

Coming of age in the Ivy League: on the social construction of a myth of genius

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Abstract. By referring to notable analytic philosophers, this paper raises a question of whether a certain myth of genius captures something universal: that a genius is neglected by their own society.

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Brown University and friends have uploaded a number of modernist magazines and journals, so that they are accessible for anyone. I read issues during the pandemic lockdown and afterwards. I was reading *The Egoist*, one of my favourites, and I came across the following material about the life of an Eskimo artist:

In American collections of Alaskan Eskimo art are a few carvings which, instead of following the conventional routine of those tribes, show a marvellous lifelikeness and power of characterisation: If the carving shows a long team of dogs, every dog has his own individuality, his own psychology. Inquiry into the origin of these unique works of genius shows that some years ago there lived in Alaska an old fellow who was universally recognized as weak-minded; for he insisted on spending his time in carving, to the neglect of the practical duties of hunting and fishing ; and he did not even do his carving properly in the style that centuries of tradition have fixed as proper for carving, but persisted in making his carved dogs look like *real* dogs ! What could be more ridiculous? So he lived and

died despised. Much good it does him that now, when he is dead, his works are being greatly admired by men of a foreign race in a foreign climate. (1914: 15)

It is a familiar story: that of a creative figure in a field who breaks significantly with tradition and finds recognition later, either in their own culture once it has changed somewhat or in another culture. But such familiar stories also give rise to questions.

One question is whether this happens in all cultures, or all societies, or whether it is a myth of genius, in a derogatory sense of the word “myth.” Removing the derogatory ingredient, we are left with a thesis:

(Neglect Thesis) Anyone whose contributions to a field reach the level of genius will experience neglect by their contemporary society or else extremely suppressive actions, such as being killed.

The question is: is this thesis true, or are there cultures which have geniuses without the pains of genius?

I notice that in analytic philosophy, we have outstanding contributors who were embraced by their native institutions from quite an early stage, such as John Rawls and David Lewis, and they continue to flourish in these elite institutions, or else their writings are treasured there, and in the provinces of academia within the English-speaking world. Why are they not just neglected or thrown out, and left to be admired by “men of a foreign race and foreign climate”¹ or worse?

An explanation for why John Rawls and David Lewis were embraced by their native institutions is that a culture is like a set of rules which anyone can in theory meet and some people meet the rules of their own culture, and so are embraced, such as Rawls and Lewis, and some meet the rules of another culture, like the Eskimo artist referred to, and so are embraced by that culture, or at least their productions are. But there are less pleasant explanations.

¹ In the case of David Lewis, one could argue that the climate condition is met.

One less pleasant explanation has to do with the qualities of a multicultural society. “I might have treated a Rawls or a Lewis differently in another society, according them a low status and shunning them as well, but in this one it is too risky. My group would suffer and a rival ethnic group would flourish.” Whatever the explanation, I wonder whether cultures which do not exclude their geniuses, leaving them to be admired by men of a foreign race in a foreign climate, will not be taking yours: “You are not better than our homegrown genius.”

References

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