

# **IQ: The New Calvinism**

**By**

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“How do you feel?” *Star Trek* fans will recognize this as the enigmatic question that finally stumped Mr. Spock in the 1986 film, *The Voyage Home*. While working to regain his mind after a traumatic near-death-experience, the disoriented Vulcan is rapidly quizzed by a computer asking him simultaneous questions about math, science, philosophy, physics, and so on, until he’s finally stumped with, “How do you feel... How do you feel... How do you feel?” Spock has always been logical to a fault, but he’s also long had trouble dealing with his emotions. Feeling anything at all, even love, has caused him tremendous pain and confusion. As his character evolves, however, he eventually becomes more comfortable with his human side, with his humanity, and, thus, with his emotions. In his last film with the original cast, the aging Vulcan tells his young protégé, “Logic... logic... logic... Logic is the beginning of wisdom, not the end.” Perhaps he’s finally learned what real life philosopher, G.K. Chesterton understood when he said, “The madman is not the man who has lost all reason. The madman is the one who has lost everything except his reason.”<sup>1</sup>

Being incredibly intelligent doesn’t necessarily make one superior to others when it comes to succeeding in life, especially in various types of relationships, just as Spock’s character is brilliant but emotionally dysfunctional. As psychologist Daniel Goleman says, “The single most important element in group intelligence, it turns out, is not the average IQ in the academic sense, but rather in terms of emotional intelligence.”<sup>2</sup> Emotional intelligence means being good at self-awareness, self-control, and having empathy, skills that don’t necessarily mean one is also good at reading, writing, and arithmetic, or any other academic subject. Nor does it mean someone who has done well by academic standards is necessarily good with feelings.

So, a person can be as intelligent as a computer, but if they can’t relate well with others they aren’t likely to be very successful in life. Consider the results of a 1993 study of star performers at Bell Labs. It turns out what makes one group more productive than another isn’t the combined IQ of its members, but of their ability to work well with each other. “The key to high group IQ,” Goleman says, “is social harmony.”<sup>3</sup> In fact, putting the smartest person in charge, especially if they don’t have good social skills, becomes an enormous disadvantage. Goleman reminds us, for example, of a fatal plane crash that happened because its crew was too afraid to tell their distracted, domineering pilot they were running out of fuel.

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<sup>1</sup> Lehrer, Jonah, *How We Decide*, Mariner Books Edition (2010), Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Co., New York, NY, 2009, p. 171.

<sup>2</sup> Goleman, Daniel, *Emotional Intelligence*, 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition, A Bantam Book, Random House, New York, NY, 1995, 2005, p. 159.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

I use to have boss myself who wasn't shy about bringing an hourglass to our staff meetings to illustrate his theory of management. He tipped it upside down, then told us he considered himself the thin funnel through which all company communications and decisions must pass. The result was that most of us spent our days paralyzed and bored, accomplishing little to nothing, because we were always waiting for him to tell us what to do, which didn't happen often because the organization was too large for one person to effectively micromanage everyone. He was a control freak with trust issues, two indicators that he lacked the emotional intelligence necessary to deal with others. An emotionally intelligent boss, by contrast, is open to hearing grievances and criticism, values others for their diverse skills and expertise, and recognizes the importance of letting employees network together to problem solve, collaborate, and get things done on their own.<sup>4</sup>

But it's not just about having emotionally intelligent leaders. You can have some of the most intellectually qualified members of a group imaginable, but if they can't relate well with others, they'll only bog things down for everyone. In fact, the Bell Lab research further discovered that those most eager to participate in a project were about as likely to drag it down as those who didn't want to participate at all. The real star performers were those able to create the kind of social harmony that got everyone using their skills and working together whether they initially wanted to or not. The researchers in charge of the study determined, "Based on a wide range of cognitive and social measures, from standard tests for IQ to personality indicators, there's little meaningful difference in innate abilities. As it develops, academic talent was not a good predictor of on-the-job productivity."<sup>5</sup>

At the start of his book, *Frames of Mind*, developmental psychologist, Howard Gardner introduces his groundbreaking theory of multiple intelligences by challenging the importance we too often place upon a person's IQ, that is, on one idea of what it means to be smart. Speaking of a young girl who has just been assigned a number based on her IQ test, Gardner says, "The number is likely to exert appreciable effect upon her future, influencing the way in which her teachers think of her and determining her eligibility for certain privileges." Although he admits her test score may be a good indicator of how well she might handle school subjects, he insists, "it foretells little of [her] success in later life."<sup>6</sup>

Nonetheless, the fantasy that we can evaluate an individual's intelligence and determine one's future by it, has been with us for a very long time. Again, as Gardner says, "Whether it be Plato's philosopherking, the Hebrew prophet, the literate scribe in a medieval monastery, or the scientist in a laboratory, the individual capable of using [one's] mental powers has

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 161.

<sup>6</sup> Gardner, Howard, *Frames of Mind*, Basic Books, Perseus Book Group, New York, NY (Kindle Edition), 1983, p. 3.

been singled out. Socrates' 'Know thyself,' Aristotle's, 'All... by nature desire to know,' and Descartes', 'I think: therefore, I am,' provide epithets that frame an entire civilization."<sup>7</sup>

But we need not go all the way back to Plato, or even to Descartes, to see this frame at work. Right here in the United States, during the era of slavery, Samuel George Morton, a 19<sup>th</sup> century physician and natural scientist developed his theory of scientific racism based on brain size. Morton simply measured the cranial capacity of various skulls to determine the inherent intelligence of what he considered the separately created races. His flawed research, and erroneous presumptions about skull size and intelligence to begin with, led him to conclude, as you might have already guessed, that whites are the most intellectually superior race and blacks the most inferior, with other "races" falling somewhere in between. Thankfully, science has discarded Morton's results today, although they were very popular while he lived and were widely regarded as scientific justification for segregation and race based discrimination.

Here's another instance; As recently as 1927, again right here in the United States, in a decision written by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., our Supreme Court ruled, 8 to 1, that the compulsory sterilization of those deemed "unfit" did not violate the Constitution. The decision was in response to the Commonwealth of Virginia's wish to sterilize Carrie Buck, an 18-year-old young woman who had given birth outside of marriage, under its recently passed law permitting the forced sterilization of those it labeled "feeble-minded." Although Buck had received a 6<sup>th</sup> grade education, which was a respectable accomplishment at the time, her adoptive family considered her a problem child and sent her to the Virginia State Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-minded, which diagnosed her with the mind of a 9-year-old and petitioned the state to have her surgically sterilized. Charged with both feeble-mindedness and promiscuity, behavior the courts had traced back to Carrie Buck's natural mother, Holmes concluded his decision by stating, "Three generations of imbeciles are enough." In truth, Carrie had been raped by a member of her adoptive family, and the Bucks sent her to the State Colony to save face. It may seem like a long time ago, but the Virginia statute resulting in Carrie Buck's sterilization wasn't repealed until 1974.

Today we know there's no real difference between male and female brains, no neurological structures, that is, that aren't found in the brains of both sexes. But not too long ago our nation prohibited women from voting, based partly on the belief their brains are smaller than those of men, and, like Samuel George Morton, assumed bigger means brighter. In an 1869 essay on *The Subjection of Women*, ethicists and philosopher, John Stuart Mill argued against this common misnomer, saying, "... (it is said) there is anatomical evidence of the superior mental capacity of men compared with women: they have a larger brain. I reply, that in the first place the fact itself is doubtful. It is by no means established that the brain of a woman is smaller than that of a man."<sup>8</sup> Mill went on to point out this presumption was

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mill-john-stuart/1869/subjection-women/ch03.htm>

“inferred merely because a woman’s bodily frame generally is of less dimension than a man’s,” even though anatomists had even then proven body size and weight have nothing to do with brain size, and that by the same bad logic, larger men must be considered smarter than smaller men, and elephants and whales smarter than all men. “It is certain,” he said, “that some women have as large a brain as any man.” Not only was this widespread belief, or should we call it a widespread excuse, wrong about the size of women’s brains, it was also wrong in its presumption that a bigger brain necessarily means a more intelligent brain. Nevertheless, it justified denying women a democratic voice in our nation for over 100 years, until 1920, when the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment was finally passed.

It was around this same time in our history that the notion of IQ became prominent. The test for intelligence was developed in 1907 by psychologist Alfred Binet after France adopted compulsory education. The French authorities wanted a way to determine which kids might need more help, so Binet developed a way to test innate learning skills not taught in schools, like memory, attention, and problem solving. Upon administering the test to a few subjects, he quickly found that some younger kids were better at these skills than some older ones, leading to his notion that one’s mental-age might be different than one’s physical age, the very notion Carrie Buck’s psychologists used to claim she had the mind of a child half her age. Binet’s test was standardized in the U.S. in 1916 by Stanford professor, Lewis Termin, who used the results of his revised test to assign a number indicating one’s Intelligence Quotient, or IQ. This figure was determined by dividing a child’s test score, also called the mental age, by the child’s chronological age, then dividing the result by a hundred.

The century old IQ test continues to be considered a major indicator of a person’s potential today, even though research has proven those with high IQs don’t statistically end up more successful than anyone else. As Goleman points out, “When 95 Harvard students from the classes of the 1940s... were followed into middle age, the men with the highest test scores in college were not particularly successful compared to their low-scoring peers in terms of salary, productivity, or status in their field. Nor did they have the greatest life satisfaction, nor the most happiness with friendships, family, or romantic relationships.”<sup>9</sup> Goleman also mentions a study of 450 poor kids who grew up in the slums near Harvard, mostly the sons of immigrants. Most had low IQs, with a third of them scoring less than 90, yet, on average, they were just as capable as the Harvard grads when it came to “how well they had done at work or in the rest of their lives.”<sup>10</sup> Goleman says, “childhood abilities to handle frustrations, control emotions, and get on with other people made the greater difference.”<sup>11</sup>

Even though, “The brightest among us can founder on the shoals of unbridled passions and unruly impulses; [and] People with high IQs can be stunningly poor pilots of their private

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<sup>9</sup> Goleman, *ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

lives,”<sup>12</sup> Goleman continues, and, “At best, IQ contributes 20 percent to the factors that determine life success, which leaves 80 percent to other forces,”<sup>13</sup> we continue to place extreme importance on IQ when it comes to determining a person’s worth and potential. Though today, more often, intelligence is measured by other standardized tests, administered between elementary and high school, including the SAT, that may prove little more than a child’s aptitude for passing tests.

I hope by now you’ve begun to see a pattern or paradigm that has persisted throughout our history, or, at least, throughout Western history, from ancient Athens to our public education system today—from Descartes’ belief that the ability to think is the foundation of our existence, to Samuel Morton’s attempts to determine the intelligence of different ethnicities by filling empty skulls with lead pellets, to the sterilization of Carrie Buck because she was deemed feeble-minded by the psychological establishment, to the subjection of women, to Binet and Termin’s idea of a mental age, to standardized tests that prevent too many capable people from doing well in school and attending college—we continue to determine the worth and potential of others based upon false presumptions about what it means to be intelligent.

Yet when we think about prejudice and bias and oppression against others, we tend to think of racism, and sexism, and elitism, not about the common excuse used to justify all these injustices—intellectualism. And if we don’t recognize this underlying paradigm that has only been tweaked a little to suit the needs of each generation, this ancient pattern, based upon very narrow and incomplete ideas about what it means to be smart, shall continue to be an excuse for both prejudice and poverty in our society. According to a 1998 study of the relationship between income inequality and IQ, commissioned by the American Enterprises Institute for Public Policy Research, which divides IQ into five categories, Very Bright, Bright, Normal, Dull, and Very Dull, those at the very top, the Very Bright earned 33 percent more than the Bright, who earn 29 percent more than the Normal, who earn 62 percent more than the Dull, who earn 73 percent more than the Very Dull.<sup>14</sup>

This is why I refer to IQ as the new Calvinism, because, like Calvinism, it’s often used to predetermine a person’s future and to justify a few at the top being better off than everyone else. Calvinism, for those who may not know, is a kind of religious determinism based on the belief that God predestined who will be saved or condemned long before anyone was ever even born, and, though none can know for sure who is on the good list, that wealth and good fortune are signs of God’s favor, and poverty, therefore, a sign of his disfavor. Today we don’t live in a society that, by and large, theologically justifies income inequality (although the prosperity gospel remains alive and well), so we’ve shifted the basis for such inequality on our belief in IQ—which, again, historically, has helped our society’s claim that blacks,

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>14</sup> Murray, Charles, *Income Inequality and IQ*, The AEI Press, Washington, D.C., 1998, p. 7.

women, and the poor deserve to be discriminated against because they aren't as smart as wealthy white men.

I have a personal interest in this matter because, as a child, I was a poor student, to say the least, and ended up having to drop out of high school because of it. I came from a long line of uneducated blue color workers, many of whom I still consider to be among the smartest people I've ever known. I grew up feeling like a dummy and that, I too, was destined for low wages and hard labor. It was only by a twist of fate, if I may use that term, and the compassion of others, that I ended up in college, where I excelled. It turns out, I was fairly intelligent after all, even though my mind worked differently than those better suited for public education. In public school I was told what I had to learn and how to learn it, and usually couldn't comprehend what was going on in class.

When I was in the fourth grade, for instance, and could hardly read a word, so my teacher sent me to a special education class in which I was the only child for whom English was my native tongue. I knew my ABCs and the sounds they represent, but I hadn't grasped what any of it had to do with reading, and struggled to sound out the words my teachers asked me to read aloud in class. It was only when the special education teacher directly explained the theory of reading to me, that the sounds the ABCs make must be strung together to make a word, that I finally understood what it takes to read. From then on, I could read well and was returned to my usual class within a few days; the Special Ed teacher explaining that I didn't need her help because I could read just fine. Likewise, in college, it took me only a few months to learn how to take notes, how to study, how to memorize, and how to pass tests, not after years of public education, but out of necessity and my own desire to learn. College was also an environment in which I alone was responsible for my education, not somebody else, and I got to choose most the subjects I was interested in learning about.

To this day, I have a mind that needs the freedom to learn and discover in my own way, and is of only average academic intelligence, but excels and connecting the dots, of seeing the relationship between different disciplines, and is good at bringing them together. Yet, were it not for my unusual entry into college, where I fell in love with learning and discovered I could learn, I would not be here today, making my living and finding meaning in my life by sharing my thoughts with others. I'd probably still feel like a dummy innately incapable of intelligent conversation. I would have long ago succumbed to what Howard Gardner calls the "IQ way of thinking," that, "people are either smart or not smart, are born that way, that there's nothing much you can do about it, and that tests can tell if you are one of the smart ones or not."<sup>15</sup>

The importance of Gardner and Goleman is that they remind us there are different kinds of intelligences, not just academic intelligence, that can be as important for succeeding in life.

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<sup>15</sup> Goleman, *ibid.*, p. 37.

Whether it is Goleman's emotional intelligence, which we've dealt with more at length here, or the six intelligences outlined in Gardner's book, linguistic intelligence, musical intelligence, logical-mathematical intelligence, spatial intelligence, bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, and personal intelligence (how well one knows oneself), or my own kind of "independent" and "connective" intelligences, there are many ways to be brilliant in this life and we cannot allow our ancient, unjust, narrow beliefs about what it means to be smart to prevent anyone from shining.