

QUESTIONS FOR FIRST READING ON PLATO  
Darrin McMahon, *Divine Fury: A History of Genius*  
Chapter 1: “The Genius of the Ancients”

(Darrin McMahon is a serious historian who now teaches at Dartmouth and has written the most substantive overview of changing attitudes about genius over the centuries. *Divine Fury* is a scholarly work intended for specialists, not the general reader. The questions below are intended to guide your reading and allow you to get the most out of the hour or two that you will spend reading this.

- p. 1: Does the author believe in the concept of genius? What would happen if he didn't?
- p. 1: What, apparently, is his definition of genius?
- a. the capacity to change the world
  - b. a high IQ, great learning, performance, or presence of mind
- p. 2 (especially the bottom): The premise of this book is
- a. the definition of genius has proved constant
  - b. that the definition of genius is mutable
- p. 3 top: What was the ancient attitude regarding the genius and originality?
- a. without originality there was no genius
  - b. it was impossible to write phrases not already known
- p. 3 middle: How does this compare with the modern Western notion of genius? In which direction was the genius of ancient times looking? a. Backward b. Forward
- p. 3 bottom: What is this issue about? “only when the primacy of the past was challenged and the gods' monopoly on creation contested could human beings truly conceive of themselves as creators.”
- a. humans once thought of themselves only as vessels for abilities sent by the gods
  - b. the notion that humans themselves had the capacity to create began with the Greeks
  - c. the Greeks didn't value emulating past models as creating original ideas for the future
- p. 4: To “invent” something originally mean what?
- a. to find something that was already known
  - b. create something new
- p. 4: Who was the creator in ancient times?
- a. scientists b. gods c. humans d. flatulent politicians e. philosopher kings
- pp. 4-5: Judging from the fate of Prometheus and Satan, what happened to the rebellious, original thinker in ancient times—figures that we might think of as geniuses today?
- p. 5 middle: When did the notion of originality and creative imagination as being a virtue begin to take hold—in other words, when did the modern notion of genius begin?
- a. ancient Greece and Rome b. Middle Ages c. Renaissance d. eighteenth century
- p. 5: Where on the globe did this begin to take hold? (And not broached here but important—WHY--why might it have taken hold here and then. Look up Adam Smith.)

NOW MORE SPECIFICALLY TO THE ANCIENT GREEK NOTION OF GENIUS

- p. 6: bottom: Strangely—but this is important to the notion of the “evil genius” what was the main Greek word for “genius”? \_\_\_\_\_

pp. 6-7: Was the genius of the ancients inside or outside the individual? Think of a one-word English synonym for the Greek word for genius. Think of Walt Disney's *Aladdin*.

STOP AT THE BOTTOM OF P. 7 AND GO TO THE MIDDLE OF P. 10

p. 10 middle: Judging from Socrates and Homer, then genius of ancient times were not so much scientists and painters as \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

p. 11: What does the word "inspire" mean literally (possibly two meanings). The Latin word "spiritus" denotes what different possibilities?

LEAVING SOCRATES AND HOMER WE NOW MOVE ON TO PLATO'S NOTION OF GENIUS

p. 12 middle: Plato in his *Dialogues* develops the notion of the Greek word *mania* and the Latin expression *furor poeticus*. [And this is where McMahon derives the title of his book *Divine Fury*.] Simple task, provide an English translation of these words "*furor poeticus*." But here's the point of this, later: Aristotle would suggest that there is a thin line between genius (this state of being out of one's senses) and \_\_\_\_\_.

p. 13: Do good poetic geniuses among the Greeks follow art (conventional rules)?

p. 14 bottom-15: Again not only the seer and the poet, but also the \_\_\_\_\_ can be seized by a *furor divinus*, which is sent by the \_\_\_\_\_.

p. 16 middle: recap of what has been said in previous few pages

BIRTHDAY PARTIES!

p. 19: As recounted by the Roman Tibullus, how did ancients venerate their personal genius? When we blow out a candle on the birthday cake, what ancient tradition are we continuing?

NOW TO THE LATIN WORD GENIUS;

pp. 20-25. Let me cut to the chase for you, because you have been good sports (your genius is one that brings to you patience and magnanimity). The Romans essentially borrowed the Greek notion of genius (as they did with most of the arts and philosophy). They used the word *genius* meaning attendant spirit, much as the Greeks had used the word *diamon*. The Romans also coined the term "ingenium" meaning the possession of a particular capacity—a penchant for extraordinary poetry, or evil or whatever talent or genius your genie might bring to you. The word "genius" then

- a. is essentially Roman in conception but is Greek linguistic origin
- b. is essentially Greek in conception but is Roman in linguistic origin

FINIS. DEIS GRATIA