

Intelligence and Its Discontents

Reflections on the lies and limitations of IQ.

Tim Wise

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By all accounts, Donald Trump is obsessed with IQ.

For years he has articulated his belief that intelligence is something one either has or doesn't. Unsurprisingly, in *his* mind, he possesses an abundance of it, even if his balance sheets, failed businesses, or daily behavior suggest otherwise. And to hear the president tell it, the credit for his genius — and a very stable genius at that — is owed to “good genes.”

Presumably, these genes have now been passed on to his children. If so, they appear to be taking a bit longer than usual to express, as genes sometimes do.

But I'm sure it's just a matter of time.

Trump insists he has the best words. He's “like, really smart,” he declares, ignoring how that particular phrasing tends to undermine one's confidence in the previous assurance. And he knows more about every subject than you do, even if you've spent your life studying it.

Seriously, you name it, and he's the leading expert: trade, taxes, renewable energy, drones, ISIS, infrastructure. He even insists he knows more about Cory Booker than Booker knows about himself.

That people with even above average intelligence — let alone real brilliance — rarely feel the need to brag about the size of their brains should be self-evident. There are no records of Einstein following up $E=mc^2$ with something about the superiority of his gray matter. Neither Galileo nor Newton or Imhotep seem to have ruminated about how much smarter they were than everyone else.

No, cognitive greatness doesn't typically avail itself of cheerleaders, to say nothing of the placement of one's name in giant letters on everything one touches — a trait so grandiose even Nero never thought of it, nor Narcissus, for whom the president's defining psychological condition is named.

As a general rule, advertising one's intellect is not a trait of inventors, scientists, or mathematicians. Instead, it appears to be the purview of real estate developers, failed steak salesmen, and game show hosts — no offense to Alex Trebek.

In any event, I won't waste bandwidth explaining why the notion of IQ is flawed, or why intelligence is not merely inherited, let alone unalterable with policy interventions. And I surely am not going to go through all the junk science arguments made by racists to the effect that intelligence is connected to race, with Asians and whites at the top of the hierarchy and blacks on the bottom. Others far more trained in the requisite subject matter have long since eviscerated the work of the IQ hereditarians, and especially the racist nonsense they peddle so gleefully.

No, here I would like to attend to a different task. Because regardless of one's views on the source of intelligence (nature or nurture or both), there is one thing everyone seems to have accepted as axiomatic. And this is so, even though we might do well to reconsider it; namely, the idea that the most intelligent people (as defined by things like test scores) should be the ones to whom we offer rewards, from college slots to school enrichment programs to the best jobs and leadership positions.

Although it might *seem* logical to steer society in the direction of so-called meritocracy with such a system, in truth, it makes little sense morally or practically. In short, **intelligence — at least in the currently accepted sense of that term — isn't all it's cracked up to be.**

Let's begin with the moral issue.

If IQ is, as Trump would insist, genetically determined in large measure, to then reward those with high IQ for a trait they merely inherited (perhaps by providing them with better educational opportunities) would make no more moral sense than to reward persons with blonde hair, green eyes, freckles or lactose intolerance.

And to punish those with lower IQ (which they couldn't *help* but have inherited if the determinists are correct), by withholding opportunities from them, would be no more justified than to punish those with O blood type. In all cases, these would amount to morally arbitrary conditions, none of which say anything about how a person should be treated.

To this, the hereditarians would likely respond that intelligence differs from those other traits. Whereas eye color does not correlate with one's ability to contribute to a society's net worth, intelligence does. So, on this view, structuring society to provide enhanced opportunities to persons with higher intelligence makes sense.

Indeed, to provide significant opportunities, let alone similar ones, to those with lower IQ, would make little sense at all. As one person who wrote to me recently argued, there are "diminishing returns" with such attempts at equality, and thus, they are hardly worth the time, money or effort.

But morally, even if we accept the notion that genetics exert substantial sway over intelligence, the ability to influence the part of one's cognition that *is* related to environment could still prove significant. More than that, to *not* seek to improve the conditions to which persons are subjected, so as to boost that portion of ability that we *can* influence would amount to allowing biology to become destiny.

For instance, we know that exposure to lead and other toxins directly impacts cognitive development and that low-income children of color are disproportionately exposed to these dangers. So even if we were to accept the hereditarian argument that intelligence is tied to one's genes, and that poor folks are in part poor because of lesser cognitive ability, would it not seem obvious that we would still have an obligation to intervene to improve the housing and environmental quality in the neighborhoods where such kids live, so as to blunt the impact of toxic exposure on brain development?

To refuse to make those interventions (because of a perception that they would be wasted on less capable people) would result in a horrible injustice to millions whose lives could have been altered by policy changes made on their behalf.

As an example of how this works, consider the results of educational policy changes at South Side High School in Rockville Centre, Long Island.

In the late 1990s, less than a third of black and Latinx students at the school were graduating with full New York Regents Diplomas, compared to 98 percent of whites and Asians. After the school eliminated their rigid "ability tracking" (which tended

to relegate black and Latinx students to lower level classes) and replaced it with heterogeneous grouping, in which all students were exposed to high-level material, racial disparities in graduation rates virtually disappeared. Now, roughly 95 percent of all racial and ethnic groups graduate from the school with full diplomas.

Obviously, black and Latinx genes didn't change in 10 to 15 years, and neither did their cultures or family structures (other factors often seen as culprits for these achievement gaps). What changed was the assumption as to what black and brown students could handle, and the policies governing that to which they would be exposed.

Had school officials been guided by the thinking that ability is largely fixed and that resources should flow to the cognitive "elite" — or merely by fears that interventions at the bottom would "drag the advanced students down" — tracking would have been maintained. As a result, thousands of kids at just that one school would have seen their life chances dimmed, not because of genes, but because of racism.

Indeed, if anything, social interventions on behalf of the gifted are inefficient and wasteful, and far more so than interventions on behalf of others.

After all, if those with high IQ are more talented, then their talents would manifest even without assistance from the larger society. In fact, the marginal gains produced by interventions on their behalf (orchestrated by policy planners and bureaucrats of mostly average intellect) would likely be too small to amount to much in the way of added value.

On the other hand, for those of average intelligence but significant determination, or for those who were below average but imbued with substantial perseverance and drive, interventions by the state could be the difference between academic failure and success, or employment that can support one's family and work that cannot. It could mean the difference between a fulfilling, autonomous life and one of dependence and hardship.

But perhaps most importantly, it is questionable as to whether intelligence as formally measured is really something we wish to maximize.

Although a reasonable degree of aggregate intelligence — including the type tested by psychometricians — is beneficial to social well-being, there is little reason to believe that intelligence, narrowly defined, is correlated with other traits that are equally or more important. Among these: character, compassion, kindness, perseverance, empathy, generosity, humility, or the ability to cooperate and collaborate with others.

Indeed, one might even say there is a tipping point, beyond which too much formal intelligence may be *inversely* related to some of those other traits.

Take the ability to cooperate and collaborate with others, for instance. Most human resource specialists would argue that among the essential skill sets in the 21st century, the ability to work collaboratively, to rethink one's assumptions and to approach a problem from multiple perspectives would rank near the top.

Yet there is no known correlation between these skills and formal IQ. Indeed, some research suggests that higher-IQ individuals are often *less* flexible in their approach to problems. Perhaps this is because their feelings of superior intelligence lead them

to doubt those they view as mental inferiors. As a result, they have a harder time manifesting the teamwork-related talents so desired by virtually any institution for which one might be working in years to come.

Likewise, however important IQ may be to scientific or industrial innovation, there is little doubt but that it could be of benefit to those seeking to engage in fraud, deception, or effective criminality.

But is this something to which we should aim our society?

Corporate criminals are usually highly educated, and probably would score well on any standardized test you chose to give them. But what of it?

Virtually all the unethical derivatives traders and shady money managers on Wall Street whose actions brought the economy to its knees a decade ago would likely do well on the Stanford-Binet. They probably were above-average students. But what are we to make of these facts? Clearly, they say little about the value of such persons to the world.

The Unabomber was a certified genius, and Ted Bundy was of well-above-average intelligence, as were the men who invented Napalm or killed thousands thanks to their malfeasance in Bhopal, or who have been responsible for most of the ecological damage done to the land base upon which we all depend. But I'm having a hard time discerning what we should conclude about these truths, in terms of how much emphasis we place on intelligence, as opposed to other human traits. If predatory sociopathy may also be correlated with intelligence, then perhaps we need less of it and not more.

In the end, **the question the IQ fetishists refuse to engage is the most important of all: What kind of society do we want?** One in which collaboration and cooperation, empathy, compassion, and integrity are paramount? Or one in which people are good at standardized tests and abstract reasoning, and where those imbued with advantages in these categories feel entitled to the best life has to offer, to hell with everyone else?

Ultimately, if you're happy with the way mostly rich white men are running the United States, and particularly its corporations and its banks, then you should probably embrace the worldview and vision endorsed by the hereditarians who fetishize IQ. If, as is more likely, you find their leadership and direction to be a tad bit problematic, then perhaps it is time to consign this nonsense about formal intelligence to the waste bin of scientific history, where it rightly belongs, and to find a different basis for ordering society.

Tim Wise is the author of seven books on racism and inequity in America, including *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son*; *Dear White America: Letter to a New Minority*; and *Under the Affluence: Shaming the Poor, Praising the Rich and Sacrificing the Future of America*. He is the host of the podcast, *Speak Out With Tim*

Wise, tweets @timjacobwise and posts bonus audio commentaries for his podcast at patreon.com/speakoutwithtimwise

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