

What Is Intelligence, Anyway?

Isaac Asimov

Many of us think that intelligence is something one is simply born with or that it has to do with doing well in school or getting high scores on IQ tests. But did you ever stop to think about what IQ tests really measure? In the essay that follows, Isaac Asimov asks us to rethink our definition of intelligence.

Words to Know

aptitude ability, talent

arbiter someone who has the power to judge

complacent self-satisfied

intricate elaborate

KP kitchen patrol

oracles wise expressions or answers

raucously loudly

Getting Started

Do you think that tests can ever really measure intelligence?

What is intelligence, anyway? When I was in the army I received a kind of aptitude test that all soldiers took and, against a normal of 100, scored 160. No one at the base had ever seen a figure like that, and for two hours they made a big fuss over me. (It didn't mean anything. The next day I was still a buck private with KP as my highest duty.)

All my life I've been registering scores like that, so that I have the complacent feeling that I'm highly intelligent, and I expect other people to think so, too. Actually, though, don't such scores simply mean that I am very good at answering the type of academic questions that are considered worthy of answers by the people who make up the intelligence tests—people with intellectual bents similar to mine?

For instance, I had an auto-repair man once, who, on these intelligence tests, could not possibly have scored more than 80, by my estimate. I always took it for granted that I was far more intelligent than he was. Yet, when anything went wrong with my car I hastened to him with it, watched him anxiously as he explored its vitals, and listened to his pronouncements as though they were divine oracles—and he always fixed my car.

Well, then, suppose my auto-repair man devised questions for an intelligence test. Or suppose a carpenter did, or a farmer, or, indeed, almost anyone but an academician. By every one of those tests, I'd prove myself a moron. And I'd *be* a moron, too. In a world where I could not use my academic training and my verbal talents but had to do something intricate or hard, working with my hands, I would do poorly. My intelligence, then, is not absolute but is a function of the society I live in and of the fact that a small subsection of that society has managed to foist itself on the rest as an arbiter of such matters.

Consider my auto-repair man, again. He had a habit of telling me jokes whenever he saw me. One time he raised his head from under the automobile hood to say: "Doc, a deaf-and-dumb guy went into a hardware store to ask for some nails. He put two fingers together on the counter and made hammering motions with the other hand. The clerk brought him a hammer. He shook his head and pointed to the two fingers he was hammering. The clerk brought him nails. He picked out the sizes he wanted, and left. Well, Doc, the next guy who came in was a blind man. He wanted scissors. How do you suppose he asked for them?"

Indulgent, I lifted my right hand and made scissoring motions with my first two fingers. Whereupon my auto-repair man laughed raucously and said, "Why, you dumb jerk, he used his *voice* and asked for them." Then he said, smugly, "I've been trying that on all my customers today." "Did you catch many?" I asked. "Quite a few," he said, "but I knew for sure I'd catch *you*." "Why is that?" I asked. "Because you're so goddamned educated, Doc, I *knew* you couldn't be very smart."

And I have an uneasy feeling he had something there.

Questions About the Reading

1. What does the writer mean when he says, "My intelligence, then, is not absolute but is a function of the society I live in . . ." (paragraph 4)?
2. What distinction does the writer make between being educated and being smart?
3. Do you think the repairman is smarter than the writer? Why or why not?

Questions About the Writer's Strategies

1. What mode of development does the writer use in paragraphs 5 and 6? What is the purpose of these paragraphs?

2. Does the writer actually define *intelligence*? If so, state his definition in your own words. If not, explain why you think he didn't.
3. In paragraph 6, the writer says he made the scissoring motions "indulgently." What does this tell you about his attitude towards the joke? Why is his attitude ironic?
4. Does the essay contain a thesis statement? If so, where is it located? If not, state it in your own words.
5. Is the repairman a symbol? If so, what does he represent?

Writing Assignments

1. Imagine a society in which intelligence is measured by how well people can work with their hands and fix machinery. Write a definition of *intelligence* for that society.
2. Write an essay defining the term *joke*. Use examples to illustrate your definition.
3. Pick one of the following terms and define it in an essay: *beauty*, *truth*, *wisdom*, or *quality*.

