

Am I a Genius?

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AM I A GENIUS? Fascinating as is the question, What is Genius? propounded by a writer in the St. James's Gazette the other day, it is perhaps more pleasantly expressed in the personal form. This gives it a human interest. I confess to having often put the problem to myself, though perhaps less frequently of late than when I was nineteen. Sometimes murmur, Am I a genius? forgetting that Gilmour is present (or possibly just to hear what he will say), and he answers No. His mind is not of the reflective order. He looks problems of great moment cheerily in the face, and passes them by.

The writer of the article referred to says, very truly, that if we cannot easily decide what genius is, we can at least clear the ground by deciding what it is not. The more I seek to know myself the more certain do I feel that Carlyle was wrong in defining genius as an infinite capacity for taking pains. Allowing that I am genius, but leaving my natural bent an open question (for I have still to decide whether it is as philosopher, or man of letters, or by reason of indomitable energy a magnificently practical man), it is not because I take infinite pains. More satisfactory to me is Kenny Meadows's distinction between genius and talent —namely that the former is power without effort, and the latter power with effort. I am inclined to think that mine is power without effort. I always liked to dash a thing off and be done with it. Of course, where you cannot do this it is creditable to you to make the effort; but you ought clearly to understand that that is talent.

Was he a Genius?

(Chapter 16 The Greenwood Hat)

“Fascinating as is the question, What is genius? recently propounded by an able writer, it has perhaps a more human interest when expressed in the personal form, ‘Am I a genius?’ I confess to having occasionally put the problem to myself. Sometimes I murmur it aloud, forgetting that my so-called friend Gilray is in the room, and he promptly answers No. Fortunately Gilray is dining out to-night, so this is an admirable opportunity for communing pleasantly on the matter.

The writer referred to says very truly that if we cannot easily decide what is Genius (henceforth to be called G in this paper), we can at least clear the ground by deciding what it is not. The more I seek to know myself the more certain do I feel that Carlyle was wrong in defining G as an infinite capacity for taking pains. Granting for the moment (in the blessed absence of Gilray) that I am a G, but leaving the natural bent of my G an open question (for I have still to decide whether I bend best as a philosopher, or a man of letters, or by reason of indomitable practical energy), my pre-eminence, I note (sparing myself nothing), has not come through taking infinite pains. Even Gilray would agree to this. More satisfactory to me is the grudging distinction made by Kenny Meadows between G and talent, namely that G is power without effort, and talent power with effort. I am inclined to think that mine is power without effort. It is certainly something without effort. I always like to dash a thing off and be done with it. Of course where you cannot do this it is creditable to you to make the effort; but you ought clearly to understand that this is talent.

For my own part, I have never desired talent, and there seems to me something pathetic as well as praiseworthy in the way Carlyle sat up through the long nights acquiring power with effort. As an ambitious man, he had doubtless no other course open to him, though genius lying on its back cannot help smiling at talent in its shirt sleeves.

The St. James's writer pertinently remarks that the question, What is Genius? has one great merit. If the response is genuine (as I hope mine is), it gives flash into the character of the person interrogated. He will but give you the real thought of his heart on this point, you can tell at once to what order of minds he belongs; whether to the contemplative or the imaginative, the purely intellectual or the plainly practical." Did this require proof, it would be found in the cases of Carlyle and myself; for he adopted the definition, An infinite capacity for taking pains, while I lean to power without effort. There is obvious danger here; for this means that a man is unconsciously biassed the force of his own personality. Whether we are ever to attain a true definition of genius or not, it seems certain that the great mass of mankind are incapacitated for the search. Carlyle certainly was prejudiced; indeed, the most conclusive proof of his was not his definition drawn from his own personality (talent, I fear, we must call it), but his incapacity to see that there were other possible definitions, and that one of them might be the true one while his was false. I am not prejudiced in that way. Naturally (for all have our weaknesses), I like to think that genius is power without effort, or, rather, that power without effort is genius; but I am prepared to admit that I may be wrong. If we are to inquire into this matter at all, let us do it with open minds. If you prefer to think that genius is power with effort instead of without effort, then by all means acknowledge Carlyle a genius and leave me out.

For my own part I have never desired talent, and there seems to me something pathetic as well as praiseworthy in the way Carlyle sat up through the long nights acquiring power with effort. As an ambitious man he had doubtless no other course open to him, though G, lying on its back, cannot help smiling at talent in its shirt-sleeves.

The writer referred to pertinently remarks of the question before us, 'Am I a G?' that if the response is genuine (as I hope mine is), it gives a flash into the character of the person interrogated. 'If he will but give you the real thought of his heart on this point, you can tell at once to what order of mind he belongs; whether to the contemplative or the imaginative, the purely intellectual, or the plainly practical.' Did this ingenious statement require proof it would be found in the case of Carlyle and myself; for he adopted the definition, 'An infinite capacity for taking pains,' while I lean to power without effort. There is an obvious danger here; as this means that a man is unconsciously biassed by the force of his own personality. Whether we are to attain to-night a true definition of G (which largely depends on how long Gilray stays away at dinner) it seems certain that the great mass of mankind are incapacitated for the search. Carlyle certainly was prejudiced; indeed, the most conclusive proof of this was not so much a definition drawn from his own personality (talent, I fear we must call it bluntly), as his incapacity to see that there are any other possible definitions, and that one of them may contain the truth. I am not prejudiced in that way. Naturally (for we all have our weaknesses), I like to think that G is power without effort, or, rather, that power without effort is G; but I am prepared to admit that I may be wrong. If we are to inquire into this matter at all, let us do it with open minds. If you prefer to think that G is power with effort instead of without effort, then by all means acknowledge Carlyle a G and leave me out.

Probably we are at least agreed on this point—that, if Carlyle was a genius, I am not; and vice versa. Just as we can decide what is not genius, though we are unable to say what is, we can say who are not geniuses without fixing easily upon who are.

'Thus I know that Gilmour is not a genius. The very suggestion that he is would raise smile on the face of every intelligent person who knows him. Does this, however, help us? What is it in Gilmour that makes us so sure of him? Is he lacking in certain qualities or powers which, whether they make genius or not, are to be found in, say, me? Undoubtedly. He is dull of perception; when he attempts to argue he quickly gets out of his depth; he falls asleep soon as he goes to bed; and he is invariably bright and cheerful. With me it is very different. I astonishingly quick at reading between the lines, as the phrase goes; and so far as argument is concerned, I am never in my element until I reach deep water. The unfathomable sea of thought, in which Gilmour would drown, seems to bear me up. While he, not caring whether he is a genius or not so long as he gets a good night's rest, falls asleep, I lie awake busy with the problems of my personality. As a result he gets through more work in the daytime than I do, for I require to rest on the sofa during the afternoon. By that time my brain is tired out. Lastly I am by no means the invariably cheerful person that he is. He is always the same—ever the characteristic of a commonplace person—while my moods are as changeable as those of hoary ocean. There are times when I am the best of company, and when nothing puts me out. Then my wit sparkles, and if it cuts also that is because I use a keen rapier. At other times I pass out of the sun into shadow. Then let no one speak to me, for I am in world of my own. Possibly I am communing with the mighty dead.

Just as we can decide what is not G, though we are unable to say what is, we can say who are not Gs without fixing easily upon who are. Thus I know that Gilray is not a G. The mere suggestion that he is would raise a smile on the face of all. Does this, however, help us? What is it in Gilray that makes us so sure of him? Is he lacking in certain qualities or powers which, whether they make G or not, are to be found in, say, me. I am afraid so. When he attempts to argue on the subject of G, he gets out of his depth; also he falls asleep as soon as he goes to bed; and he is invariably bright and cheerful. With me it is very different. I am never in my element until I reach deep water. The unfathomable sea of thought in which Gilray would drown seems to buoy me up. While he, not caring whether he is a G or not so long as he gets a good night's rest, falls asleep, I lie awake busy with the problems of my personality. As a result he gets through more work in the daytime than I do, for I require to rest on the sofa during the afternoon. By that time my brain is tired out. Lastly, I am by no means the invariably cheerful person he is. He is always the same, ever the characteristic of a mediocrity, while my moods are as changeable as hoary ocean. There are times when I am the best of company, when my wit sparkles and cuts. At other times I walk in the shadows. Then let no Gilray speak to me (I wish he would remember this), for I am in a world of my own. Suppose I am ruminating with the mighty dead.

The slightest thing seems to send me out of the one mood into the other, such as my pipe not drawing properly. In Carlyle this dark mood of mine showed itself in irritability, which suggests lighter nature. I am never irritable myself, so long as there is nothing extraordinary to put me out. Still, it is interesting to note that here is something which, in its different forms, is characteristic of myself and Carlyle, but is wholly lacking in Gilmour. Might we say that irritability goes with Power with effort, while the dark mood (as seen in Byron, Shelley, and others) is the natural accompaniment of Power without effort? That seems a conclusion fair to all parties. Admirable though the article which suggests these reflections is, it is perhaps unnecessarily despondent. There is one way in which we may arrive at definition of genius that has escaped the writer. He is quite correctly of opinion that genius is not word of different meanings, but rather "some peculiar mental quality in common between the soldier and the poet." The difficulty is to say what that quality is; but I think I can manage it. We must start with the assumption that I am a genius, and then go over the various definitions, striking out as false those which do not apply. In this way we at once get rid of the Carlylean definition. It is granted that I am a genius; but it is equally certain that I have no infinite capacity for taking pains. Already, therefore, we have made advance. The common creed with the populace, as our writer points out, is that genius is synonymous with success. I have, however, been less successful than I could have wished; indeed, every one whom I know that pretends to genius has been unsuccessful. Of course one maybe unsuccessful without being a genius.

The slightest thing seems to send me out of the one mood into the other, such as being contradicted. In Carlyle this dark mood showed itself in irritability, but I am never irritable even with Gilray.

Admirable though the paper which suggests these reflections is, it is perhaps unnecessarily despondent, there being one way in which we may arrive at a definition of G that has escaped the writer. He is correctly of opinion that G is not a word of different meanings, but rather 'some peculiar mental quality in common between the soldier and the poet.' The difficulty is to find what that quality is; but I think I can manage it. We must start with the assumption (I consider it no more) that I am a G, and then go over the various definitions, striking out as false those which do not apply. In this way we at once get rid of the Carlylean definition. It having been granted by you that I may be a G, it is even more certain that I have no definite capacity for taking pains. Already, therefore, we have made an advance. The common creed with the rabble, as our writer points out, is that G is synonymous with success. I have, however, been far less successful than Gilray, so that this creed obviously leaks. Indeed every one of my acquaintance who pretends to G has been unsuccessful. Of course one may be unsuccessful without being a G.

Still this excludes another common view, for the same reason we may safely disregard the businessman's theory that genius is large general capacity specially turned in a particular direction." I have taken care not to turn my capacity into any special groove; indeed, I have tried several directions for it at different times and given them all up: which seems to favour the belief that genius rebels against restraint. Nor is genius "a noble enthusiasm constraining the person possessed by it to action of an heroic kind; for though I am momentarily enthusiastic, nothing comes of it. In this way we shut out all the definitions but two ; namely, Power without effort—to which I must plead guilty—and a creative power working in strict accordance with nature and the fitness of things." I feel these two in equal degrees; and they are also to be found in men of such opposite types as Napoleon the Great and Wordsworth. Yes; there can be no genius where there is no creative power. Gilmour's observation upon this is that I have created nothing. That is true; but I am going to.

Still this excludes another common view. Also we may safely disregard the business man's theory that G is 'a large general capacity specially turned into a particular direction.' I have taken care not to turn my capacity into any special groove; indeed, I have tried several directions for it at different times and given them all up; which seems to favour the belief that G rebels against restraint. Nor is G 'a noble enthusiasm constraining the person possessed by it to action of an heroic kind'; for though I am momentarily enthusiastic, no action comes of it, the reverse being the case with such as Gilray. In this way we shut out all the definitions but two: namely, power without effort, to which I must plead guilty, and 'a creative working in strict accordance with nature and the fitness of things.' I am not sure what this means, but I feel I have it; it was probably also in men of such opposite types as Napoleon and Wordsworth. Yes; there can be no G where there is no creative power. Gilray's observation upon this is that I have created nothing. Nevertheless I consider that if —

However, I hear his garrulous footstep on the stair, so I must dissemble."