

GARBER QUESTIONS  
“Our Genius Problem”  
*Atlantic Monthly*

The following questions are designed to guide your thinking, and we may answer them in class.

p. 1: Can a football coach (Bill Belichick) be a genius? Think about it: What criterion of genius might not he meet, given the activity (football) with which he is involved?

- a. Not everyone watches football.
- b. Playing or watching football doesn't significantly change society.
- c. It is the players, not the coach, who are the geniuses.
- d. Wearing hats that look like blocks of cheese (stupid as they may look) is a sign of creativity.

p. 1: What have the term “genius,” and the “tall” at Starbucks (and Yale GPAs) all experienced in the last twenty years? \_\_\_\_\_

p. 1: Arrange the proper pairing by century:

- a. 18<sup>th</sup> century Romantic behavior shows the characteristics of genius, but the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Enlightenment) established the concept as we think of it today.
- b. Genius is essentially an 18<sup>th</sup> century concept (Enlightenment), but one that evokes an array of 19<sup>th</sup> century (Romantic) characteristics to exemplify it.

p. 1: Implied on this page but not explicitly addressed: What do you think about this conundrum: the more the individual feels helpless in the modern world, the more he/she idealizes the genius? (What then does the notion of genius DO for us? Why do we want it?)

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p. 1: Is the notion of genius an individualistic or a cooperative concept? (Garber strongly implies that it is which?)

- a. the rugged individualist
- b. someone working in a group

What does it say, a point that perhaps Garber has not fully considered, that the two examples that she gives are Watson & Crick and Thomas Edison? In what disciplines did they work? Why did she not cite Picasso or Beethoven, for example?

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p. 2 top: Garber grants that exceptional individuals have existed and have left an artistic or scientific legacy, but then asks: “But do they constitute an actual class called geniuses? And if so, how can we tell the real ones from the wannabes, the genuine articles from the poseurs?” If true, what would be necessary for a “class called genius” to exist, a class higher than that of the poseurs? What kind of thinking or judgment?

- a. There would have to be a hierarchy of genius.
- b. There would have to be a relative scale of genius.
- c. Only a few would reach the top echelon.
- d. All of the above.

p. 2: Interesting thought: The geniuses of modern times (Einstein, Darwin, Edison) are the modern equivalent of the \_\_\_\_\_ of the Middle Ages.

p. 2: This point raises an issue that all creative people experience over time. It concerns the story of Clive in the novel *Amsterdam*, by English novelist Ian McEwan. Is genius “a young person’s game? How does a creator, who once enjoyed the “the genius of youth” as did Clive in this story, manage to soldier on, decade after decade, without further sparks of genius. McEwan himself seems to have written nothing of consequence since *Atonement* back in 2001. What did McCartney write after age thirty? What did Dillon write after age thirty?

p. 2: She throws down a gauntlet to us by saying that “Exploring the Notion of Genius” is “trying to nail down a concept that can’t be nailed down, to identify a proof or a marker the way scientists identify genes.” Your instructor disagrees, but more important, YOU, by the end of this course will have to determine whether the concept of genius can be “nailed down.”

p. 2: Again an interesting thought: how have we tried to humanize or personalize the genius—in this regard her example of making Einstein “loveable” is probably the best. How have we done this? More important, WHY does the human mind prefer to present and understand the world in terms of personal narratives?

- a. people are more interesting than scientific facts
- b. our culture from earliest times told of cultures through stories
- c. couching information in the form of a story makes it easier to remember
- d. we can all relate to a human story
- e. all of the above are possibilities

p. 2: But why do we want to (often) simplify a complex phenomenon and associate it with a single individual—the genius? Why do we have names for historical periods, and even or hurricanes (and now, on the Weather Channel, winter storms?

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p. 3: In what ways did Einstein himself try to inflate and capitalize on his image as a genius? What “eccentric” things did he do? \_\_\_\_\_

p. 3: Name an example of a “genius” who has been “airbrushed” by the popular media, someone (who won a Nobel Prize in economics) who is described here as a complicated personality?

- a. Ron Howard
- b. Albert Einstein,
- c. John Nash
- d. Will Hunting

p. 3: [Look up Velcro] How high a standard do we need have for genius? What does a “genius” have to do that Georges Mistral did not? The genius has to be able to? (circle one or more)

- a. Create something that is more important than the profoundly trivial
- b. Have more than just one “lucky” discovery.
- c. Continually impact the lives of people over a long period of time.
- d. All of the above.

NOW COMES A HISTORY OF THE “CHANGING NATURE” OF GENIUS,

p. 4: What is the landmark writing that changed the concept of the notion of genius (much of it still in place today)?

\_\_\_\_\_

p. 4: “Brilliant vs. Industrious” is tantamount to saying “N\_\_\_\_\_ vs. N\_\_\_\_\_”

p. 4: Which was the first to be recognized, an artistic or a scientific genius? \_\_\_\_\_

REALLY A CONTINUATION NOW OF THE HISTORY OF THE CHANGING NATURE OF GENIUS, NOW MOVING INTO THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY AND ROMANTICISM

p. 5: The Romantic notion of genius favored

a. The wild, untutored figure.

b. A person who built upon a steady, formal education—the diligent overachiever.

Was Shakespeare thought to be “well schooled”? \_\_\_\_\_ Did the 19<sup>th</sup> century want Shakespeare to be well-schooled? \_\_\_\_\_ If not, why not?

\_\_\_\_\_

p. 5: Oscar Wilde was, according to this, the first of what?

a. Homosexual genius

b. Transgender genius

c. Performance genius

d. All of the above

Extra credit for viewers of *The Imitation Game*: What do Oscar Wilde and Alan Turing have in common? \_\_\_\_\_

p. 6 top: In the spirit of Romanticism, what is it about Poe, Mozart, and Oppenheimer that attracts us to them?

a. They had eccentric personalities.

b. They had demonstrably high IQs.

c. They were enormously versatile.

p. 6: Which theory about genius begins to develop in the **19<sup>th</sup> century**?

a. Genius and mental illness were closely associated.

b. The genius was morally degenerate.

c. The genius was infirm even deformed.

d. All of the above

p. 6: “Eugenicist” Francis Galton was a cousin of what famous biologist? \_\_\_\_\_

p. 6: What is the implicit pernicious conclusion to be drawn from Francis Galton (half-cousin of what famous scientist? \_\_\_\_\_)

- a. Genius is hereditary (and selective breeding should be encouraged).
- b. Through selective breeding, over time, the genius will survive.

QUANTIFYING GENIUS—HOW IMPORTANT IS THE IQ TEST? (our first pass on this subject, more later with Malcolm Gladwell)

- p. 7: When the high IQ types were studied many decades later, how many genius were to be found?
- a. The number of geniuses greatly outnumbered those found in the general population.
  - b. The number of geniuses somewhat surpassed the number among the general population.
  - c. There number of geniuses was no great than that found in the general population.

p. 8: What do you think of the position: “an intelligence-testing procedure is completely invalid because of its cultural and linguistic bias????”

p. 8: If the Nobel Prize is given for accomplishment, what is the MacArthur Grant given for (will be discussed in class)?

p. 8 bottom: According to Garber, is freedom (to exploit your genius) necessary to genius? \_\_\_\_\_

p. 9: More recently, the entire issue of sperm banks has been shown to be outmoded by the prospect of which new technology involving gene editing?

- a. AI
- b. CRISPR
- c. NFL
- d. NFT

p. 9: (Returns to the question of why we seem to want “the genius”) (Why do we?)

- a. Makes for a good story
- b. Sells trade books
- c. Provides hope for a “rescue figure”

p. 9: What, according to Garber, is genius NOT?

- a. an identifiable essence
- b. proved to exisce
- c. something that can be predicted
- d. all of the above