

The Genius Famine

Genius, essential to a building and supporting civilization, is vanishing before our eyes.

Dutton and Charlton's thesis is that genius is essential to a society, powering the immense breakthroughs in science and technology that have allowed us to advance so rapidly. And – genius is becoming markedly rarer.

One has only to look at the development of scientific knowledge about electricity in the nineteenth century, its many applications to improving our lives. The same can be said for knowledge in the fields of chemistry, physics and biology – especially evolution.

Although geniuses make outsized contributions to the societies to which they belong, they can be a mere nuisance to the people closest to them. They have rough edged personalities. They do not assume standard roles in society, such as worker, husband, father, churchmen and so on. They may be so unworldly as to require constant care and feeding by their better-rounded families and peers. Previous societies and ages, epitomized by Victorian England, recognized and supported their geniuses. This is an age that seems to suppress and mock genius.

Coupled with the fact that all of mankind is becoming less intelligent by the generation, Dutton and Charlton observe – and I certainly concur from observations over a longer lifetime – that genius is much more rare than it was even 50 years ago, and is definitely more rare than 150 years ago.

Dutton and Charlton propose that genius proceeds from an endogenous personality. Endogenous is defined as proceeding from within; derived internally. This is a person who is self-motivated. He doesn't see a need for encouragement to do what he feels needs to be done. In Dutton and Charlton's words, to fulfill his Destiny. Geniuses are characterized by traits of intelligence, personality and something ineffable - intuition.

Personality is hard to define, but most researchers have settled on a five factor model with the acronym OCEAN: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism. Though a genius may have an endogenous personality, he still has to interact with other people for his genius to be appreciated. Dutton and Charlton discuss how the individual factors in the model pertain to genius.

- The genius has to be open to new ideas, to the point of rejecting traditional wisdom and risking offending the Establishment.
- The genius may be conscientious within his own sphere, but he is generally not bound by conscience to satisfy other people's expectations of him. He is his own man.
- The genius has to be enough of an extrovert to champion his own ideas in the face of resistance. He is not a conformist.
- The genius is probably not a very agreeable sort. Dutton describes a number of rather antisocial characters, Isaac Newton topping the list.
- Neuroticism is associated with creativity. The genius may well be fairly neurotic, somewhat unbalanced.

After having described a typical genius personality, Dutton and Charlton are quick to observe (1) that the questionnaires designed to operationalize these five factors are designed for normal people, and the answers provided by a genius may well reflect different underlying characteristics than the same answers provided by the population upon whom the test is standardized. (2) There are no hard-and-fast rules. Every genius is by definition *sui generis*.

Even intelligence, far easier to measure than personality, is not precisely that which is shown by an intelligence test. Put another way, although intelligence tests are the best way to measure intelligence, they miss things. It is generally recognized that there are three types of intelligence: verbal, spatial, and mathematical. Genius intelligence is often rather lopsided. Einstein was off the charts in mathematical intelligence but only middling in spatial and verbal intelligence. There's also the question of intuition. Geniuses seem to all possess great intuition, and ability to visualize a concept before they put together the logical structure to support the idea. Intuition, however, resists being operationalized and measured.

Throughout the book Dutton and Charlton make the unfashionable observation that most geniuses have been men of European stock. Why is this true?

Men, because (1) average male intelligence exceeds that of female intelligence by about half the standard deviation, (2) the standard deviation of male intelligence is greater than female intelligence, meaning that significantly more men appear at the right end of the bell curve distribution, and (3) men are more likely to have the endogenous personality.

An aside on male intelligence – men and women's intelligence appears to be about equal up through late adolescence. Men's brains, however, continue to grow in volume and appear to grow in function through their early twenties. This makes evolutionary sense. Women, in late adolescence, have everything they need to bear the next generation. Men, on the other hand, need to continue to strive for dominance in order to get the opportunity to sire the next generation.

Why Europeans instead of East Asians? Dutton and Charlton note that average Northeast Asian intelligence is about five points above that of Europeans. Yet there are few recognize geniuses among them. There are at least two factors at play. The most important appears to be the endogenous personality again. East Asians may be simply too nice, too conformist by culture to fight received wisdom. Secondly, the standard deviation of East Asian intelligence may be smaller than European. This would make sense inasmuch as there is not as much diversity in their genomes. If this is so, it would account for the fact that there are so many Asians at the 140 level crowding out everybody else for admissions into Harvard, but relatively fewer at the 170 and 180 levels.

Drs. Dutton and Charlton indulges themselves in some wonderful rants with which I am in hearty concurrence. One of their best is about artificial creativity, the presumption to genius by people who are more gifted at manipulation than actual creativity. One archetype they cite at length is psychiatrist Carl Jung, who was so facile with words that his concepts could never be nailed down, but who nevertheless mesmerized generations of groupies. He was apparently rather shameless about taking advantage, especially sexually, of those naïve enough to fall under his spell.

They say that the art world is full of such poseurs. To this end I recommend reading Tom Wolfe's excellent *The Painted Word* about pretentiousness of Modern Art. In Wolfe's words the objective is "épater le bourgeois" - shock the bourgeoisie. The charlatan must play a delicate balancing act between pretending he has no material interests and allowing the deep-pocketed rubes with pretensions to culture to shower him with money.

Dutton and Charlton also have a riff on destructive geniuses, people of genius level intellect whose efforts, consciously or not, destroyed the very fields in which they work. In art Picasso led the parade, devaluing talented execution and elevating the value of novelty and shock. In music it was Schoenberg. There have been no great composers since the early twentieth century. In literature James Joyce did the same.

Dutton and Charlton contend that the field of philosophy was destroyed by Rousseau, Marx and Nietzsche. When everything becomes relative, including morality, no foundation remained. Dutton and Charlton do not even talk about Foucault, Derrida, Rorty or other postmodernists. They may have considered that after Nietzsche they were not worth bothering to mention. I tried, but could make no sense reading any of them. Worst of all seems to be Vladimir Putin's pet philosopher Alexander Dugin, who unfortunately has a certain appeal to the Alt-Right. Dugin's [[ASIN:1907166653 *The Fourth Political Theory*]] has the dubious distinction of having earned the most significant pan I have written among almost 500 Amazon reviews. Philosophy is dead.

The genius stands apart from the rest of his group, rather like the shaman in more primitive societies. He is usually an odd duck, frequently unmarried and sexually ambiguous, but possesses of unusual powers of insight that are beneficial to the group in times of crisis. Dutton and Charlton contend that among Europeans, genius was favored by group selection. Geniuses did not often leave behind their own genes, but rather promoted their own genetic interests by helping the entire society.

The book does not include any systematic list of people whom Dutton and Charlton consider to be geniuses. Expected names crop up as examples of the quirkiness of geniuses: John von Neumann, Ernst Rutherford, James Clerk Maxwell, Pascal. Many expected names are not mentioned whatsoever: Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Fibonacci, Spinoza, the Bernoulli family, Michael Faraday, Darwin, the Huxleys and others. I recommend Peter Bernstein's compelling short biographies of major mathematical geniuses in his book [[ASIN:B00BV6RTUG *Against the Gods: The Remarkable Story of Risk*]]. Geniuses outside of the fields of science and the arts also get no mention. I

would consider Thomas Edison, Luther Burbank, Bill Gates, Larry Ellison and Steve Jobs to be geniuses. They were/are certainly endogenous – driven by their own demons – highly intelligent and in many cases rather irascible.

Dutton and Charlton get a lot of mileage out of the term "Head Girl," the antithesis of the genius. The Head Girl is popular, competent, well-rounded, agreeable... and not creative. He contends that modern society seeks out and promotes Head Girl types. It ignores potential geniuses. Budding geniuses are difficult to work with and may never pan out. The Head Girls, on the other hand, can be expected to blossom into exactly what the Establishment wants.

Dutton and Charlton don't go into business personalities. I would propose that whereas Gates, Jobs and Ellison are/were geniuses, most of the people who succeed them are not. Steve Ballmer, Tim Cook at Apple and John Flannery of GE are Head Girls. And I would even be bold enough to say that female executives are more of the "Head Girl" mold than men. Examples include Christine Lagarde at the IMF, Gina Haspel at the CIA, Ginni Rommety at IBM, Carly Fiorina at HP, Marissa Mayer at Yahoo. Genius does not manifest itself in any of them. They manage by consensus, careful not to make waves. And they rarely achieve outstanding results. The same can be said of female heads of state in today's Europe. The people who are changing things are men. Merkel and May represent the forces of stasis, reaction.

Dutton and Charlton contend that bureaucracy smothers genius. The schools, by forcing everybody to go through the same stifling regimen, provide an unsatisfying environment for the budding genius. Gates, Jobs and Ellison all had highly irregular careers in education. They succeeded despite the educational establishment.

Dutton and Charlton do not mention the constant talent dragnet conducted by the schools: the National Merit Scholar System, the Westinghouse Science Talent Search, the endless regimes of standardized testing which would be off-putting to a genius but catnip to the Head Girl types who would bask in the adulation that their high scores earned. It is not surprising that genius manifests itself mostly in the computer realm these days. Because all computer knowledge is man-made, there is no standard set of hoops to jump through to become a great computer designer or programmer. You simply do it. Have the geniuses whose efforts might have gone to bettering the condition of mankind been sidetracked into programming video games?

Dutton and Charlton hypothesize that increasing bureaucracy is necessary to counteract falling intelligence. It is simply not possible to find individuals with the talent to carry out complex tasks. High levels of societal trust depend on high levels of intelligence. If people are not that smart, they cannot be trusted, and the bureaucracy has to have more redundancy to prevent self-dealing. We note that bureaucracies throughout society are becoming larger and more top-heavy, most noticeably in government, education, and healthcare. Many of them are becoming so complex as to be wholly dysfunctional, but yet they cannot be abandoned. Dutton and Charlton project that bureaucracy is in an evolutionary cul-de-sac – it will continue to grow until it consumes all available resources, produces nothing, and must die of its own inertia.

The overarching thesis permeating all of Dutton's books is that the human genome is weakening over time and that intelligence is declining. This book makes a number of points that are repeated in his "At Our Wits End," and are consistent with observations made by other intelligence researchers such as Richard Lynn, Helmuth Nyborg and Satoshi Kanazawa.

The problem is masked by the fact that average reported IQ cannot fall – it is re-centered around with each new age cohort. The intelligence quotient is thus a relative number – relative to the population norms at the time of the test.

Some components of IQ tests have been re-centered upwards, reflecting an apparent increase in intelligence over time, called the Flynn effect for psychometrician James Flynn. Most observers, including Flynn, believe it is an artifact of testing and does not represent any increase in underlying intelligence, the so-called g factor. 100 years ago the questions that appeared on IQ tests were novel to the people taking the tests. They had to figure out what was wanted. If they were given the series ABACADAEA and asked what letter came next, they would first ask the question "Why would they want to know that?" Modern test takers have been so inundated throughout life with such questions that they know exactly what to make of them – and will thus score higher.

Other longitudinal tests – longitudinal testing over time – show a general decline. In America these would include the National longitudinal survey of youth – NLSY – the PISA tests of academic achievement and so on. The SAT and ACT tests have been repeatedly re-centered downward over time.

Dutton and Charlton point out that the most time invariant measure is simple reaction time, SRT, the time it takes to press a button after seeing a colored light come on. Such tests have been carried out for over a century. The increase in the average SRT represents a decrease in intelligence, They figure, on the order of one standard deviation, or 15 points.

There are more indirect methods of estimating historical levels of intelligence. One of which is the WORDSUM quotient of the complexity of texts for different levels of readership. Textbooks, novels, and scientific journals of the nineteenth century expected significantly more verbal skill than modern texts. Given that things like novels are voluntarily purchased, and had large markets, we can reasonably infer that the buyers were smart enough to understand them. Silas Marner, Wind in the Willows and Call of the Wild were recent reminders to this reviewer of the delight that older authors took in using the English language.

Dutton and Charlton rather wanly propose observations about what might, but obviously won't be done. They are not worth repeating here. They conclude with seven statements about genius

1. We need to recognize that support for genius is social self-interest – it is a risky investment, true; but when it pays off, a genius yields vastly more benefit than he costs.
2. The benefits yielded by genius are not obtainable in any other way.
3. Genius is born and not made. Training of non-geniuses will not yield more geniuses.
4. Genius can be identified, and may be encouraged and flourish; or alternatively genius can be ignored, thwarted, suppressed – and rendered irrelevant.
5. A genius is a difficult, eccentric, asocial person who – despite this – exists in order to promote the good of the group.
6. Yet, although strong in self-motivation, self-determination and autonomy – a genius is normally a sensitive and emotionally vulnerable person. He can be dismayed, demoralized, corrupted or driven to despair – and his potential will then be diminished or destroyed.
7. In future most genius will be 'local' (by our current standards), rather than international: a shaman rather than an Einstein. This is the best that can realistically be hoped-for – but a local genius is better than no genius at all.

Dutton is always a delight to read. He wrestles with the most significant issues of the age, undeterred by political correctness or the fact that he is pointing out problems to which there is no practical solution. Another five-star effort.