



columns

The Genesis of Artistic Creativity – Asperger's Syndrome and the Arts

Michael Fitzgerald
Jessica Kingsley, 2005,
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Michael Fitzgerald acknowledges early in his intriguing book the scale of the task he has undertaken. In autism and Asperger syndrome, outstanding ingenuity is not unrecognised, but is most typically associated with mathematics, physics and engineering. Yet Fitzgerald is mounting a novel argument that *artistic* creativity is in many instances throughout history profoundly linked with these psychiatric syndromes.

The book is assembled in short chapters containing biographical sketches of outstanding writers, philosophers, musicians and painters, including George Orwell, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Andy Warhol, among many others.

The question which is raised is whether the multiplicity of odd personality traits and behaviours are indicators of Asperger

syndrome. For example, there are Herman Melville's eccentric breakfast habits – he badgered cooks at home about the strength of his coffee and the consistency of his oatmeal – and the dislike of physical contact by Simone Weil (a French philosopher) who hated being kissed even by her parents. Simone refused to eat from a spoon from an extremely early age and became so thin that doctors gave her up for lost; eventually she had to be fed mush from bottles into which increasingly large holes were pierced.

One central difficulty in linking famous or outstanding achievement with some underlying psychological characteristic or dysfunction is whether the stresses of attainment in itself could cause psychological problems or whether, as is often claimed, it is the other way around. Correlation is not the same as causality, and the connection between two variables could easily be reversed in terms of which is driving what.

Michael Fitzgerald, Henry Marsh Professor of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at Trinity College Dublin, makes a genuine attempt to tackle this difficulty from a developmental perspective, which

is often lacking in this kind of project. He demonstrates in detail how the clues to Asperger syndrome were present early in the lives of this collection of geniuses. Of course the problem with this biographical approach is that it lacks the rigour of a prospective research trial. What we know of our own childhood and that of others is widely open to retrospective recollection bias, particularly when the past lives of the famous are being picked apart.

Despite these inevitable pedantic objections, the book will leave readers much better informed both about Asperger syndrome and artistic creativity, but the recurrent sense of tragedy in these lives raises an even deeper question as to why suffering and struggle – either with self or others – seems to characterise the reach for greatness. It is almost as if genius is not something that naturally arises out of normal humanity but despite it.

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forthcoming events

The National Organisation For Fetal Alcohol Syndrome–UK (NOFAS–UK) would like to announce **Children affected by alcohol**, a conference to be held on Friday 9 February 2007 at Brunei Gallery, London. The conference is a response to the growing needs of people that care for and work with children and adults whose mental and physical health is in some way affected by prenatal alcohol

exposure. This can cause learning disabilities, hyperactivity, attention and memory deficits, inability to manage anger, difficulties with problem-solving and deficiencies in prenatal and postnatal growth. The conference aims to give further support and advice. For more information please email: nofas@midlantic.co.uk, tel.: 020 8458 5951, or visit the NOFAS–UK website at <http://www.nofas-uk.org>

The **Second International Conference on Nidotherapy** will be held at the Elstree Moat House Hotel, Elstree, Herts on 13 and 14 April 2007. Details can be obtained from Sandra O'Sullivan (email: s.osullivan.imperial.ac.uk) at the Department of Psychological Medicine, Imperial College, St Dunstan's Road, London W8 8RP.