



Divine Fury: A History of Genius

Darrin M. McMahon

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Genius. With hints of madness and mystery, moral license and visionary force, the word suggests an almost otherworldly power: the power to create, to divine the secrets of the universe, even to destroy. Yet the notion of genius has been diluted in recent times. Today, rock stars, football coaches, and entrepreneurs are labeled ‘geniuses,’ and the word is applied so widely that it has obscured the sense of special election and superhuman authority that long accompanied it.

As acclaimed historian Darrin M. McMahon explains, the concept of genius has roots in antiquity, when men of prodigious insight were thought to possess—or to be possessed by—demons and gods. Adapted in the centuries that followed and applied to a variety of religious figures, including prophets, apostles, sorcerers, and saints, abiding notions of transcendent human power were invoked at the time of the Renaissance to explain the miraculous creativity of men like Leonardo and Michelangelo.

Yet it was only in the eighteenth century that the genius was truly born, idolized as a new model of the highest human type. Assuming prominence in figures as varied as Newton and Napoleon, the modern genius emerged in tension with a growing belief in human equality. Contesting the notion that all are created equal, geniuses served to dramatize the exception of extraordinary individuals not governed by ordinary laws. The phenomenon of genius drew scientific scrutiny and extensive public commentary into the 20th century, but it also drew religious and political longings that could be abused. In the genius cult of the Nazis and the outpouring of reverence for the redemptive figure of Einstein, genius achieved both its apotheosis and its Armageddon.

The first comprehensive history of this elusive concept, *Divine Fury* follows the fortunes of genius and geniuses through the ages down to the present day, showing how—despite its many permutations and recent democratization—genius remains a potent force in our lives, reflecting modern needs, hopes, and fears.

Divine Fury: A History of Genius Details

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From Reader Review *Divine Fury: A History of Genius* for online ebook

Jim Alvaro says

Wow, a study of genius. Well written and researched. I really enjoyed this one.

Jim Clinton Slusher says

The best part of *Divine Fury* is the final 30 pages, wherein McMahon reflects on the impressively diverse and thorough research that is reflected in the rest of his discussion of the nature of “genius” and how our understanding of it has changed over the course of the centuries. In his epilogue, he reflects on the irony that in a world where now almost everyone can be considered a genius at something, there are few, perhaps no, actual geniuses to be found. One of the problems I have with the book, perhaps with the topic itself, is the simple notion of why we spend any time debating the definition of genius. Is there really some value in determining whether, say, Napoleon was a genius of war or Edison was a genius of invention. I wondered often throughout the book whether the author would ever reference Edison’s famous declaration that genius is 1 percent inspiration and 99 perspiration. And when he does acknowledge that description it is acutely appropriate to the conclusions one may consider about genius based on the author’s discussion and reflection on the term and the people to whom it has been, or may be, applied. There is throughout this book an aura of stark pedantry, and I often found myself thinking that it would be an A-plus graduate thesis but was a work of limited appeal to a general audience. At the risk of damning it with faint praise, I will say that “*Diving Fury*” is an incredibly well-researched examination of the nature and definition of the term “genius,” with ultimately a limited reflection on why it matters for us to dissect the term. I think what I’m trying to get at is that this book would great for a certain segment of readers, but may be a bit scholarly - in tone as well as content - in the way it concentrates on the term “genius.” Much of the body of the book is devoted to a rather academic discussion of the term and the historical applications for it. In that sense, it may have something of a limited audience; but the concluding discussion helps to bring it all into a more contemporary and more thoughtful context.

Nancy says

Genius from Socrates to Hitler and Beyond

Philosophers have been fascinated by what makes a great man. Plato told of Socrates daimon that inspired him. In the Renaissance, inspiration came from God. The cult of genius in Europe in the early 20th century led to the rise of Hitler. Today IQ tests are used to identify genius, but then perhaps everyone has a genius in some area.

Divine Fury charts the changes in the definition of genius from Plato through Terman. The book is packed with information with chapters devoted to the Greeks, the Christianity, the moderns, the romantics, geniology, or how to detect genius, the religion of genius, and today's take on everyone's genius.

I found the book very readable, but I have to admit it helps to have at least a passing acquaintance with the

major philosophers. The book is packed the quotations illustrating the philosophical theory under discussion. There are also a myriad of pictures giving the artists' conception of genius. I think it's interesting that genius originally was applied to the arts and only lately became the province of scientists and politicians.

I highly recommend this book if you're interested in the history of genius. I found it fascinating to trace the thoughts about what constitutes genius and whether it resides inside or outside the person, as divine inspiration from the gods or God. It's not an easy book, but it's well worth reading.

I reviewed this book for Net Galley.

Robert Miller says

This is a book which traces the origin of the concept of "genius" from ancient time to the present. The author arduously examines the original concept of the term as it related to the exceptionally enlightened (Including discussion of some of the usual characters- Socrates, Saint Augustine, Homer, Cicero, Shakespeare, etc.) He reports that the "ancients" thought that genius' were possessed by demons as opposed to having natural super intelligence. Or, as Saint Augustine thought, human nature had been damaged by original sin and therefore could never attain perfection unaided by God. Both theories promoted the idea that man could not be a genius on his own. The author's journey through the eras of the Ancients, Christianity, Moderns and Romantics is thorough but makes for some slow reading. The book picks up pace nicely starting with the chapter on "Geniology" and actually includes some witty comments. Moreover, the author points out some bizarre historical "thinking" when it came to differentiating between brain size, race and gender. He notes that many of the philosophers of the past felt these physiological differences doomed any aspirations by these people to ever reach genius status. Essentially, the author concludes his book by taking note of the modern view of genius (It's in the DNA- no demons, Gods, etc.), and surmises how loosely the term is now used (Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, Bob Miller is a genius, etc.).

Karen says

I'm think this may have been an interesting read, but it was too dense for me - or maybe I am too dense for it. In any case, I could not finish it.

Martha Anne Davidson says

Darrin M. McMahon's *Divine Fury: A History of Genius* (2013) presents an informative (and readable) survey of the subject of genius. McMahon is a professor of intellectual history at Dartmouth, whose other works include *Happiness: A History* (2006) and *The Pursuit of Happiness* (2006). In *Divine Fury*, the author traces conceptions of genius--in the form of both person and idea--from ancient times, through Enlightenment and Romantic thinking, and on to our own. As the subtitle of the first part of the book indicates, McMahon views genius as a "problem," perhaps because genius is so often related to power, which can serve both good and evil, as the figures of Einstein and Hitler attest. Much of the study concerns these polarizing dynamics associated with genius: that of good versus evil, for example, but also religious versus secular variations and even aristocracy versus democracy. The book ends with the current state of debate regarding genius, with a chapter that McMahon calls "The Genius of the People." He suggests that the "cult

of genius," which focuses on the worship of individual genius, and the "democratization of genius," or the view to collective genius, are two sides of a "dance" that has been going on since the beginning (239). Professor McMahon nicely concludes his study of this dance: "And for all the abuse of genius since the presence of the *divinum quiddam* was first detected in the minds of special men, it long kept alive an exhilarating sense of the possibilities of being—and being transcendent—in the world" (242). Posted to Goodreads 07/07/16.

Karen says

The 13 Best Biographies, Memoirs, and History Books of 2013

"Genius is nothing more nor less than doing well what anyone can do badly," celebrated British novelist Amelia E. Barr wrote in her 9 rules for success in 1901. Indeed, the notion of what genius is and isn't endures as one of our culture's greatest fixations. We apply the label of "genius" to everyone from our greatest luminaries to exceptional children's book editors to our dogs, and we even nickname prestigious cultural awards after it. But what, precisely, is genius? Why was the concept of it born in the first place, where did it begin, how did it evolve, and what does it mean today? That's precisely what historian Darrin M. McMahon explores in *Divine Fury: A History of Genius* (public library) — a fascinating, first-of-its-kind chronicle of the evolution of genius as a cultural concept, its permutations across millennia of creative history, and its more recent role as a social equalizer and a double-edged sword of democratization.

Alex Athanassakos says

Definitely worth reading, but the author could have said the same things in half the pages. He has an annoying habit of repeating every statement he makes in different words. The first three chapters are almost painfully wordy. Nevertheless, it provides a different perspective on geniuses and the history of some tools we use to measuring them, e.g., the IQ test.

Joan says

This was a difficult book to read, particularly at the beginning. After about 3 chapters I finally got his rhythm, but he didn't make it easy. I would only recommend this book if you are in a book club and want to have a discussion about the history of genius. It was thought provoking and changed my perspective of "genius". It's interesting to look back at the history of how the definition evolved. The author could have made it more interesting and easier to follow. I think he liked to hear himself think out loud.

Atila Iamarino says

Não sei o que esperava quando peguei este (na verdade sei, uma abordagem mais biológica/médica), mas tem muita história para o meu gosto. Bem completo nesse sentido, para quem quer entender como a noção de gênio mudou de uma pessoa possuída ou inspirada pelo divino para uma pessoa extraordinária por mérito próprio, este é o livro. Também vale pela parte da construção da noção de que gênios podem mudar o mundo

por conta própria que hoje projetamos em pessoas do Silicon Valley.

Satyajeet says

This is an underrated book. It's really fascinating and very well researched. It could've been written better though (or shorter), but it's definitely a good read.

Jafar says

A fascinating book about the history of the concept of genius from antiquity to the modern time. The book's description on this web site is a great summary and I don't need to paraphrase it. Specially interesting to me were the chapter on geniology (the various ways, always futile and often wrongheaded, of trying to detect and measure the genius) and the chapter that contrasted two Germans: Hitler, the evil "genius" who was actually the product of a cult that longed for and worshiped a genius that would come and lift the *Volk* to glory; and Einstein, the last true genius who was publicly and deservedly recognized as a genius.

Vince Darcangelo says

<http://ensuingchapters.com/2013/11/10...>

Divine Fury

Darrin M. McMahon

Since 1981, the MacArthur Foundation has bestowed its "genius grant" on 873 (ostensibly) geniuses—"talented individuals who have shown extraordinary originality and dedication in their creative pursuits and a marked capacity for self-direction," reads the MacArthur Web site.

But is this the truest definition of "genius"? Considering that the title is so commonly conferred upon basketball coaches, celebrities and rock stars (a recent Rolling Stone article referred to Kanye West as a "mad genius"—seriously), is being a "genius" even that impressive anymore?

In *Divine Fury*, historian Darrin M. McMahon isn't questioning MENSAs credentials so much as tracing the history of this loaded term and how it's changed over the centuries.

Our etymological quest begins with the ancient Greeks, for whom being a genius was a form of madness. McMahon culls pithy quotes from Plato revealing a lesser-known side of Socrates: He was quite haunted. (This from the *Phaedrus* dialogues—no wonder the brilliant 20th century philosopher/madman Robert Pirsig chose *Phaedrus* as his alter ego in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.)

Whereas contemporary culture views genius as something you possess, ancient philosophers believed the inverse: Genius possesses you. More specifically, a demon possesses you, for good and ill, and this was the belief for centuries. McMahon documents many cases of "genius," from the ancients to modern times, and how the concept evolved and then devolved into our current celebrity-obsessed culture.

It's a curious evolution, and one I wouldn't have thought about much before reading *Divine Fury*. McMahon deftly illuminates this secret and complicated history through literary accounts, keen observation and a strong narrative. His writing can be a bit tangential and academic at times—but hey, the man's an academic! What do you expect?

I certainly wasn't expecting to think about genius as a populist concept, but there it is. In some ways, the history of genius is the flow of agency from the elite to the proletariat. While I would rate that as a good thing, an unfortunate consequence is that genius has become just another noun that anyone can claim.

The change is due in part to advanced medical knowledge. In ancient Greece, Socrates believed a demon was whispering in his ear. Today, we'd slip him some Paxil.

Or give him his own TED talk.

Ultimately, it remains a fuzzy line between madness and genius. Is it the possessed or the possessor? Are 98th percentile test-scorers (the threshold for MENSA membership) the elite or merely outliers? Or is each of us capable of becoming an Einstein?

No matter, from now on I'll be slower to label someone a genius.

Unless that "mad genius" Kanye West splits the atom in his next video.

Roslyn says

Notes to self:

Ovid: Describes an annual ritual in which one makes a sacrifice of cake, flowers, and wine to his genius--a birthday party.

Since ancient Greece humans have noticed the same thing: Some people do better than others, even as children. Some children are bright. Others are not.

Nature vs Nurture. In many different words and ways we have discussed the same thing. Believing the genius was 100% nature led to eugenics. Believing that it was 100% nurture led to totalitarian communist regimes. Both envisioned utopias filled with "heroes." Both envisioned societies that would only work if Man was improved upon.

Today we just deny heroes exist. Or we call everyone one for some reason or another. Equality is real if we say it is!

Genius has long been connected to melancholy, insanity, destruction, and freedom. Genius is a gift and a curse. It has to do with perception. Perceiving more than others. (Are Genius's HSP's? The description for the last few thousand years does rather fit!) It has also been linked to physical degeneration.

Riana Elizabeth says

While I typically prefer print over viewing, I feel the book and my visualization just don't convey that same cinematic realm. :-/
