

### **Salvador Dali versus Specialization III: his conception of genius**

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*Abstract.* In Salvador Dali's *Diary of a Genius*, his conception of a genius, or concept perhaps, is different from a genius is an inspired specialist. From any piece of personal data about someone, one can infer whether they are a genius or not, given a full grasp of the distinction. I raise a puzzle about his conception.

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*"If there is one thing I do not like*

*It's the sound of the motorbike"*

The purpose of this paper is to contrast the conception of a genius that I think coheres best with the writings of Adam Smith on specialization with that of Salvador Dali. I begin with the former.

**Adam Smith.** Specialization, Smith thinks, is rational, because our shared ends are achieved more efficiently if I specialize in task A and you in task B (Bk. 1, Ch. 1). He also thinks that the appearance of greater natural talent is illusory. Superior ability in a field is the result of specialization, rather than the cause. Does this leave any room for genius at all? A genius is going to be a specialist who makes "inspired" contributions to their specialism. Inspired here should not be taken as involving divine influence. I suppose Smith would wish to be neutral on this issue. Here is an initial clarification: an inspired contribution to a specialist field is very valuable for that field and it is not reasonable to expect that contribution to arise in the field. Once you have trained some workers in it, it is not

reasonable to expect one or more of them to make that contribution. From this conception of genius, we can make an inference: if you want to know whether a person is a genius, the thing to focus on is – or the things to focus on are – their contributions to a specialist field.

Somewhere I saw the strange claim that one should not use bullet points in presentations, but we can give a bullet point summary of Smith's thinking and this extension of it, for any browsing readers:

- It is rational for different individuals to specialize in different tasks to more efficiently achieve their shared ends (Bk. 1, Ch. 1).
- Superior ability in a field is caused by specialization (Bk. 1, Ch. 1).
- A genius is a specialist who makes inspired contributions in their specialism.
- Inspired contributions to a field are very valuable for it and if one trains a team of specialists, one cannot reasonably expect them.

That is the extended Smith over.

**Salvador Dali.** Dali's conception of a genius is very different. He writes:

Ever since the French revolution there has been growing up a vicious, cretinising tendency to consider a genius as a human being more or less the same in every respect (apart from his work) as ordinary mortals... This book will prove that the daily life of a genius, his sleep, his digestion, his ecstasies, his nails, his colds, his blood, his life and death are essentially different from those of the rest of mankind. (1966: 15)

Later he says such things as:

I spill coffee on my shirt. The first reaction of those who are not genius like me—that is to say, the others—is to wipe it off. With me, it is just the opposite. (1966: 207)

These quotations leave me with a puzzle: is there anything that extraordinary about Dali's conception of a genius? It's just an aristocratic conception, which is also shared by various others, who are not aristocrats. A lot of ordinary material is written down by admirers. He or she is desperate for your excrement even (1966: 59)!

Also how does Dali reconcile his conception with his distaste for children's art, because it seems the child genius's art should be of interest for him. He writes:

Children have never particularly interested me, but what interest me even less are paintings by children. The child painter knows his picture is badly painted and the child critic also knows that he knows it is badly painted. Then the child painter-critic who knows that he knows that he knows that it is badly painted has only one recourse: to say that it is very well painted. (1966: 36)

This reminds me of *Anarchism is not Enough*, by the way (Riding 1927), and of course Gertrude Stein.



## References

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Riding, L. 1928. *Anarchism is not Enough*. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company.

Smith, A. 1904 (originally 1776). *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. London: Methuen. Available at: <http://www.econlib.org/library/Smith/smWN.html>