

Kant's Concept of Genius: A Defence, Against Romanticism and Scepticism

di Andy Hamilton*

ABSTRACT

This article defends a Kantian conception of genius, as a middle way between the Romantic, and the Nietzschean sceptical conceptions. It begins by considering how the concept of genius has evolved, before addressing how Kant's account of genius helps resolve a tension within his aesthetics between aesthetic judgment as appreciation of purposiveness without a purpose, and recognition that the artwork is created purposefully. It considers the relation of genius to rule-following and the exemplary. It concludes with a defence of the concept of genius as well-defined, against contemporary critiques which see it as elitist, patriarchal, ethnocentric and mystificatory. In his discussion, I argue, Kant relates talent, skill and the exemplary in an elucidatory explanatory holism.

KEYWORDS

Genius, Kant, Romanticism, Art, Nietzsche

1. *A Changing Concept*

'Genius' is a contested concept, but the following analysis seems fairly anodyne. A genius is an exceptional person who manifests unusual creativity through natural ability and personal application. Application may be necessary to acquire the skills needed for genius to flourish, but the common stress is on native ability; as Bruno comments, the "greatness [of a genius] is not something that can be taught".¹ The genius, who is often charismatic, may be ahead of their time, and at odds with prevailing norms.

Beyond this anodyne characterisation, there is a range of views, from full-blown Romanticism, to scepticism about genius, whether ideologically-motivated or not. The latter account rejects Romanticism's mystical or religious connotations, or their residue in moderate accounts such as Kant's. It avoids the idea that the genius's

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¹ P. Bruno, *Kant's Concept of Genius*, Continuum, London 2010, p. 2.

talent is inexplicable or innate. Non-ideological scepticism probably originates with Nietzsche, and says that “genius” is simply a term of respect for a supreme and original talent. It need not deny that some people are so brilliant, that one is lost in admiration. It may also find a place for Kant’s view that geniuses are a required object of study; this applies to philosophy, music, or chess – Kant, Bach, Mozart or Spassky. Ideological scepticism, in contrast, which now takes a postmodern form, regards the concept of genius as involving a mystificatory and superstitious expression of wonder, with connotations of elitism, patriarchy and Eurocentrism.

Romanticism is still flourishing, however. Henry Hardy is a Romantic about genius who finds the dictionary definition wanting:

The OED defines a genius as “an exceptionally intelligent or talented person”. In other words, genius is an ordinary ability possessed to an extraordinary degree. But this isn’t right. A genius can do something quite different from ordinary mortals – different in kind, not just degree.²

In this, perhaps, Hardy is following Schopenhauer, whose highly Romantic account assumes that the genius works for posterity alone, their achievements rarely recognized by contemporaries:

Talent is able to achieve what is beyond other people’s capacity to achieve [...] *genius* [...] transcends not only others’ capacity of achievement, but also their capacity of apprehension [...] Talent is like the marksman who hits a target which others cannot reach; genius is like the marksman who hits a target, as far as which others cannot even see.³

Against scepticism and Romanticism, I will defend a Kantian middle way. I will argue that “genius” does have a definite sense, and refers to a genuine phenomenon. In the context of a variety of “genius myths”, the account outlined in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (henceforth, *CrJ* – sections 46-49) is the most persuasive – or so I will argue.

As with other central concepts in the world of the arts, it is debated when the concept of genius appeared. Plato’s concept of divine poetic inspiration in *Ion* is commonly recognised as an ancestor of the modern concept of genius. In the 18th century there was a transformation of the world of the arts, which included changes in the meaning of ‘art’ and ‘aesthetic’. Peter Kivy argues

² H. Hardy, *In Search of Isaiah Berlin*, Tauris/Bloomsbury, London 2018, p. 3.

³ A. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Dover, New York 1966, Vol II, p. 391.

that this involved a change in the concept of genius. The term originally referred to the essence of something, as in Adam Smith's "the genius of the British constitution", or *genius loci* – in Ancient Rome, the presiding deity of a place, later its essence or unique qualities. There may be a connection with *jinn* in Arabic.

Clearly there was a change in the meaning of the concept – or at least a change in the meaning of the word, as it appears in European languages.⁴ (The distinction between word and object is clearly a difficult one.⁵) There is no doubt that Alexander the Great would have been described by contemporaries as a great general – but the idea of a military genius is a modern one. It is likely that the change in meaning, that Kivy refers to, began earlier in the modern era, however. Thus for Vasari, whose *Lives of the Artists* (1550) is the founding text of art history, artists of genius work with their minds before they work with their hands. Writing to his patron the Duke of Milan to explain a delay in the completion of the Last Supper, Leonardo commented that

men of lofty genius [*gl'ingegni elevati*] sometimes accomplish the most when they work the least, seeking out inventions with the mind, and forming those perfect ideas which the hands afterwards express and reproduce from the images already conceived in the brain.⁶

It is disputed whether the concept applied in music before the 18th century – but this is a debate as much about the artistic status of music, as about the advent of the concept of genius. According to Kivy, Handel was the first composer regarded as a genius, in the manner of Michelangelo and artists in other media. But James Young demurs, citing Glarean's comment on Josquin (d. 1521) that "his genius is indescribable".⁷ Richard Taruskin comments that Josquin was the first composer to interest his contemporaries and posterity as a personality:

He was the subject of gossip and anecdote, and the picture that emerges [...] resembles the popular conception of Beethoven [...] cantankerous, arrogant, distracted [...] but excused by [...] his transcendent gift. Josquin, like Beethoven, was looked upon with awe as one marked [...] by divine inspiration – a status formerly reserved for prophets and saints.⁸

⁴ See Bruno, *Kant's Concept of Genius*, cit., ch. 1.

⁵ It is discussed in A. Hamilton, *Art and Entertainment: A Philosophical Enquiry*, Routledge, London, forthcoming 2022.

⁶ G. Vasari, *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, trans. G.d.C. de Vere, Knopf, New York 1996, vol. 1, p. 632.

⁷ H. Glarean, *Dodecachordon*, trans. by Clement A. Miller, n.p.: American Institute of Musicology, 1965, 2, p. 268.

⁸ R. Taruskin, *Oxford History of Western Music*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009, 1, p. 548.

However, I think that all writers agree that in the visual arts, genius was recognised at least as early as the 16th century.

Among philosophers, the concept of genius became prominent only in the 18th century – while Hume was a proponent, Reid was not. Kivy argues that during the 18th and 19th centuries, philosophers developed two concepts of genius – a Longinian conception of genius as a gift of nature, and propensity for breaking established rules, and a Platonic one of genius as divinely possessed. The dichotomy is unconvincing, however; Kant does not fit in either category, and Longinus is not a sufficiently major authority.

Historically, the concept of genius has in some ways become more specific, while in others it has broadened. As Robert Musil commented in the 1930s

The time had come when people were starting to speak of genius on the soccer field or in the boxing ring, although there would still be at most only one genius of a halfback or one great tennis-court tactician for every ten or so explorers, tenors, or writers of genius who cropped up in the papers. The new spirit was not yet quite sure of itself.⁹

Even in a postmodern age, however, there are limits. A ‘genius forger’ is not both a genius and a forger – here the use of ‘genius’ is metaphorical, meaning ‘excellent’.

In this article, I consider a continuum of concepts of genius, from the innate to the acquired:

- (1) the Romantic or divine concept of innate or possessed
- (2) Kant’s combination of the innate and acquired.
- (3) Nietzsche’s sceptical concept of genius as hard work.

These concepts may be associated with alternative conceptions of the artwork, from Idealist to materialist – Idealists fail to recognise that art involves understanding the possibilities and limitations of the medium. But I have nothing further to say on that large question here.

An early precursor of the Romantic concept is Plato’s *Ion*, which describes the inspired poet as having not skill, but divine dispensation. Schopenhauer – not Herder – offers the clearest expression of Romanticism, stressing “the free impulse of genius

⁹ R. Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, trans. S. Wilkins and B. Pike, Picador, London 1997, p. 41. Quoted by Bruno, Kant’s Concept of Genius, cit., p. 1.

without any admixture of deliberation and reflection”.¹⁰ At the other extreme is Nietzsche’s naturalist scepticism about genius – popularly epitomised by Thomas Edison’s remark that “Genius is one percent inspiration, ninety-nine percent perspiration”.¹¹ For Nietzsche, genius should be “understood without any mythological or religious nuance”.¹²

aside from [...] suggestions of our vanity, the activity of the genius seems in no way fundamentally different from the activity of the inventor of machines, the scholar of astronomy or history, the master of tactics.

All these activities are explicable if one pictures to oneself people whose thinking is active in one direction, who employ everything as material, who always zealously observe their own inner life and that of others [...].

[...] Every activity of man is amazingly complicated, not only that of the genius: but none is a “miracle”.¹³

His model is that of “the serious workman”:

Do not talk about giftedness, inborn talents! One can name great men of all kinds who were very little gifted. They *acquired* greatness, became ‘geniuses’ (as we put it) [...] they all possessed that seriousness of the efficient workman which first learns to construct the parts properly before it ventures to fashion a great whole [...].¹⁴

Postmodern scepticism about genius could be regarded as a development of the Nietzschean view. Scepticism here means: the concept is not a genuine one, or has no instances. But Kant’s middle way, I will argue, is the most convincing position.

2. Overview of Kant’s Account

Kant’s treatment of genius is the most profound in the philosophical literature. Among his key insights is that the genius-talent distinction relates to the exemplary nature of works of genius – thus at least implicitly, he understands the crucial role of artistic tradition, still neglected in the literature (discussed in section 4 below). However, it is notable that his discussion of genius was added to *CrJ* at a late stage; surprisingly, given its importance in the aesthetics of the time, earlier drafts do not refer to genius. As Cooper comments, until its final drafts in 1789, Kant rejected

¹⁰ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, cit., p. 409.

¹¹ Spoken statement (c. 1903), published in *Harper’s Monthly* (September 1932).

¹² F. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, Penguin, Harmondsworth Middlesex 1994, s. 5, paragraph 231.

¹³ Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, *ibid.*

¹⁴ Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, *ibid.*

the conception of genius as spontaneous creativity, advocated by Edward Young, Baumgarten, Herder, Mendelssohn and Hume.¹⁵ In a letter to his student Herder in 1768, Kant warned against its excesses.¹⁶ In some mid-1780s letters, Kant is sceptical of the concept of genius in German-speaking philosophy, while the preface to the second edition of *Critique of Pure Reason* criticises the German obsession with genius.¹⁷ By 1788, Herder had become a leader of the *Sturm und Drang* movement, and advocated a Romantic conception of genius that neglects perspiration in favour of inspiration. In *CrJ*, Kant wanted to provide a purely transcendental account of taste against his speculative systems. Indeed, for John Zammito, “The Third *Critique* is almost a continuous attack on Herder”.¹⁸ But in the later drafts of late summer 1789 to early 1790, Kant explored genius as exemplary use of the productive imagination, and expression of freedom.

As Henry Allison explains, Kant’s account of genius is meant to help resolve a tension within his aesthetics between aesthetic judgment as appreciation of purposiveness without a purpose, and recognition that the artwork is created purposefully.¹⁹ For Jeremy Proulx, this is the commonest modern interpretation of Kant’s theory of genius:

a solution to the problem of fine art – the problem that while pure judgments of taste rest on the appreciation of the mere form of purposiveness, art involves intention and thus an actual purpose, not just purposiveness itself.²⁰

Kant begins by declaring that

Genius is the talent (natural endowment) that gives the rule to art. Since talent is an innate productive ability of the artist and as such belongs itself to nature, we could also put it this way: *Genius* is the innate mental predisposition *through which* nature gives the rule to art.

Genius, then, is an innate ability, and it is in this sense that artworks are rule-governed. Kant regards the artistic genius as a

¹⁵ A. Cooper, *The Tragedy of Philosophy: Kant’s Critique of Judgment and the Project of Aesthetics*, SUNY Press, New York 2017, passim.

¹⁶ I. Kant, *Correspondence*, ed. by A. Zweig, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007, p. 94.

¹⁷ *Critique of Pure Reason*, 1787, Bxliii.

¹⁸ J. Zammito, *The Genesis of Kant’s ‘Critique of Judgment’*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1992, p. 10.

¹⁹ H. Allison, *Kant’s Theory of Taste*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2008, p. 272.

²⁰ J. Proulx, *Nature, Judgment and Art: Kant and the Problem of Genius*, in “Kant Studies Online”, 2011, pp. 27-53, p. 30.

“favourite of nature” – “*ein Günstling der Natur*” – gifted to make objects of great complexity and unified structure. The rules which inform these objects are the product of nature, and not the object of conscious attention.

Kant assumes that the genius is solitary, which is a feature of the Romantic conception. But his treatment is an otherwise moderate one, incorporating discipline and skill, and rejecting Herder’s *Sturm und Drang* proto-Romanticism.²¹ Genius is “nature working through the subject” rather than the “subject in their self-possession”. Kant insists that “fine arts must necessarily be considered arts of *genius*”: “Beautiful art is the art of a genius” who ignores “classical rules”, and pursues an exemplary originality.²² The genius is a rule-giver, but not a rule-follower. It is important to stress that Kant does not think that all the products of fine art are products of genius. His view is that necessarily, some of them are – a form of argument that is too often neglected. A similar argument would be that not all artworks must be products of craft, and could be readymades or conceptual works; but necessarily, some of them must be products of craft, and so there could not be an artworld consisting entirely of conceptual art or readymades. It is apparent that Kant allows that talents as well as geniuses produce fine art, in such quotations as: “But since a genius is nature’s favourite and so [...] a rare phenomenon, his example gives rise to a school for other good minds”.²³

For Kant, “Every art presupposes rules [...]” – it is intentional, not random. “On the other hand, the concept of fine art does not permit a judgment about the beauty of its product to be derived from any rule whatsoever that has a *concept* as its determining basis [...]” Free beauty is not based on a determinate concept, for which criteria of application can be specified. (Contrast, for example, the determinate concept “chair” – its criteria specify something for sitting on, with legs, a certain height, and so on.) “Hence fine art cannot itself devise the rule by which it is to bring about its product [...] [So] it must be nature in the subject (and through the attunement of his powers) that gives the rule to art; in other words, fine art is possible only as the product of genius”.²⁴

The artist operates in the domain of nature, and freedom, yet

²¹ See Zammito, *The Genesis of Kant’s ‘Critique of Judgment’*, cit., pp. 137-142. Kant also rejects the Platonic notion of genius as ‘inspiration’.

²² *Critique of Judgement*, s. 46.

²³ *Critique of Judgement*, s. 49.

²⁴ *Critique of Judgement*, s. 46.

this freedom is not unfettered or chaotic. Artists “make sensible rational ideas [...] beyond the limits of experience”, not by reason, but by the poetic thought characteristic of genius.²⁵ Kant outlines the following argument:

(1) Genius is a *talent* for producing something for which no determinate rule can be given [...] hence the foremost property of genius must be *originality*.

(2) Since nonsense too can be original, the products of genius must also be models, i.e., they must be *exemplary*.

(3) Genius itself cannot describe or indicate scientifically how it brings about its products, and it is rather *nature* [through the talent of the artist] that gives the rule to art.

(4) Nature, through genius, prescribes the rule not to science but to art.²⁶

This argument rests on distinctive Kantian themes, including the aforementioned idea that attributions of beauty do not rest on determinate criteria – they have no “determining basis”. There is also the Kantian assumption that natural beauty is superior to artificial or artistic beauty. Kant expands on claim (2), that products of genius are exemplary: “the other genius, who follows the example, is aroused to it by a feeling of his own originality”, and does not simply imitate – an issue pursued in section 4 below. However, “for other clever minds his example gives rise to a school, that is to say a methodical instruction according to rules”²⁷; imitators produce derivative works. Geniuses do not themselves make up rules for others to follow. Rather, they create a body of works from which others can extract a set of rules – as Aristotle did for drama in the *Poetics*, and as European music theorists did in creating the concept of sonata form in the 19th century.

Kant deflates the problem when he says that genius lies in the nature of the artist. For him, genius lies in some ineffable rule of nature, nature here being unfathomable and impossible to explain – the origin of aesthetic rules lies beyond reach. This is a *characterisation*, not an explanation of genius.

One of several controversial claims by Kant is that the genius-artist must not know what they are doing, in the sense that it is not prescribed by a rule – they cannot explain their own achievement, nor teach it to others. They must, however, know what they are doing in the sense of avoiding arbitrariness. As Zammito puts it, “From the vantage

²⁵ *Critique of Judgement*, ss. 5, 314.

²⁶ *Critique of Judgement*, s. 46.

²⁷ *Critique of Judgement*, s. 49.

point of rationality, [the genius] is impotent”.²⁸ According to Zammito, the only way to reconcile art as free, yet limited by mechanism – as natural and also purposive – is to treat artistic creativity not in terms of “the subject in his self-possession, but rather as nature working through the subject”.²⁹ Ironically, genius was understood by Kant “as something which the artist neither controlled nor understood”:

genius had to be taken to be “original”, as the conventional wisdom had it, and [...] could produce only “exemplary” instantiations which could neither be prescribed in logical rules nor described in discursive empirical canons, but which stood [...] the one source not only for the cultivation of taste as appreciation but for further exemplification of beauty through art.³⁰

What Michael Haworth calls “a constitutive ignorance” in the genius is not something that Kant regards positively:

Despite such extravagant language as “nature’s favourites”, the genius is not simply venerated or elevated in Kant’s account, for he is simultaneously humbled by being placed under the influence of something that he no more understands or controls than the non-artist does.³¹

As Haworth argues, art both requires rules and conventions, and requires their constant suspension and transformation. The genius cannot work to a rule, otherwise there is no originality – yet they cannot work without rules, otherwise they will produce nonsense.

There seems to be a confusion here, both by Kant, and contemporary followers such as Derrida. Artists vary in how knowledgeable they are concerning their creative processes. For instance, in contemporary Western art music, many composers are academics who are rigorous in their musical self-analysis – Brian Ferneyhough is a good example. He is certainly a talent, and the test of time is needed before we can pronounce him a genius – but it will not be his self-analysis that prevents him from being one. Contrast the geniuses of jazz who have been inarticulate – for every articulate Miles Davis or Dave Brubeck, there is a Bud Powell or Thelonious Monk, generally unwilling or unable to discuss their music. Obviously there are issues here about *who* they were unwilling to talk to, but the general point is clear – many geniuses conform to Kant’s model, and lack insight, but many do not.

²⁸ Zammito, *The Genesis of Kant’s ‘Critique of Judgment’*, cit., p. 140.

²⁹ Zammito, *The Genesis of Kant’s ‘Critique of Judgment’*, cit., p. 139.

³⁰ Zammito, *The Genesis of Kant’s ‘Critique of Judgment’*, cit., p. 139.

³¹ M. Haworth, *Genius Is What Happens: Derrida and Kant on Genius, Rule-Following and the Event*, in “British Journal of Aesthetics”, 54, 3, 2014, p. 333.

The question of insight into genius has a bearing on Kant's rejection of scientific genius, discussed in section 4. But first we consider taste, which may be a more self-conscious capacity than genius – the question of understanding of one's genius, and the relation of taste and genius, are connected.

3. *Kant vs. Sturm und Drang – Genius vs. Taste*

Commentators such as Adorno regard Kant as offering a 'taste' aesthetic. They therefore assume a traditional formalist picture of Kant, that neglects the *Critique of Judgment* beyond the Four Moments. However, it must be agreed that Kant advocates such an aesthetic to the extent of holding that 'taste' must "clip the wings" of genius. It is widely agreed that in doing this, Kant was reacting against the *Sturm und Drang* movement, which aimed to free art from the constraints of classical rules (Greek, Latin and French) by untrammelled pursuit of genius, evoking intense emotional responses in audiences. *Sturm und Drang* contrasted taste, which it regarded as derivative and pedantic, with the work of the genius, unconstrained by rules and taste. In Herder's Platonic account of the origin of genius, God is solely responsible. In contrast, Gadamer comments, Kant was "old-fashioned and [...] maintained the concept of taste which the *Sturm und Drang* not only violently dismissed but also violently demolished".³² However, it is wrong to say that Herder rejected the role of taste. He writes that "*genius* is generally a *mass* of [...] striving faculties of the soul; *taste* is *order* in this mass [...] in themselves taste and genius are never opposed":

Genius is an aggregation of natural forces; it therefore [...] precedes the formation of taste [...] taste can arise only through geniuses – that is, through natural powers that operate quickly and vivaciously [...] taste without genius is an absurdity.³³

My present concern is with Kant rather than *Sturm und Drang*, however.

Kant writes that

insofar as art shows genius it does indeed deserve to be called *inspired* [*geistreich*], but it deserves to be called *fine* art only insofar as it shows taste.

³² H. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. by J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall, Continuum, London 2004. p. 50.

³³ J.G. Herder, *The Causes of the Decay of Taste*, in his "Selected Writings on Aesthetics", Princeton University Press, Princeton 2006, pp. 309-310.

Taste, like the power of judgment in general, consists in disciplining (or training) genius. It severely clips its wings, and makes it civilized [...]but at the same time it gives it guidance as to how far and over what it may spread while still remaining purposive. It introduces clarity and order into a wealth of thought [...] if there is a conflict between these two properties in a product, and something has to be sacrificed, then it should rather be on the side of genius.³⁴

He continues that

since originality of talent is one essential component [of] genius, shallow minds believe that the best way to show that they are geniuses in first bloom is by renouncing all rules of academic constraint, believing that they will cut a better figure on the back of an ill-tempered than of a training-horse.³⁵

Thus the descriptions of Beethoven as a rule breaker, that became common late in Kant's lifetime, are reminiscent of Herder rather than Kant.

Zammito stresses that Kant does not subscribe to a cult of genius:

Romanticism is often taken [...] as [a] rebellion against the primacy of theoretical reason and of science [...] the effort to replace the natural scientist or natural philosopher [...] with the artist as the true seer [...] As a good son of the Enlightenment, Kant found such notions revolting. Science should not endure such indignity. "Genius" had to be put in its place.³⁶

The *Sturm und Drang* concept of genius is incoherent, Kant insists. Skill, discipline and technique are required, in addition to originality – though Zammito holds that Kant has an ironic intention in his account of genius.

Kant holds that beauty in art is the result of taste, which gives it form.

To give this form, however, to the product of fine art, taste merely is required. By this the artist, having practiced and corrected his taste by a variety of examples from nature or art, controls his work and, after [...] often laborious, attempts to satisfy taste, finds the form [...] Hence this form is not [...] a matter of inspiration, or of a free swing of the mental powers, but rather of a slow [...] process of improvement, directed to making the form adequate to his thought without prejudice to the freedom in the play of those powers.³⁷

For Zammito, Kant then fears he has undermined his approach to genius, so takes back what he has ascribed to taste:

³⁴ *Critique of Judgement*, s. 50.

³⁵ *Critique of Judgement*, s. 47.

³⁶ Zammito, *The Genesis of Kant's 'Critique of Judgment'*, cit., 1992, pp. 138-139.

³⁷ *Critique of Judgement*, s. 48.

Taste is, however, merely a critical, not a productive faculty; and what conforms to it is not, merely on that account, a work of fine art. It may belong to useful and mechanical art, or even to science, as a product following definite rules.³⁸

Kant is unclear whether genius provides the material, or also the life and spirit of art. His considered view in s. 50 is that taste in isolation can produce only mechanical, lifeless art, while taking genius in isolation risks producing nonsense.

It is the Romantic conception that separates genius and taste, therefore – a more moderate account such as Kant’s does not need to do this. As Proulx rightly comments, “the separation between genius and taste is strictly analytic, and [...] Kant’s most complete account embraces both in a seamless whole”.³⁹ One underlying issue is what I will call the *naïve innateness condition*. The classic model of the genius views their ability as innate, as illustrated in popular accounts of Mozart as having no need for craft – music just poured out of him. However, Beethoven had sketchbooks, while the greatest Renaissance artists made *pentimenti* – it is the copyist who does not. The Romantic model has a naïve view of what “innate” means. The issue of innateness is largely spurious – the answer in “nature v. nurture” disputes is usually that each is required. If one views Kant as regarding genius and taste as inseparable, he can escape that naïve view.

4. *Talent v. Genius: Imitation and the Exemplary*

Kant anticipates Adorno and Horkheimer in treating science as unthinking calculative reason, though he does not condemn it as they do. For Kant, a great scientist is a great calculating machine – though for him, this is not a pejorative description:

the scientists’ talent lies in continuing to increase the perfection of our cognitions and of all the benefits that depend on [these], as well as in imparting that same knowledge to others; and in these respects they are far superior to those who merit the honour of being called geniuses.⁴⁰

Kant declares that “No disparagement [...] of those great men [of science], to whom the human race is so deeply indebted is involved in this comparison [with artist-geniuses]”. He means it

³⁸ *Critique of Judgement*, s. 48.

³⁹ Proulx, *Nature, Judgment and Art: Kant and the Problem of Genius*, cit., p. 29.

⁴⁰ *Critique of Judgement*, s. 47.

– but it is nonetheless an unsettling comment. It shows that in Kant’s account, the concept of genius had not in all respects fully evolved – for in our contemporary concept, scientific genius is fully the equal of artistic.

In regard to science, indeed, Kant is mistaken. As Haworth comments, Kant does not apply the same criteria in each case.⁴¹ The student of Newton, we are told, could learn “everything that [Newton] has set forth” in his great work, but “one cannot learn to write inspired poetry however elaborate all the precepts of this art may be, and however superb its models”.⁴² But Kant asks the would-be scientist merely to *learn* or *understand* scientific knowledge, while asking the would-be artist to *create* art. Clearly, the ability to understand Newton is not the same as an ability to produce something of similar magnitude. Newton may have been no better able to explain how he discovered gravity, than Van Gogh could explain how he painted his sunflowers. Moreover, while much scientific work is calculation, so is much of the work of the artist of genius. It might be argued that Einstein was creative in his discoveries, but not in terms of bringing something into existence – science discovers and does not invent. But even scientific realists must allow that Einstein brought the theory of relativity into being.

The notion of a ‘school’ is different in science and art, while imitation takes a different form. In that sense Kant is right to contrast them, even if the terms of his contrast are mistaken, and he is wrong to deny scientific genius. Philosophy occupies a middle way between the arts and the sciences. There was a school of Cartesians, and a school of German rationalists; the Lvov-Warsaw School of Polish philosophy flourished between WW1 and WW2.

Although Kant locates the disanalogy between art and science incorrectly, he is more insightful on the nature of imitation in relation to artistic schools. He writes that

the product of a genius [...] is an example that is meant not to be imitated, but to be followed by another genius [...] [who] [...] is aroused [...] to a feeling of his own originality, which allows him to exercise in art his freedom from the constraint of rules, [so] that art itself acquires a new rule by this, thus showing that the talent is exemplary. But since a genius is nature’s favourite and so [...] a rare phenomenon,

⁴¹ Haworth, *Genius Is What Happens*, cit., passim.

⁴² *Critique of Judgement*, s. 47.

his example gives rise to a school for other good minds, i.e., a methodical instruction by means of whatever rules could be extracted from those products of spirit [...] fine art is to that extent imitation, for which nature, through a genius, gave the rule.⁴³

From Kant's account we can see that although talent and genius are contrasting notions, they inhabit the same artistic system. Artistic schools follow rules derived from the study of Old Masters, but genius still flourishes within those constraints. Genius draws on tradition. Bach's contrapuntal style was an ingenious development of Buxtehude's Germanic polyphony. Monet in the 1860s was the ingenious epitome of the Barbizon school, of which he was then only a follower; Proust's greatest work arose from Balzac and Zola's construction of epic textual composites. But unlike the talent, the genius does not seek to follow rules from a school. One must distinguish "influenced by" and "follows". There are different kinds of imitation, with varying degrees of understanding of what is being imitated; similarly, different kinds of influences.

A genius can belong to, or initiate, an artistic tradition. But to reiterate, the concept of an *artistic tradition* has been underexplored in the philosophical literature. Here are some necessary distinctions. Artistic traditions can be divided into sclerotic or coercive, and living traditions; only the latter opens itself to criticism. There is unthinking and thinking acceptance of tradition – unself-conscious, non-rational tradition on Max Weber's model, and self-conscious, rationalistic tradition that Alisdair MacIntyre stresses. When jazz musicians refer to working "in the tradition", for instance, they are not ceasing to reflect – rather, they are consciously reflecting on and drawing from the artistic achievement of their precursors.

Unself-conscious, non-rational tradition on Weber's model, largely follows David Armstrong's non-rational analysis of tradition; the concept of a self-conscious, rationalistic tradition that MacIntyre stresses departs from it in important respects.⁴⁴ There is a *non-rational component in intellectual or artistic tradition* – membership of the tradition is accepted traditionally. Thus for a jazz musician in the tradition of John Coltrane, a painter in the tradition of Abstract Expressionism, or a philosopher in the tradition of Wittgenstein, one simply accepts the approach in question, or abandons it in favour of another tradition, without reason. When MacIntyre writes

⁴³ *Critique of Judgement*, s. 49.

⁴⁴ D. Armstrong, 'The Nature of Tradition', in O. Harries (ed.), *Liberty and Politics: Studies in Social Theory*, Pergamon, Rushcutters Bay (NSW) 1976; A. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, University of Notre-Dame Press, Notre-Dame (IN) 1988.

about what is “part of the nature of traditions”, he means “part of the nature of intellectual traditions”.⁴⁵ There has to be a commitment in this sense to a philosophical, religious, artistic or political world-view – it cannot be entirely a rational matter, but is part of one’s self-identity.

Intellectual and artistic traditions do not evolve entirely by osmosis, however. An artist may want self-consciously to develop the tradition in a certain direction. Armstrong comments that

a tradition cannot be adopted nor does it spread. It is handed on [...] although the result is that the successors in the tradition imitate their predecessors, their predecessors and/or the social group generally are not simply passive but in some way encourage this imitation.⁴⁶

However, it is not simply by encouraging imitation that the artistic group or tradition is active; it may also encourage criticism. An artist or thinker who sees themselves as within a tradition may nonetheless be critical of how that tradition is evolving. This would be an example of MacIntyre’s rationality of tradition, and it allows for the possibility that the genius may have rational understanding of their place in a tradition.

There is unclarity in the literature, concerning how the genius rejects rules. The genius does not follow rules. By this I mean both that they break them, and that they cannot – as Kant argues – explain their own genius. But any skilled practitioner has to internalise rules, as they develop their skills over hours of learning; in lawn tennis or in jazz improvisation, one absorbs the rules in order to play without thinking about them, intuitively. Thus there are interesting parallels between genius, and discussions of expertise such as by Dreyfus.⁴⁷ However, the skilled practitioner who internalises the rules is – generally – a talent rather than a genius. Much further work is needed to elucidate the multiple distinctions.

There is an important sense in which genius obscures, or makes us forget, the skill involved in producing its works. Wittgenstein, in notes from 1940-1943, begins with the comment “One might say: ‘Genius is talent exercised with courage’”.⁴⁸ He continues:

⁴⁵ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, cit., p. 327.

⁴⁶ D. Armstrong, ‘The Nature of Tradition’, cit., p. 17.

⁴⁷ See H. Dreyfus, *Overcoming the Myth of the Mental: How Philosophers Can Profit from the Phenomenology of Everyday Expertise*, in “Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association”, 79, 2, 2005, pp. 47-65.

⁴⁸ L. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. by G.H. von Wright and H. Nyman, trans.

Genius is what makes us forget the master's talent.
Genius is what makes us forget skill.
Where genius wears thin, skill may show through [...]⁴⁹

He also states that “Genius is talent in which character makes itself heard [...] Kraus has talent, an extraordinary talent, but not genius”.⁵⁰ Wittgenstein’s comments are close to the proverbial “*Ars est celare artem*” – literally “It is (true) art to conceal art”, commonly rendered as “the art that conceals art”, a remark traditionally but doubtfully attributed to Ovid. (See <http://atrium-media.com/goldentreads/arsestcelare.html>.) In the sentence “*Ars est celare artem*”, the two occurrences of “ars” are ambiguous: fine art consists in concealing artistic technique or skill. But it might be thought that in order to create art that conceals art, the genius must have that insight into their own creativity that Kant denies. It is not clear that this is the case, however. The doing of the genius may be hidden to them, so that art is “concealed” without the genius recognising it.

Finally, an important connection with the issue of the test of time should be noted. Arguably, calling something a “contemporary classic” amounts to a prediction that it will pass the test of time. In the case of exceptional genius, however, it seems that the test of time is not necessary. Beethoven was exemplary, and popular, in his own lifetime, and has remained so uninterruptedly ever since – and is constantly re-interpreted. Likewise, it would be astonishing if Picasso did not remain in the canon.

5. *Art Without Genius*

Finally I turn to scepticism about genius. One must distinguish scepticism concerning a Romantic conception of genius – including Kant’s scepticism – from a deeper scepticism about any concept of genius. This is the view that may be labelled “art without genius”, and it takes two forms, one of which is *philistinism*, I would argue. “Art without genius” means

- (1) Austere classicism with no place for originality.

by P. Winch, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1980, pp. 38 and 38 (English edition).

⁴⁹ Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, cit., pp. 43 and 43 (English edition).

⁵⁰ MS 136 59a, 4.1.1948, quoted in F. Özlem, *Wittgenstein on Art and Creative Imagination: “How to Understand ‘Genius’ as Courage in Talent and Character Manifested Through Talent”*, in “From the ALWS archives: A selection of papers from the international Wittgenstein symposia”, <http://wittgensteinrepository.org/ojs/index.php/agora-alws/article/view/2850/3424>.

(2) Democratic or (I would say) populist art with no place for talent or originality.

(3) Non-populist concepts that nonetheless treat “genius” as a metaphor for “exceptionally talented”.

Classicism is sceptical of genius; perhaps it does not approve of overturning the rules. But I do not think that classicists must deny genius – at least, the form that classicism now takes is not inimical to genius. So I cannot conceive of contemporary advocates of (1), but there are many of (2).

Contemporary populists, who adopt position (2), reject the idea of genius as such. This position is *philistine* and has a strong political dimension.⁵¹ For instance, Kevin Ashton calls “the genius myth” a “divisive classification”, and rejects the “creativity myth” – that creative brilliance is the domain of a few gifted people. He argues that the modern concept of genius implies exceptional hereditary general intelligence, that can be measured and used to predict future greatness.⁵² We examine the objections in turn:

(a) *Ethnocentric*

Ashton comments that the term “genius” was intended only for white men of European descent. Against this view, one should argue that canons may have neglected non-Europeans, but the neglect is being rectified. It may well be that Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Billie Holiday were not widely referred to as ‘geniuses’ till the 1940s or 50s, because the term was intended for white men – though I would be surprised if there were no descriptions of Armstrong and Ellington as geniuses during the 1930s. But as racism was increasingly recognised as such, the term ‘genius’ was more often used to refer to non-European, as well as to female musicians and artists. African-American jazz musicians are recognised as geniuses, while South Asian classical music celebrates the genius of virtuoso musicians and composers; Western canons recognise figures such as Ravi Shankar and Hokusai. “Genius” is not an essentially racist concept.

⁵¹ See A. Hamilton, *Art and Entertainment: A Philosophical Enquiry*, Routledge, London, forthcoming 2022.

⁵² K. Ashton, *How to Fly a Horse: The Secret History of Creation, Invention, and Discovery*, Doubleday, London 2015, *passim*.

(b) *Patriarchal*

Linda Nochlin offered a feminist critique of genius which avoids what she calls “the feminist’s first reaction [...] to answer the question [Why are there no great women artists?] as it is put” – by arguing that Berthe Morisot was not dependent on Manet, and that Artemisia Gentileschi was a great artist. On her view, “The problem lies not so much with the feminists’ concept of what femininity is, but rather with their misconception – shared with the public at large – of what art is”. One must look at the socio-economic context, and will discover that the arts are “stultifying, oppressive and discouraging to all those, women among them, who did not have the good fortune to be born white, preferably middle-class and, above all, male”. Women were not permitted to participate in traditionally male areas of artistic activity such as life rooms; women artists or writers tended to gain success by assuming a male identity. While women were home-makers, their genius husbands produced artworks – it is no coincidence that Jane Austen was unmarried.⁵³

Nochlin’s critique has been influential, as illustrated by reports that Cambridge University examiners are told to avoid using words like “flair”, “brilliance” and “genius” when assessing students’ work. According to lecturer Lucy Delap, History tutors are discouraged from using these terms because genius in particular has an “intellectual history [...] associated with qualities culturally assumed to be male”.⁵⁴ A study in *Science* found that fields where the concept of genius is popular, like maths, have fewer women than those which emphasise hard work.⁵⁵ It remains true, up to the present, that people struggle to attribute the qualities associated with genius to women, because of how women are viewed. But Kivy rightly responds that

It is not [...] the traditional concept of genius that has historically excluded the female genius, but rather the insidious [...] characterizations of women that prevent them from falling under that concept.⁵⁶

⁵³ L. Nochlin, ‘Why have there been no great women artists?’, in A. Jones (ed.), *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, Routledge, London 2003.
www.artnews.com/art-news/retrospective/why-have-there-been-no-great-women-artists-4201/

⁵⁴ www.telegraph.co.uk/education/2017/06/12/cambridge-university-examiners-told-avoid-using-words-like-flair/.

⁵⁵ E. Lamb, *The Media and the Genius Myth*, in “Scientific American”, February 5, 2015, <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/roots-of-unity/the-media-and-the-genius-myth/>. See also C. Battersby, *Gender and Genius*, University of Indiana Press, Bloomington 1989.

⁵⁶ P. Kivy, *The Possessor and the Possessed: Handel, Mozart, Beethoven, and the Idea of Musical Genius*, Yale University Press, Yale 2001, p. 237.

That is, rather than reject the concept of genius as male, one should recognise that it can have female as well as male representatives – and indeed, in the visual arts from the 20th century onwards, figures such as Barbara Hepworth and Bridget Riley are unsurpassed.

(c) *Elitist*

Elitism in a possibly acceptable sense says that some people are better judges, in art, morals or politics. Elitism in a pejorative sense is an anti-meritocratic standpoint that perpetuates an elite group – such as white, privately-educated, Protestant males from wealthy suburbs. This is exclusion. Talent must be viewed as potential, not just achievement. A classic example is the recruitment policy for the officer class of the British Royal Navy during the 19th century. In the period 1818-1902, just four officers were commissioned from the ranks.⁵⁷ That is, a talent pool of experienced seafarers was almost entirely ignored, in favour of those – talented or not – who were wealthy enough to afford the considerable outlay needed to become a naval officer. This is a “self-perpetuating” class indeed.

This objection is the weakest, because in some sense, the production of higher quality art is inherently the work of the gifted.⁵⁸ Indeed, as Nietzsche writes, genius may be explicitly anti-elitist.

Cult of genius out of vanity – Because we think well of ourselves, but nonetheless never suppose ourselves capable of producing a painting like one of Raphael’s or a dramatic scene like one of Shakespeare’s, we convince ourselves that the capacity to do so is quite extraordinarily marvellous, a wholly uncommon accident, or, if we are still religiously inclined, a mercy from on high.

Thus our vanity, our self-love, promotes the cult of the genius: for only if we think of him as being very remote from us, as a *miraculum*, does he not aggrieve us [...] ⁵⁹

Nietzsche was certainly an elitist, but he argues correctly that genius is not an essentially elitist concept. He believes that the supernatural model of genius arises from vanity:

Thus our vanity furthers the worship of the genius, for it does not hurt only if we think of it as very remote from ourselves, as a miracle [...] men speak of genius only where they find the effects of the great intellect most agreeable and [...] where

⁵⁷ Admiral Lord West, in “Britain at Sea”, BBC Radio 4, www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b045c66j.

⁵⁸ See A. Hamilton, *Scruton on Culture*, in “British Journal of Aesthetics”, 49, 4, 2009, pp. 389-404.

⁵⁹ Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, s. 4, paragraph 162.

they do not want to compete. To call someone “divine” means “Here we do not have to compete”.⁶⁰

He continues:

Artists have an interest in others’ believing in sudden ideas, so-called inspirations [...] In truth, the good artist’s or thinker’s imagination is continuously producing things good, mediocre, and bad, but his *power of judgment*, highly sharpened and practiced, rejects, selects, joins together [...] Beethoven’s notebooks [show] that he gradually assembled the most glorious melodies and, to a degree, selected them out of disparate beginnings. The artist who separates less rigorously [...] can [...] become a great improviser; but artistic improvisation stands low in relation to artistic thoughts earnestly and laboriously chosen.⁶¹

Unlike Kant he believes that there are scientists of genius, such as Kepler.

Great artists are talented, and talent is not equally distributed. Some people have a lot of talent in a certain direction, and it is not elitist to say this. “Picasso is a more talented artist than I am, or could ever have been”, is obviously true, and hardly elitist. To reject the idea of genius, and hold that “Everyone is equally talented, we reject the idea of genius” – that is philistine, and it implies that there is no such thing as good as opposed to bad art.

(d) *Mystificatory*

For Berger, the concept of genius places the work of an artist beyond understanding, as though the social and historical context of the work were irrelevant, swept aside by “mystification”.⁶² As Nochlin comments, “Genius [...] is thought of as [a] mysterious power [embedded in] the Great Artist”. She calls it a “magical aura”, a “semi-religious conception of the artist’s role [...] apparently miraculous [...] and a-social”. However, she argues, “no serious contemporary art historian takes such obvious fairy tales at their face value”.⁶³

There are two responses to this misconception. First, wonder is not inconsistent with socio-economic explanation. As Kivy rightly comments, if the ‘myths’ of genius – or rather, the concepts of genius – were rationalised or explained away, the result

⁶⁰ Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, cit. s. 4, paragraph 162.

⁶¹ Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, cit. s. 4, paragraph 155.

⁶² J. Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, Penguin, London 1972, pp. 15-16.

⁶³ Nochlin, ‘Why have there been no great women artists?’, cit.

would no more leave untouched the wonder we now experience over the mystery of artistic creation [...] at the highest level, than could the discovery that comets are 'merely' dirty ice leave untouched the wonder and awe our ancestors experienced in contemplating [them].⁶⁴

There is something inexplicable in Art Tatum's genius, though one can analyse how he was influenced by stride pianists such as Fats Waller – another genius – and the otherwise obscure cocktail pianist Lee Sims. Why not be amazed? It would be a sad existence, that denied that amazing things happen. The second response is that, as we have seen, ascriptions of genius have a more complex structure than mere expressions of wonder – Kant relates talent, skill and the exemplary in an elucidatory explanatory holism. His distinction between the way in which talent and genius imitate, helps to show that to ascribe genius is not simply to express wonder at a phenomenon.

Finally we come to position (3): Non-populist concepts that nonetheless treat 'genius' as a metaphor for 'exceptionally talented'. An example would be biographer Duncan Heining's discussion of jazz composer George Russell.⁶⁵ When I asked him, by email, whether Russell was a genius, he responded, "Would you settle for 'Highly talented with a distinctive vision of jazz'? I emphasise collaboration over individual agency alone". That is a persuasive objection to Romantic conceptions of genius. But the description does not do justice to Russell's creation of some of the greatest jazz of the 1950s and 60s. That makes him a genius, I would argue, in some sense more than "exceptionally talented". Indeed, he founded a school of followers.

6. Conclusion

Many attacks on genius, including the preceding, are I think attacks on a Romantic conception. This includes the concern about genius that arises from what Harold Bloom called 'the anxiety of influence'. The 19th century 'Beethoven myth', the celebration of his genius, was an example of *Kunstreligion* and the sacralisation of art. The resulting anxiety of influence was perhaps to the detriment of Western art music, in that Brahms and others were reluctant to attempt forms that expressed Beethoven's dominance, notably the

⁶⁴ Kivy, *The Possessor and the Possessed*, cit., p. 253.

⁶⁵ D. Heining, *Stratuspunk: The Life and Works of George Russell*, Jazz Internationale, Self-published 2021.

symphony. But that is a problem concerning the response to genius, rather than a kind of scepticism about genius.⁶⁶

Sceptics fail to recognise that there is no single ‘genius myth’, and no single concept of genius. To reiterate, in ‘nature v. nurture’ disputes, usually that each is required. Not every genius is a *Wunderkind*; for every Mozart there is a Beethoven or Brahms who worked hard, producing many drafts of material. There are genius late developers, sometimes very late. If Kant – or Janacek, or Michael Tippett to take three extreme cases – had died at the age of fifty, they would largely be forgotten. Likewise, solitariness is not essential.

The genius, whether in philosophy, art or science, may not belong under the heading of some existing ‘ism’ or other – though they often generate their own ‘ism’, to which followers subscribe. Unlike lesser thinkers, for instance, someone of Wittgenstein’s originality cannot simply be subsumed under either naturalism or Kantianism. A genius can create a style-category; Hume may be a naturalist, but that is a position that he largely created himself. However, it is true that Hume belonged to a tradition of scepticism. Genius is in some sense inexplicable, but it belongs within a context of artistic practice and tradition which is fully subject to interpretation.

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⁶⁶ On the Beethoven myth, see M. Barnes, “The People’s Beethoven: The Reception of Beethoven in the United States before the American Civil War”, in preparation.

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