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The Genius of Stupidity

Editorial

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Inventive genius is due to the creative fantasy of introverts often incapable of grasping even the simplest precepts of social life [1]. Beethoven, for example, lost all effective contact with the social and business worlds before he was thirty years old. He was totally devoid of sympathetic insight and inhabited a world of his own into which no one else could penetrate. Except for a few disastrous occasions, he indifferently left others to live their own ways in their own pragmatic, atonal worlds [2]. To put it bluntly, Beethoven was pretty damned stupid in nonmusical matters, but that was the price he paid for his genius.

Sir Isaac Newton was likewise something of a freak/odd-ball. He was reclusive, mindless of personal cleanliness, taciturn and so obsessed with his all-consuming work he could forget to eat. He was also insensible to passion and rumored to have died a virgin [3].

Henry Ford had little in common with Beethoven or Newton, except that all were totally inept in their interactions with ordinary people. Beethoven misunderstood people because he lived in a world of tones and emotions; Newton in equations and apples; Ford in a world of steel and overalls[4] outside of which he was all but lost–i.e., stupid [4,5]. This inability of the great to relate to ordinary minds shows up in sports as well: no great baseball player has been an effective manager. Such people do so much so naturally and well that they have difficulty relating profes-sionally to those who are struggling to learn and to whom performing is a conscious effort. Further, the development of creativity and genius seems to depend very much on such noncognitive factors as personality, motivation, upbringing, etc. Although a certain level of mental ability is necessary for mastery of a body of knowledge, independence of thought is really the factor which permits the creative person to move beyond mastery to inventive genius [6]. Napoleon opined that genius was an unlearnable artstic intuition:learning might carry a person up to a point, but the genius would leap beyond what was learned to another level. The jump may be a logical extension of what is know, but it is still a leap into the unknown [7].

Most geniuses leap to greatest advantage when least embroiled in human society [8]. Mozart, for example, created best when completely himself [9] because excellence is a subjective, personal experience rather than a psychosocial phenomenon. It is not a commodity which can be bought or sold; nor is it a matter to be settled by arbitration or reached by mutual consent; nor can it be imposed on anyone by force. The genius provides an alternative perspective to that of the ac-cepted schema, [10] dispenses with the clutter of mythology, false belief and jargon which obscure clear perception of the facts [11] and reaches that pinnacle of creation by building faith in his own beliefs about a phenomenon in which he is totally absorbed. The inventive genius deliberately isolates himself so that he can deal exclusively with a limited amount of information independently.

It is important to note the contribution of stupidity to gen-ius [12]. For the creative person to achieve independence of thought, he must, to some degree,

make himself oblivious of his surroundings, prevailing explanations and assumptions. One recipe for creative thinking is a peculiar blend of concentrated daydreaming and willful blindness [13]. The first step is to get the eyes out of focus so that disruptive external stimuli are reduced [14]. This reduced awareness of the environment gives imagination a chance to wander. Such was the mental state of nineteenth century architect John Root, as described by his partner Daniel Burnham: "He would grow abstract and silent. A faraway look would come into his eyes, and the building was there before him...." [15].

When, in such a state, the mind can fix upon a new idea and concentration on it, its ramifications can then be carried to logical or even absurd extremes. If this brings one closer to the solution of a problem or opens new vistas for personal or cultural advancement, then the brief detachment was well worthwhile.

French author Honoré Balzac was a classic example of this: He was a genius at creating fictional worlds by isolating himself from reality for twelve hours a day. However, he was a failure when his grandiose, Kramdenesque schemes for glory, power and riches came to less than naught in his dealings with the factuality of the business world [16]. Likewise, Thomas Edison saw what he wanted to see and ignored most of the rest of his perceptual field: that is, he was focused independent of conventional wisdom [17]. Edison, as an inventor, focused on practically useful items[2] in con-trast to abstractive scientists like Ernest Rutherford–deducer of atomic structure–who in 1935 saw no practical application of nuclear physics [18]. In an institutional context, detachment is endemic as programs started to address a problem remain after the problem is resolved–an example being intelligence efforts set up during the Cold War to combat a Communist threat remaining after the threat, like the smile of the Cheshire cat, was gone [19]. Such programs are, at best, simply wasteful but by a posfeed mechanism, they take on an enduring if functionless life of their own.

As implied, there are different kinds of genius. The sensational form is the schemabuster (like Beethoven or Ford) who breaks convention to redefine the world. Geniuses of this type are usually people of flair and great insight. By way of contrast, there is the conventional form of genius who really abides by the rules—the formal, stated standards—and makes them work. Louis Pasteur is an example of one who creatively applied the rigors of experimental investigation to unconven-tional assumptions. His results conclusively demonstrated basic principles of life and disease so convincingly that these replaced age-old myths with knowledge and understanding.

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