



Origins of Genius: Darwinian Perspectives on Creativity

By Dean Keith Simonton

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How can we account for the sudden appearance of such dazzling artists and scientists as Mozart, Shakespeare, Darwin, or Einstein? How can we define such genius? What conditions or personality traits seem to produce exceptionally creative people? Is the association between genius and madness really just a myth? These and many other questions are brilliantly illuminated in *The Origins of Genius*.

Dean Simonton convincingly argues that creativity can best be understood as a Darwinian process of variation and selection. The artist or scientist generates a wealth of ideas, and then subjects these ideas to aesthetic or scientific judgment, selecting only those that have the best chance to survive and reproduce. Indeed, the true test of genius is the ability to bequeath an impressive and influential body of work to future generations. Simonton draws on the latest research into creativity and explores such topics as the personality type of the genius, whether genius is genetic or produced by environment and education, the links between genius and mental illness (Darwin himself was emotionally and mentally unwell), the high incidence of childhood trauma, especially loss of a parent, amongst Nobel Prize winners, the importance of unconscious incubation in creative problem-solving, and much more. Simonton substantiates his theory by examining and quoting from the work of such eminent figures as Henri Poincare, W. H. Auden, Albert Einstein, Marie Curie, Charles Darwin, Niels Bohr, and many others.

For anyone intrigued by the spectacular feats of the human mind, *The Origins of Genius* offers a revolutionary new way of understanding the very nature of creativity.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

What makes an Einstein happen? How is it that some kids grow up to be Nobel laureates while others, seemingly their equals, go on to undistinguished careers? Dean Simonton, professor of psychology at the University of California at Davis, has striven to understand this phenomenon for years and has compiled his insights and research in *Origins of Genius: Darwinian Perspectives on Creativity*. His evolutionary perspective sheds new light on an old topic, suggesting that the genius is able to generate a diverse range of ideas, recombine them, and choose the "fittest" with which to proceed. These faculties might have a wide range of origins, including both genetic and environmental, and Simonton tries to pinpoint them and their similarities with the etiology of mental illness. His writing style is humble and personable, yet as penetrating when discussing experimental results as it is humane when presenting examples of genius and madness at work. While defining such terms as *intelligence* and *creativity* are (and should be) daunting even to a thoughtful psychologist like Simonton, his use of the terms is precise enough to avoid mushy thinking yet wiggly enough to satisfy most critics. His deeply engaging writing coupled with the undeniable, almost urgent fascination that his subject holds makes *Origins of Genius* a rousing success by any standard. --*Rob Lightner*

From Publishers Weekly

In Simonton's bold formulation, creative genius—the ability to produce highly original ideas with staying power—is based on a fundamentally Darwinian process that enhances the adaptive fitness of the individual and the human species. In a fascinating treatise leavened with candid descriptions by Einstein, Nietzsche, Mozart, Darwin, Poe, Linus Pauling and many others of their own creative processes, Simonton, a professor of psychology at UC-Davis, argues that creativity can be understood as a process akin to natural selection that leads to the survival of those ideas that prove their hardiness. If that sounds more like a quaint analogy than a real scientific theory, consider that, as Simonton explains, computer programs called "genetic algorithms" that are modeled on Darwinian principles and feature randomly generated strings of ones and zeroes that reproduce "sexually" (that is, each string exchanges a portion of its strand with a mate) are already solving real-world problems such as how to plan fiberoptic telecommunications networks, make forecasts in currency trading and improve oil exploration operations. Similar "variation-selection" programs have generated original art, solved equations and composed jazz melodies. Besides providing his own mathematical model of creative productivity, which will interest specialists, Simonton explores how cultural evolution and environmental influences stimulate the emergence of genius, as well as the links between mental illness and creativity. His dense and at times astonishing analysis of the creative process is likely to generate controversy but also has the potential to influence how we think about the human mind. (July)

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From Library Journal

What makes a genius? What factors are responsible for the development of creative scientific breakthroughs? Why does it appear that some scientific discoveries are made simultaneously by several scientists with no knowledge of each other's work? Simonton (Greatness: Who Makes History and Why; psychology, Univ. of California at Davis) attempts to answer these questions as he surveys the research on genius and creativity, examining such contributing factors as cognitive processes, personality, environment, heredity, development, productivity, psychopathology, and sociocultural milieu. Using Charles Darwin as his primary example of creative genius, Simonton draws from the lives of eminent scientists and creative individuals to demonstrate that creativity follows Darwinian principles of selection and variation. This fascinating and intriguing study

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