Psychological Approaches to the Biography of Genius

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Probably few words have acquired a greater variety of connotations than genius. On this occasion I shall disregard the numerous meanings attached to the word in the first two thousand years of its history and call attention only to common usages in modern English.

In a popular sense genius is often used to designate some kind of mystical gift that can not be explained by the ordinary laws of human nature. The scientist, of course, rejects this usage. Havelock Ellis and others have used the term as practically synonymous with eminence. Galton, while employing the criterion of eminence, follows Samuel Johnson in defining a genius as one who is endowed with superior intellectual ability. This definition is essentially identical with that given in Warren’s “Dictionary of Psychological Terms,” 1934, and is the one I prefer.

The sine qua non of genius is the ability to acquire and to manipulate concepts, the shorthand symbols without which abstract thinking can not proceed. However, there are many levels of aptitude for concept mastery and the question arises where genius may be said to begin. We have at one extreme Dr. Fields’ laboratory rats which required thousands of trials and a good part of their lives to learn to respond to triangularity in visual stimuli; that is, to acquire one crude concept. At the other extreme are the Newtons...