I suspect the reader will grant me this. He may say, though, that geniuses have intuitions more often. However, he has already significantly weakened his defense of the genius by admitting that the average guy on the street can have one of the supposedly defining experiences of the genius, namely that of intuition. By claiming that geniuses have intuitions more often than others, he has reduced his case to the belief in a merely *quantitative* difference between the two types of people. And the conclusion has to be that there is no fixed, categorical difference, in this respect at least. There is but an unclear, blurry merging between the two "categories"—which effectively refutes the Romantics' conception, and thus the implicit significance of our conventional linguistic usage. Even great personifications of genius, like Mozart, Kant, and Newton, are in this respect merely uncommon examples of ordinary people, in that they have the ordinary experience of intuition relatively often.

Of course it will be objected that, in giving a *phenomenological* analysis of intuition, I've ignored what is really unique in the genius's intuitions. While his *experience* of them may be similar to the ordinary person's experience, their *content* is different. For example, while the philosopher Derek Parfit's intuitions may, for him, feel similar to the way Kant's intuitions felt to him, Kant's were more fruitful, pithy, etc. This is why he is called a genius, while Parfit is not.

This objection is perceptive, in that it links intuition to creativity, which is another criterion in the definition of the genius. A man like Kant has intuitions with more creative potential than a

man like Parfit. Consider the following quotation from Henri Poincaré, who was a mathematician of undisputed genius, in which he describes the experience of profound mathematical creation:

...Most striking at first is this appearance of sudden illumination, a manifest sign of long, unconscious prior work. The role of this unconscious work in mathematical invention appears to me incontestable, and traces of it would be found in other cases where it is less evident. Often when one works at a hard question, nothing good is accomplished at the first attack. Then one takes a rest, longer or shorter, and sits down anew to the work. During the first half-hour, as before, nothing is found, and then all of a sudden the decisive idea presents itself to the mind. It might be said that the conscious work has been more fruitful because it has been interrupted and the rest has given back to the mind its force and freshness. But it is more probable that the rest has been filled out with unconscious work and that the result of this work has afterwards revealed itself to the geometer just as in the cases I have cited... These sudden inspirations never happen except after some days of voluntary effort which has appeared absolutely fruitless and whence nothing good seems to have come, where the way taken seems totally astray. These efforts then have not been as sterile as one thinks; they have set agoing the unconscious machine and without them it would not have moved and would have produced nothing...

This is quoted in Hans Eysenck's book *Genius: The Natural History of Creativity* (1995). Eysenck summarizes the passage: "This quotation well describes what countless mathematicians, scientists, writers, artists, and composers have described somewhat less clearly. There is the preliminary labor; the incubation period; the sudden integration, owing its existence to inspiration rather than conscious logical thought, and finally the verification or proof, perfectly conscious..." (Chapter 5.)

It would seem that most people rarely experience this kind of intuition, the kind that results from sustained conscious and unconscious work. Correspondingly, they're called less creative than people like Poincaré. The creativity of the latter is closely related to the content and origin of their intuitions; otherwise they would, supposedly, be merely *talented*. The talented person may be industrious and productive, but his work is less instinctual or unconscious than the genius's, and this results in its relative mediocrity. (The obvious hidden premise is that, for whatever reason, if significant unconscious work—and consequent intuitive illumination—is involved, the product will likely have more value than if the work all takes place on a conscious level.)

But here the question arises: is it the nature of the activity or the worth of the work that determines the genius? If the former, then whether the final product is intrinsically valuable is irrelevant; the point is that it has been arrived at through a process akin to that described by Poincaré. If the latter, on the other hand, then the nature of the creative process is irrelevant; what matters is only the intrinsic value of the work. Neither option seems very satisfying, though. Poincaré might respond, "Both aspects are important: you can't have the intrinsic value without the unconscious, intuitive creative process." But is this right? There seems no way of knowing.

Perhaps it's best just to stipulate—for the sake of definitional clarity—that the class of *true* geniuses includes only those people who are creative in a Poincaréan, intuitive and unconscious way. This appears to capture the essence of our ordinary use of the word 'genius,' since, after all, it isn't a contradiction to say that a particular man was a genius who unfortunately produced only mediocre work. He had the *potential* for brilliant work, due to the nature of his creativity, but he

failed to realize it. Thus, the direct criterion for true genius is not the value of the work but the fecundity of the mind—a fecundity revealed by the nature of its creative process.

Even apart from the further testimony of “countless mathematicians, scientists, writers, artists, and composers,”<sup>2</sup> that claim is justified by the intellectual character of the most uncontroversial geniuses, such as Shakespeare, Byron, Mozart, and Einstein. We’ve already seen what Mozart said about his creative process; Einstein has written somewhere that in the moment of his decisive insight into the theory of relativity, he felt as if something had “snapped” in his mind. He was overcome by elation; his momentary intuition, after countless hours of conscious work, was the most powerful experience of his life. As for Byron and Shakespeare, one has only to read their works to see that their unconscious is responsible for them. (*Don Juan*, for instance, is ridiculously brilliant. It’s a poem unlike any other in the English language—in *any* language—surpassing even Pope’s *Dunciad*. Clearly no merely conscious manipulation of words could have created it.)

In short, we’re back to Plato, Shelley, and Nietzsche, albeit made a little more precise and quasi-scientific. The creative genius is defined as a person whose mind is fertile in such a way that much of its work is done on an unconscious level, and that once the unconscious work is finished, the result intuitively appears to the conscious mind and is then crafted and manipulated. I think that this argument, and this definition, is the strongest one possible in support of the claim that geniuses really are categorically, “*substantively*” different from ordinary people. For it claims that implicit in our ordinary linguistic usage is the notion that there is an *essence* to the genius, an essence that other people lack. This is what the Romantics argued, and it is what I am denying. The definition links intuition and creativity in a plausible way, thus uniting the two main criteria in people’s understanding of what genius is. (Geniuses are, of course, held to have other qualities, various personal idiosyncrasies, but these are not *criteria*.)

So my task is to show why that argument is mistaken. I have to show that our admiration of “true” geniuses is misguided. First I’ll point out that even on the restrictive definition I’ve given, the class of geniuses has a far greater extension than is commonly supposed. There are thousands or hundreds of thousands of so-called geniuses in every generation in the U.S. alone. Many or most poets, novelists, mathematicians, theoretical physicists, and others qualify, because their creative process is essentially the same as Poincaré’s. It’s wrong, then, to think that geniuses are spectacularly unusual, that there are only several in any given generation. This fact in itself serves as an argument against the attribution of semi-divinity implicit in our use of the term.

Similarly, there is nothing particularly remarkable about the behavior of a genius. People tend to associate certain stereotypes with the concept, such as: irritable, impatient, eccentric, absentminded, half-insane, depressive, self-absorbed, socially naïve, or having an unkempt appearance. These stereotypes heighten the mystique of the concept. They do seem to have *some* empirical basis, but, first of all, if we’re assuming approximately the definition I gave above, it may well be that most geniuses do *not* exhibit these traits (any more than the average person). Secondly, even the ones who do—such as Einstein, Van Gogh, Byron, Beethoven, Wittgenstein—don’t exhibit them to the extent that myth suggests they do. In his lifetime, for instance, Byron enjoyed the reputation of being full of passion at all times, a Don Juan pining for love and happiness. His poems were the basis for the myth. And while it flattered him, he had enough intellectual integrity to remark that the myth was absurd: no one is as passionate as he was reputed

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<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Coleridge’s description of the circumstances under which he wrote *Kubla Khan*, and A. E. Housman’s statement to the effect that sometimes, when he goes for a stroll outside, an entire stanza of a new poem suddenly appears before his mind, fully worked out.



to be. The vast majority of the time, he said, he was utterly ordinary, as passionless as anyone else; it was only in rare moments that he felt lonely or intensely in love, and it was then that he wrote his poems. Similarly, if you had followed Van Gogh around every day, or Einstein, you would have seen that there was nothing especially sublime about him. Van Gogh, you might think, was kind of a bore, a little too gloomy at times, while Einstein was just a fairly pleasant man with unusual hair. Perhaps moody, perhaps a bit odd in some respects—but who isn't? Everyone has idiosyncrasies. The main reason it seems as if “geniuses” have more than most people is that people pay more attention to their behavior than to that of others. People write about their experiences with the “great man”; every unusual act of his is recorded, and the consequent impression is of a unique and fascinating person. But if you met him without knowing who he was, the odds are overwhelming that you wouldn't find him particularly memorable. —Napoleon was right that “no man is a hero to his valet.” Familiarity breeds contempt.

It may be true, though, that people called geniuses have tended not to be “well-adjusted.” Many of them have been narcissistic, schizoid, (manic-)depressive, or simply lonely. Some have ended up insane. Others have committed suicide. Artists in particular appear to suffer from erratic mentalities. They're often overly sensitive and unhappy, except, perhaps, in moments of creation. One wonders why. What is it about this kind of creativity that makes the creative person susceptible to mental illness? The most obvious factor is loneliness. When your innate aptitudes are different from most people's and your interests are not theirs, you're going to feel different from them and hence lonely. It will be rare that you find a true companion. Eventually you'll learn that you feel more “fulfilled” and happy when you're being productive than when you're with other people, so you'll spend much of your time creating work in solitude. And while this will, in a sense, make you happy, it will also probably contribute to your unhappiness, since what humans desire more than anything else is “recognition” (love, etc.). No matter how good your work is, as long as you live and work in relative solitude you will be unsatisfied, possibly neurotic and depressed.

So, part of the problem is simply that the highly creative person often doesn't feel comfortable with most people, which means that the part of him that craves validation and affection is frustrated. He may therefore have a fragile sense of self, which depends too much on people's reactions to him and his work, and his self-esteem might be inadequate even as he becomes somewhat egomaniacal due to his isolation, his comparing himself with past great men, and his self-righteous conviction that “despite what they all think, I am a genius, I am ahead of my time!” (which conviction is partly a defense-mechanism against psychological insecurity—i.e., an attempt to give himself the recognition he doesn't receive from others). He will finally come to see the justification of his existence in his work, because his work is the only thing that allows him to recognize his sense of self in the world—to see it objectified and thereby confirmed.

The issue can be approached from a neurological perspective too, by asking what are the neural causes of the connection between certain types of creativity and mental illness, but the foregoing suggestions are sufficient to show that the so-called genius's pathological state of mind is thoroughly earthbound, with fairly ordinary causes. It isn't (only) that he sees so much ugliness in the world that he despairs, having a soul so noble that he pines for Beauty while the cruel world crushes his hopes. There is nothing particularly sublime about his “madness.”

So all the mystique that hovers around the “genius” because of his supposedly eccentric behavior is based on illusions. People misunderstand both themselves and geniuses by attributing to the latter exceptional personal qualities. In general, this idolization is almost as unfounded as the idolization of celebrities: it reflects the peculiar human tendency to pick out a certain person

or group of people and look up to them, model oneself after them, praise them and seek their affection, attribute to them supposedly unique qualities many of which are in fact possessed by everyone. This tendency first shows itself in childhood, when one admires one's parents as if they were perfect all-knowing beings; later it takes other forms, such as hero-worship and the idealization of unusually creative people.

Doubtless John Dryden was partly right when he said, in *Absalom and Achitophel*,

Great wits to madness sure are near allied,  
And thin partitions do their bounds divide.

This idea is quite interesting, insofar as there is some truth to it. Aside from their both sometimes being absentminded, socially awkward, withdrawn, tormented, etc., the exceptionally creative and the “insane” can have deeper similarities too. For instance, they both tend to interpret reality differently from how others interpret it, e.g., by perceiving logical and causal connections where others wouldn't. Likewise, obsessive thinking is a common experience in some types of insanity. People suffering from a psychosis may have compulsive thoughts, delusions of grandeur, hallucinations, severe depressive tendencies, paranoid thoughts—all of which have been associated with genius. Creative people often think compulsively about themselves and are driven compulsively by their creative urge. If they're in the process of creating something, they'll feel strangely “haunted” or “bothered” until it's finished. It will feel like their lives have been put on hold until they're satisfied with their creation, because they just can't stop thinking about it—about getting it *right*, about the absolute necessity of getting past their doubts and moving on with life. (See §93 of Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*: “...But why, then, do you write? —A: Well, my friend, to be quite frank: so far, I have not discovered any other way of getting rid of my thoughts. —B: And why do you want to get rid of them? —A: Why do I want to? Do I want to? I *must*.”)

But, of course, whatever seemingly unusual quality one wants to assign some category of people is to a degree possessed by many others as well. Even such meritorious traits as having an impressive work-ethic or a wide-ranging curiosity or great intellectual integrity are dispersed widely through the population. High creativity itself is universal, inasmuch as it is human nature to be astonishingly creative—in the use of language, for example, or in thinking of new ideas, or in interpreting new experiences, or in pursuing whatever talents one has. It may even be misleading to speak of someone's “exceptional creativity”; it seems exceptional to us because it takes a slightly different form than it does in most people, but others are, in their own ways, probably just as creative. We attribute too much creativity to some people and too little to the rest of us—especially given that, in many cases, the difference is simply that the former are more privileged than the latter, having more money or leisure time or a job that allows them to indulge their creative side more than most jobs do.

Anyway, one must reject the argument that there is an *essence* to genius, because we use the word in too many disparate contexts for it to have a single, coherent definition. Its denotations and connotations are associated through “family resemblances” (to quote Wittgenstein) rather than “necessary and sufficient conditions.” That is, its uses merely *resemble* each other; they don't have some clear definition in common, as do, say, the uses of the word ‘bachelor.’ Even with regard to the *creative* genius, common use of the term doesn't justify defining it in some such essentialist way as the Poincaréan definition I gave above. People disagree on who counts as a genius, and they disagree on what it is about someone that justifies pinning the label on him. The label, in fact, is really little more than an honorific, whose application depends largely on accidental

circumstances, the vagaries that determine popular recognition. As we saw earlier, it is merely an *ideological construct*, not a scientific one, and so suffers from a basic meaninglessness at its core.

“Fine!” you say. “I’ve agreed with your conclusion all along! Now tell me why I should care.” First of all, I think that questions about the nature of genius (or lack thereof) are interesting in their own right. But more importantly, I want to extend my critique to the idea of greatness. I think that this idea is even more meaningless than the other one, and for similar reasons. For one thing, we use the word in so many contexts that to extrapolate a satisfactory definition is impossible. A great person is one who, through whatever circumstances—not all of which redound to his credit—has managed to achieve something that impresses society, causes his name to trickle down through the various social classes. The criteria for attributions of greatness differ from person to person; the concept is so vague that nothing really substantive or “definite” determines its use. The person called great isn’t somehow “above” the rest of us (whatever that would mean); he isn’t “better” than us. The most that can be said in his favor is that certain qualities are, perhaps, more well-developed in him than in most people, while others are probably less so. Often his “greatness” is due to his flaws, whether they be childishness, narcissism, arrogance, or selfishness. Charles de Gaulle, for example, is sometimes considered a great man, but he was arrogant, vain, ridiculously conservative, self-deluded—all of which qualities made possible his “strong will” and thus his rise to power. Napoleon was selfish and brutal. Albert Schweitzer, on the other hand, was just an intelligent, good man who understood that humans, as such, have obligations toward each other, and acted on that knowledge.

People called great are often surprised at their reputation. They know they’re basically ordinary; they think that all the adulation they receive is silly, though they may play along with it because of vanity. Goethe, for example, insisted he was “extraordinarily ordinary,” just as human and flawed as everyone else. But because he wrote and talked well, people thought that he himself must be comparably great. That’s the main confusion: people confuse a person with his objectifications. They confuse Mozart with the *Jupiter* symphony, Byron with his passionate poems, Martin Luther King, Jr. with his powerful speeches. These people are as human as the rest of us, but their distinctive talent makes them seem extraordinary, namely because we look at a few objectifications and think we see the entire person. If certain objectifications seem more impressive than those of most people, we think that the person responsible for them must be that much more impressive as well. But really, the inner, subjective differences, and the biological differences, responsible for the different objectifications are minuscule. And, as I said, they often include traits that are considered weaknesses. —Humans are more or less similar. They’re fundamentally “equal,” however their self-expressions may occasionally suggest otherwise.

Incidentally, everything I’m arguing here is, in a sense, merely an articulation of what has become implicit in societal conditions, in social relations. The structure of late capitalism, with its submersion of the individual in the mass, its commodification of the human personality, its worship of science, and its puerile pop culture, is such that ‘greatness’ and ‘genius’ have become empty words, ludicrously romantic and anachronistic, to which people nonetheless continue to pay lip-service. Anyone who still truly believes in the possibility of greatness—the sort of hallowed immortality that people still reflexively attribute to, say, Lincoln, Einstein, or Gandhi—is behind the times. People are molded by their circumstances far more than they can ever mold them. Greatness, this strange midpoint between the earthly and the divine, is a myth, just as the divine itself is a myth. The Great Man theory of history is dead; the spirit of Thomas Carlyle is foreign to the spirit of late capitalism.

The evolution of languages proceeds on the basis of social evolution: new concepts emerge, new modes of communication appear on the basis of new institutions, new modes of life and production. And once particular concepts or ideologies have arisen, they will remain in circulation until *after* concrete social relations have made them obsolete. Only gradually will society slough off ossified ways of thought and communication, namely when it can no longer postpone its “ideological” adaptation to new circumstances. This is why the notions of greatness and genius are still taken as semi-seriously as they are. They’re relics of a more romantic, idealistic age than our own, though when they’ll effectively die out is impossible to say.

In some respects this state of affairs is desirable, but in others it isn’t. Human life has need of *some* illusions, after all. They need not be as patently delusive as, say, Christianity, but they have to function as tonics, as things that make life bearable. Nietzsche, for example, thought of art as such a tonic, a sort of Platonic lie that is, however, believed in by its *creators* more than anyone else. (Nietzsche thought that artists are mostly actors: through their work, they lie to themselves and others, by idealistically pretending to be something they’re not.) The belief in great men and geniuses has a similar function—not, admittedly, for most people, who have family, love and, in some cases, religion to make them happy, but for the less well-adjusted, who cling to the illusion of greatness desperately. Nietzsche, ironically, was an example. As are many artists. Their commitment to the illusion is a symptom of the unhappiness I mentioned above—the loneliness, the self-fixation. “If our contemporaries don’t recognize us,” they think, “well then, posterity will! We’ll have the last laugh! (After we’re dead, though.)” Such people are frequently more committed to their works than to life itself, or even to the lives of their children. Consider Montaigne’s observations:

Now once we consider the fact that we love our children simply because we begot them, calling them our second selves, we can see that we also produce something else from ourselves, no less worthy of commendation: for the things we engender in our soul, the offspring of our mind, of our wisdom and talents, are the products of a part more noble than the body and are more purely our own. In this act of generation we are both mother and father; these ‘children’ cost us dearer and, if they are any good, bring us more honor. In the case of our other children their good qualities belong much more to them than to us: we have only a very slight share in them; but in the case of these, all their grace, worth and beauty belong to us. For this reason they have a more lively resemblance and correspondence to us. Plato adds that such children are immortal and immortalize their fathers—even deifying them, as in the case of Lycurgus, Solon and Minos.

...Few devotees of poetry would not have been more gratified at fathering the *Aeneid* than the fairest boy in Rome, nor fail to find the loss of one more bearable than the other. For according to Aristotle, of all artists the one who is most in love with his handiwork is the poet.

Such people can be so in love with their works, and the potential immortality that lies in them, that they exhibit total despair upon losing them:

[The enemies of Labienus, a man who “excelled in every kind of literature,”] prosecuted him before the Roman magistrates and obtained a conviction, requiring several of the books he had published to be burnt. This was the very first case of the death penalty being inflicted on books and erudition; it was subsequently applied at Rome in several other cases.

...Labienus could not bear such a loss nor survive such beloved offspring; he had himself borne to the family vault on a litter and shut up alive; there he provided his own death and burial. It is difficult to find any example of fatherly love more vehement than that one...

A similar misfortune happened to Cremutius Cordus, who was accused of having praised Brutus and Cassius in his books. That slavish base and corrupt Senate (worthy of a worse master than Tiberius) condemned his writings to the pyre: it pleased him to keep his books company as they perished in the flames by starving himself to death.<sup>3</sup>

It seems that a certain kind of person, blessed with a Protestant ethic, will always see more merit in his “works” than in his “faith”—precisely because his works are what make possible his faith (in himself). He has to creatively “objectify” himself—project himself into the world, see his sense of self reflected and confirmed outside himself. Everyone needs this, but some people evidently need it more, or rather in different ways, than others. If these people have talents (which they usually do), they will use them, perhaps to the point of obsession, to get the self-confirmation they desire—because knowledge of their talents has become the most essential component in their self-regard. They want their belief in themselves to be confirmed by others, or by some “abstract Other” in themselves, and so they may exhibit astonishing industry in realizing their talents. No doubt they’re usually unaware of this motivation—they might even deny it, saying they already have so much pride that they don’t care how their works are received by the public—but, inasmuch as nearly anything done in excess is evidence of some kind of dissatisfaction, and dissatisfaction usually amounts to self-dissatisfaction, it’s clear that these industrious and talented people are dissatisfied with themselves on some deep level and try to alleviate their self-dissatisfaction through creation.<sup>4</sup>—And, as the excerpts from Montaigne show, if their works are destroyed, they feel as if they themselves have been destroyed.

But what is this identification with “great” objectifications if not identification with greatness itself? The objectifications are what raise the creator (in his own eyes) from the level of the mundane, which he hates, into the level of the semi-immortal. Without them he is just ordinary, and so his sense of self—which is committed to his extraordinariness—is not confirmed or recognized. But *with* them he is this being that can put beauty and profundity into the world. He so invests himself in his objectifications that he is able to live, in a way, *outside* himself; he doesn’t have to face the fact that he is just a human among humans, as mortal and earthbound as everyone else. He can ignore his obviously animal nature. Schopenhauer and Wagner can be seen as the prototypes—those two brilliant, deluded men. Schopenhauer did more than any other thinker to propagate the myth of genius, the conception of which he basically modeled after how he perceived his own personality: the genius is the man whose intellect is so powerful and energetic that it has been effectively detached from its service to the will (i.e., to the individual’s practical interests, his will-to-live), which in the average person is its sole function.

...The gift of genius is nothing but the most complete *objectivity*, i.e., the objective tendency of the mind, as opposed to the subjective directed to our own person, i.e., to the will. Accordingly, genius is the capacity to remain in a state of pure perception, to lose oneself in perception, to remove from the service of the will the knowledge which originally existed only for this service. In other words, genius is the ability to leave entirely out of sight our own interest, our willing, and our aims, and consequently to discard entirely

<sup>3</sup> Montaigne, *The Essays: A Selection* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 165, 166, 167.

<sup>4</sup> See *The Gay Science*, §284.

our own personality for a time, in order to remain *pure knowing subject*, the clear eye of the world... For genius to appear in an individual, it is as if a measure of the power of knowledge must have fallen to his lot far exceeding that required for the service of an individual will; and this superfluity of knowledge having become free, now becomes the subject purified of will, the clear mirror of the inner nature of the world. This explains the animation, amounting to disquietude, in men of genius, since the present can seldom satisfy them, because it does not fill their consciousness...<sup>5</sup>

Such panegyric passages go on for pages in Schopenhauer's books; and while I enjoy reading them, they're obviously fantasies. Wagner didn't think so, though. Like so many other Romantics, he adored Schopenhauer and his philosophy because it flattered him—specifically because of the privileged place that Schopenhauer accorded music. This art, he said, is superior to all others, since it is the most immediate and abstract manifestation of Will, i.e., the essence of reality. This theory gave Wagner the philosophical justification he needed to think of himself as the most monumental and metaphysical of geniuses, a self-conception that comforted him amidst all the suffering and toil that went into his composing. As Nietzsche remarked,<sup>6</sup> it's likely that Wagner needed his self-idealism, which he enshrined in his philosophical essays, in order to create. But in this respect he was just an ordinary "genius" taken to the extreme.

Self-idealism is ubiquitous, though it isn't usually taken to the excesses that Wagner took it. The very illusion that one is a substantial self—"Chris Wright," "John Smith," "Nancy Jones"—rather than merely a piece of matter with consciousness and memory-fragments is an example of self-idealism; so is love, which ascribes great value to the beloved; so is the attribution of some sort of importance to oneself. Everyone, of necessity, shares these illusions. Human life would not be possible without them. The brain naturally manufactures them, and they're what keep one interested in life. Scientific understanding, as Nietzsche and Max Weber saw, does not itself give rise to values, and indeed tends to show they don't have the "objectively justifiable" status we think they do but are mere projections of our own subjective attitudes. Nevertheless, we need values, we need self-love and self-idealism, and we need to idealize others. The notions of genius and greatness are ultimately senseless, but they can be of inestimable value in stimulating certain people to action, such that it can be very cruel to try to prove to someone that his idolization of a "hero" or so-called genius is a delusion.

The example that comes to mind is that of the young, talented person whose idealization of some hero gives him the inspiration to create. The young Nietzsche is his spokesman:

Your true nature lies, not concealed deep within you, but immeasurably high above you, or at least above that which you usually take yourself to be. Your true educators and formative teachers reveal to you what the true basic material of your being is, something in itself ineducable and in any case difficult of access, bound and paralysed: your educators can be only your liberators.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *The World as Will and Representation* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1969), 185, 186.

<sup>6</sup> "Let him [i.e., Wagner] have his intellectual tempers and cramps. Let us, in all fairness, ask what strange nourishments and needs an art like [his] may require to be able to live and grow..." *The Gay Science*, §99. (Kaufmann's translation.)

<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, Part Three, "Schopenhauer as Educator."

This hero-worship is another of the illusions in which human life consists. Without it, a lot of young people would find life boring and pointless. *I* certainly would have. My idolization of particular “great men” gave substance to the (self-)ideals without which I would have found life dull. If I had thought that everyone is basically similar and equal—if, that is, I had truly, intuitively understood humanity—such that I hadn’t looked up to anyone as superior to the rest of us, it’s doubtful that I could have had my ideals. It would have seemed futile to strive for anything if I weren’t basically striving for the approval of past great men. How *boring* it would be to strive for the approval of the average person!—or of someone like me! No satisfaction would come from that kind of recognition. I had to think there were people greater than I, whose judgment I trusted more than my own. Whether I had value as a human being depended on whether they would have thought I had value. —On an *intellectual* level such people may recognize they’re the victim of an illusion, but implicitly they still have to believe in it.

Incidentally, if they actually met the person whom they idolize, they would likely be disappointed. Not necessarily because he wouldn’t measure up to their expectations, but just because he is as human as they themselves. Similarly, people who meet a celebrity are sometimes taken aback that he is just an ordinary person. “He’s easygoing and pleasant. He even goes to the mall! Just like everyone else!” The reason they’re surprised is the reason why the hero-worshiper may be disappointed upon meeting his idol: they’ve come to identify the famous person with his *name*, the *idea* of him. They see him not as something concrete and ordinary but as a sort of abstract concept, a *principle* as it were, just like the abstract other in consciousness that drives us to seek self-confirmation. This famous person has become (for them) ingrained in the structure of reality, of social reality; he, or his “concept,” is a component in the cultural or psychological background against which they live their lives, like a philosophical or aesthetic idea—with the decisive difference, though, that *this* “concept” is also a *self*. Bill Clinton, say, or Barack Obama, or some other famous person, is part-*self* and part-*concept*—part-*other* and part-*object*. His otherness, or selfhood, means that he is the kind of thing from which one wants validation, namely a human being; his “objecthood” (his being a cultural concept) means that he is more permanent than the rest of us, as though he is a part of reality itself.<sup>8</sup> The result is that he is implicitly perceived as more than human. In being “recognized” by him—or in identifying with him or with some past “great man”—one is recognized by or is identifying with a part of (social) reality itself, which of course is very affirmative of one’s sense of self.

These fragmentary reflections, I hope, help explain humans’ odd fascination with genius, greatness, and fame. My main concern, though, has been to show that the former two qualities are mere projections of the admiring person’s attitude, not substantive, coherent properties in and of themselves. Widespread appreciation of this fact would facilitate a healthy equality among people.

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<sup>8</sup> A better way of saying it may be that he is effectively a concrete version—an especially valued or “impressive” one—of the abstract other from which one is always seeking recognition/validation; hence the excitement of meeting him. His social importance creates the aura around him of a kind of “self-certainty,” a particularly powerful kind of substitute self-confidence, a *reality*, recognition from which/whom can prove one’s own reality, i.e., the validity of one’s implicit self-love.