



The Mad-Genius Controversy

BY THOMAS SZASZ

Our ideas about genius, madness, and the existence of a close relationship between them are modern inventions. For millennia people explained the world about them—especially creative/good and destructive/bad behaviors—in spiritual or god terms.

In the biblical view, creativity is the prerogative of a single supreme Creator. The Scripture attributes the miracle of life to a specific divine act: “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became living soul” (Genesis, 2:7). Hence comes our notion of *inspiration* as an explanation for great works of art and science. The idea of in-spiration—of breath, soul, or some other mysterious “substance” entering the person from without and enabling him to perform exceptionally good or bad deeds—has never lost its influence on Western thought. It is the source of the notion of possession (by spirits), and its modern successors, “possession” by the *creative inspiration* of genius and by the *destructive irresistible impulse* of madness. We replace spirit-god words with body-mind words and exult in our smug conviction that we are explaining exceptionally good and bad behaviors scientifically.

The term “genius” comes from the Latin *gignere*, meaning to beget. In the Roman world every person was attended by a tutelary deity or spirit, his *genius*. The Latin *inspirare*, from *in* + *spirare*, to breathe, meant to influence, move, or guide by divine or supernatural inspiration. None of these notions had anything to do with illness or mental illness in the modern sense.

The pseudoscience of psychiatry has, in effect, replaced *spirits possessing the person* as an explanation for his *devilish mind* with *chemical processes in the brain* as an explanation for his *diseased mind*. The ancients believed in spirits: they were not empiricists and needed no evidence of the material existence of spirits. We moderns are “scientific” and demand empirical “proof” for med-

ical explanations. In the absence of objective evidence for the claim that brain chemicals cause creativity-genius and crime-madness, psychiatrists and science writers use the testimonials of celebrities to support their claim.

Alongside the romantic image of manic-depression as a cause of creativity that does not detract from the subject’s intentionality for his conduct and responsibility for his good deeds stands the bleak image of schizophrenia as a cause of criminality annulling the subject’s intentionality for his conduct and responsibility for his bad deeds. This interpretation, too, lacks objective proof. Instead, its “truth” is enshrined in, and is taught by, the modern clerical and clinical practices of the insanity excuse/defense. Clergymen of all denominations bury *all* persons who break the religious law against self-killing in consecrated ground, “diagnosing” all suicides automatically *non compos mentis* at the precise moment of their sinful deed. Similarly, the insanity defense allows lawyers, judges, psychiatrists, and society to incarcerate *some* persons who break secular laws in prisons called “hospitals,” “diagnosing” all such criminals as having been *non compos mentis* at the precise moment of their illegal action.

The belief that research in neuroscience and psychiatry will “explain” the alleged connection between genius and madness is a typically modern delusion. Almost a hundred years ago the great German psychiatrist Ernst Kretschmer (1888–1964) acknowledged that the notion of “mad genius” is a psychiatric invention: “Since the Italian alienist, [Cesare] Lombroso, first coined that pregnant expression ‘genius and madness’ there has arisen in educated circles a very lively discussion, which, however, has been forced to close with the

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recognition that modern psychiatry has been responsible for—some might say guilty of—establishing such a connection.”

Genius and madness are vague terms. The only thing clear about them is that, by definition, each term refers to a type of psychological abnormality, *a deviation from a behavioral-social norm*. Genius and madness are value terms, not medical or scientific terms.

In its contemporary use, then, the term “genius” simply means being very good at something. Being exceptionally virtuous and being exceptionally wicked both count as genius. Stalin and Hitler were geniuses: they excelled in mass-producing corpses, just as Henry Ford excelled in mass-producing cars.

The modern meaning of genius as hereditary excellence was shaped largely by Sir Francis Galton (1822–1911), the father of eugenics. Galton was born into a wealthy and distinguished Quaker family. Charles Darwin was his cousin. “Darwin had thought mainly about the evolution of physical features, like wings and eyes,” science writer Jim Holt observes. Applying the same hereditary logic to mental attributes, like talent and virtue, Galton lamented: “If a twentieth part of the cost and pains were spent in measures for the improvement of the human race that is spent on the improvements of the breed of horses and cattle, what a galaxy of genius might we not create!”

How did Galton know that genius is hereditary? The same way that the modern psychiatrist, imitating Galton, knows that manic-depression is hereditary. In his 1869 book *Hereditary Genius*, Galton assembled long lists of eminent men—judges, poets, scientists, even oarsmen and wrestlers—to show that excellence ran in families.

A cow produces prodigious quantities of milk: she is a bovine genius. A man paints beautiful pictures: he is an artistic genius. Einstein is a scientific genius. Mozart is a musical genius. Are Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed religious geniuses? Are we explaining achievement when we attribute it to the fictitious entity we call “genius,” or are we deceiving ourselves the same way that the scientifically unsophisticated person deceives himself when he declares that hydrogen burns because it is “flammable”?

It is true that breeders of animals can produce cows that give lots of milk and horses that win races. The breeder decides; the animal (re)produces. People already do something like this. Men and women choose mates with whom to have children, and bring up children to cultivate the skills (traits) that they, the parents, value. The child can no more choose his parents than the horse can choose its owner-breeder. But the child soon gains power—both physical and legal-political—to cultivate the traits he values, and reject the traits he devalues. Doing so, he often displeases his breeders, his parents.

A Mad Genius?

What kinds of persons would a breeder of humans want to produce? Obviously, the answer depends on the values and goals of the individual who controls the breeding. Galton wanted to breed a race of persons resembling himself, “creative geniuses.” Ironically, the Galtons had no children. He or his wife was sterile. Galton was said to have suffered two “nervous breakdowns.” Was he a mad genius?

The two great twentieth-century dictators both fancied themselves geneticists. Stalin personally elevated Trofim Lysenko to the status of genius and made him, in 1928, the genetics czar of the Soviet Union. Lysenkoism became a campaign against genetics and geneticists: scientific genetics was stigmatized as a “fascist science,” and the leading geneticists were executed or exiled. The term survives as a metaphor for false beliefs, refuted by empirical evidence but preferred for ideological reasons. Persuaded by the Marxist-Leninist ideology that breeding a “new Socialist man” was a task for politics not biology, Stalin was not interested in using eugenics as a political tool.

Hitler, in contrast, went all the way politicizing Galtonian eugenics. He too sought to improve the “human stock.” The genius he admired was martial and misogynist: men should be warriors; women should be mothers; and all should be members of the “Aryan race.” Accordingly, Hitler sought to breed “healthy” Aryans and eliminate “racial degenerates,” such as Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, and the mentally ill.

Science explains physical events. Scientism justifies social policies.

