

Can Anyone be a Genius?

In Reference to Schopenhauer

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When thinking of artistic genius, one must consider how such a thing can be identified or understood by the average person, how a person might come to experience genius, and what it means to be referred to as a genius. This essay will explore and discuss, in reference to Schopenhauer, to what extent genius can be attained, and if it is accessible to everyone when 'genius' is interpreted as a state of mind, which is accessed through self-recognition and meditation, based on Buddhist and eastern philosophical influences. To understand how the genius is identified, one must first be able to understand Schopenhauer's metaphysical theory, as it is required in order to correlate the two ideas together as interacting subjects. Specifically one must understand what is meant by 'will and representation'.

'Will' and 'Representation' are two key terms used to define Schopenhauer's theory of the world and how we experience it. The 'will', to which he refers, is a continuous state of striving with no fulfilment; each person experiences this in almost every aspect of their life, we are driven by the will to attend a job, in order to earn money, so that we can eat and so on. It manifests as an unconscious driving force that pushes the

subject into action, but which can never ultimately be satisfied by the completion of any particular goal as stated "[...] the will dispenses entirely with an ultimate aim and object. It always strives, because striving is its sole nature, to which no attained goal can put an end." (Schopenhauer, 1859) The representation is the world as experienced by the subject, simply put, it is what we know, what we see and what we hear. Each object within the representative world is a reflection of what Schopenhauer calls the 'idea' which exists as a blueprint for all representations. The idea of a chair exists alongside the representation of a chair, similar to Plato's hypothesis of 'forms'. What Schopenhauer regarded as an aesthetic genius, was someone with the ability to portray these ideas and express them in art. This is because only a genius would have the ability to see beyond the representation, due to their detachment from the will. As Schopenhauer writes "the intellect of the genius is detached from the will and so from the person, and what concerns these does not conceal from him the world and things themselves; on the contrary, he becomes distinctly conscious of them." (Schopenhauer, 1859).

In "Arthur Schopenhauer: The First European Buddhist" (Young, 2017) similarities are pointed out between Schopenhauer's theory of the will and the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism: the truth of suffering, the truth of the origin of suffering, the truth of the cessation of suffering and the truth of the path to the cessation of suffering. These truths are

taught as a way of guiding the subject towards enlightenment, which is effectively detached from suffering, and thus detached from the will. Schopenhauer's definition of will is compared to the Buddhist concept of samudaya, the second of the Buddhist truths, which explains the cause of suffering, this is stated in the article: "Schopenhauer's discovery that the underlying 'essence' of life is will is not a happy one. For, as the second of the Buddha's 'Four Noble Truths' tells us, to will is to suffer.". Because of these distinct similarities between the Four Noble Truths and Schopenhauer's theories, and the recognised influence of eastern philosophy and Buddhism on his work, Schopenhauer's definition of genius can thus be looked at and interpreted through the lens of eastern philosophy in order to answer the question of whether anyone can be a genius.

The fourth noble truth, the truth of the path to the cessation of suffering, explains that in order to overcome suffering, one must follow magga, the Noble Eightfold Path. The Path can be summarized in three steps: wisdom, ethical conduct and meditation. These steps include the process of understanding suffering, accepting suffering, letting go of suffering and surpassing suffering through meditation. (BBC, 2009) This overall process provides guidance towards enlightenment, in a way which pairs directly with Schopenhauer's description of what defines a genius. Much like the path to the cessation of suffering, the path to genius would involve acknowledging and understanding the will, accepting the will,

detaching from the will and surpassing the will, in order to reflect the ideas beyond. Revisiting Schopenhauer's definition, the genius is someone who is detached from the will, as well as from suffering, and can thus express the idea with no attachment to desire. So it can be argued that the path to the cessation of suffering, the noble eightfold path, can lead to objective perception and detachment from the will, through meditation. Meditation as an act can be described as a conditioning of the mind, something that is entirely accessible to everyone due to the fact that each person has the ability and resources to meditate. Considering this when interpreting the process of becoming a genius, by Schopenhauer's definition, it can be stated that they are one and the same. Thus, everyone has the ability to become a genius through meditation.

Contrary to this, it can be argued that acknowledging one's own behaviour requires a certain level of self-awareness. This self-awareness may not be as accessible as the act of meditating itself, and so a counter-argument can be extrapolated as to the extent to which one may already inherit the traits of a genius. This is because objective observation must remain detached from the will, but is also required to understand how one behaves. This renders the genius, for some people, unachievable. As one needs to already meet the definition in order to detach from the will. The reason this is not the case is based on the definition of what it means to be self-aware.

According to the theories discussed in the article “Levels of Consciousness and Self-Awareness: a Comparison and Integration of Various Neurocognitive Views” (Morin,2006) consciousness exists on a scale; at the bottom, the unconscious, as no awareness can be brought from inactivity.

Above that, Consciousness, a basic awareness of surroundings and external stimuli; further is ‘public self-awareness’ which defines the awareness of relationships, socialisation, appearance and so on; and finally, what is referred to as the highest level of consciousness, ‘Meta Self-Awareness’, also known as ‘reflective consciousness’, is the state of mind in which one has the ability to acknowledge and understand their own behaviour, opinions, mannerisms etc as in the definition of self-awareness stated by the Encyclopedia of Neurological Sciences; “Self-awareness is the capacity to process information about ourselves in an objective manner, while retaining our self-identity.” (Young, 2014) . This state of consciousness would be required in order to objectively observe one's own behaviour, or way of thinking, with the intention to change it. Thus, is required in order to become a genius through meditation. This level of self-awareness describes the subject as conscious of their own behaviour, which is definitively accessible by all, hence it is logical to argue that although self-awareness is required to condition the mind into new ways of thinking, the ability to do so is not exclusive.

To summarise, due to the similarities between Schopenhauer’s theories and Buddhist texts, it is easy to observe how Schopenhauer came to reason his definitions of the Will, the Representation and the Genius. Thus by extracting these similarities and comparing them, it can be argued that it does make sense to observe the work of Schopenhauer whilst retaining the knowledge of eastern influences, in particular, The Four Noble Truths, and so it can be logically argued that when interpreting Schopenhauer’s work through the lens of eastern philosophy, or specifically, Buddhism, one can come to a conclusion. It is possible for everyone to be a genius, within the boundaries of a context in which the path to achieving genius and detaching from the will, is seen as a process to enlightenment through the use of meditation, So Genius itself is not an inherent trait that a particular person is born with at random, but it is in fact, a mindset or a way of thinking objectively that, when achieved through a process such as meditation, can be attained by anyone.

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