

11/20/22

Transcending normality

"Normality is a paved road. It is comfortable to walk, but no flowers grow on it." — Vincent Van Vogh

People who recognize the name Vincent Van Gogh usually add the title "genius" and assume that is a good thing. People who know a little more about him also recognize he had to deal with significant emotional and psychological issues — at one point, slicing off his ear and sending it to a lover who had rejected him — but few would say that diminished his status as a genius.

There are many things that seem wonderful, but only after the fact. "Genius" may be one of those things. After all, who doesn't want to be super smart? Or super talented? Or super... well... anything? What people overlook, however, is that a term like "genius" is simply another label for "abnormal." Lots of people say they would like to be a genius.



Arthur Yavelberg

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Not many people strive to be abnormal.

This is not just about semantics. To be different is to take great risks. People are social animals and there are few punishments more difficult to bear than ostracism. Most people are familiar with peer pressure when it comes to children, but can anyone doubt the pressure for adults to belong to the right group — go to the right club, support the right party, have the right friends, nab the right

job? Live the right lifestyle?

The spiritual world is no different. The group of geniuses is not a happy lot. The Biblical Moses felt like "a stranger in a strange land." Lao Tzu wrote his Taoist Tao Teh Ching as an afterthought for the ferryman transporting him away from all known society to who knows where. The Buddha left the palace where he was being groomed as a prince and almost starved to death before "awakening." Muhammed's ministry

began with his "Hegira" — fleeing the murderous mobs in Mecca to sanctuary in Medina. As for Jesus, well, we all know the grand rewards he received for being a genius.

In the movie, "The Matrix," Neo (the thinly veiled "One") has the choice between taking the blue or red pill. The blue pill allows one to live in The Matrix — a computer generated reality where all needs and even fantasies are met, while at the same time draining the psychic energy of comatose humans. The red pill breaks the individual from those illusions — to live a life of gruel desperately avoiding horrific machines intent on obliterating humanity in a most dark and dreary world. Is it any wonder one character betrays his real life comrades to enjoy the illusory prosperity of the blue pill? The story could end there with the question: how many of us would truly make a different choice? However, there is another

point that should not be overlooked. As the Hindus say: "That which you are seeking is causing you to seek." In other words, despite our attempts — through any manner of pills or work or whatever — to suppress our spiritual longings, there seems to be something that prods us to continue to seek. St. John of the Cross will say it is "The Dark Night of the Soul." Soren Kierkegaard uses a phrase like "Of Fear and Trembling." The spiritual life is often portrayed in the popular media as blissful. The reality of the process is more often deeply troubling and oh so lonely.

Van Gogh called this prodding "art." He simply could not imagine a life without expressing his unique genius through his media. But wouldn't he have been happier if he could have, say, taken some blue pill? Maybe... but, then again, if he had taken the blue pill, he would not have been the Van Gogh we honor as a genius.

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