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## Morality and Giftedness

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Morality does not exist in a theoretical limbo; it is an entirely practical concept, the warp and weft of the way people live together. The concept of morality can also only be understood within its historical and cultural contexts in the same way as giftedness. And like giftedness, morality is always relative, in that what is gifted or moral to me is not necessarily gifted or moral to you. It also shares the ephemerality of giftedness - being infuriatingly difficult to define precisely. However, a check-list of characteristics that morally gifted people may possess can be useful (see Spreacker, 2001).

A moral person characteristically:

1. Chooses the ethical rather than the expedient alternative when faced with an interpersonal dilemma;
2. Stands against public sentiment when such sentiment threatens to compromise his/her values;
3. Feels allegiance and responsibility for principles and causes;
4. Identifies with humanity beyond the immediate confines of his/her own group;
5. Feels compassion for wrongdoers without condoning their specific acts;
6. Perceives and admits to his/her own shortcomings; and
7. Holds to personal ideals transcending such qualities as appearance and social acceptability

In brief, "Moral motivation means prioritising moral values over other personal values."(Bebeau, Rest & Narvaez, 1999).

Morality is inextricably bound up with 'wisdom', the current fashionable concern in education. Wisdom too demands action, such as giving advice and getting people to take it -

all of course for their own good. And wisdom too depends on the individual in context. Sternberg's (2003) examples of wise people - Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, and Mahatma Ghandi - all fall into the Western Judeo-Christian mould. Yet other ideas of morality are held just as strongly, such as that as promoted by the Ayatollah Khomeini and Osama Bin Laden who are/were also revered for their wisdom, as indeed were Comrades Lenin and Stalin. For Germans, Hitler was (and still is to some) the ultimate voice of morality and wisdom, as is Kim Jung II of North Korea today. There appears to be no shortage of people ready to lead others in their vision of morality, which may be diametrically opposed to other people's visions of it. And millions of people may follow each one.

Here is an excerpt from my audio-recorded example of a gifted boy and his moral thinking in England in 1986. Melvin, the speaker, was undeniably gifted in terms of IQ and school achievement. He was a round, beaming 14 year-old with the manner of a bank manager who knew what was best for you. He explained to me carefully:

*"I often feel that I have a more mature outlook from most people my age. It sounds a terribly high-minded attitude to take, and some people pretend not to understand me, because if they did, then I'd explode all their myths about their petty little values. Sometimes it seems that the only way that everybody agrees is when they all disagree with me."*

His mother told me with concern what would happen:

*"He was always morally two years ahead of any of his peers. Where they were still hitting each other for fun, Melvin had worked out that this was silly. He used to try and reason with them, but they didn't know what he was talking about. So while they were hitting him, he was busily pointing out the reasons why they shouldn't."*

Melvin was one of the 210 gifted and non-gifted youngsters I have interviewed in their homes across Britain, comparing their developing attitudes and achievements regularly since 1974 (Freeman, 2001). A part of the investigation was to look at a possible relationship

between giftedness and morality. It seemed to me that in Melvin's case, it was neither his extraordinary intellect nor his advanced morality which had denied him friends, as is so often claimed for the gifted. Rather, it was his lack of genuine acceptance of others and of simple friendliness towards his fellows.

### WHO'S MORALITY?

Morality has a two-way relationship with gifts and talents. The first is cultural morality, the everyday conduct and expectations of a society. The second is the personal morality of the gifted and talented themselves.

***Cultural morality*** Prevailing societal morality affects the values placed on all gifts and talents within it. What is seen as moral behaviour to the majority is bound to influence the emphasis placed on provision for different kinds of learning and what is consequently respected as excellence (see Freeman, 2005). Cultural morality determines which children are eligible for special opportunities for learning. This is influenced by groupings such as gender and social-status, so that while some youngsters are effectively selected to succeed, others are permitted to fail. Educational scholarships are not available, for example, to enhance the fine skills and creative talents required to crack open other people's safes.

***Personal morality*** Because the adjectives 'gifted' and 'talented' refer to a statistically small percentage of individuals, myths and stereotypes about them circulate, so that the outlook and behaviour of this 'abnormal' cluster is expected to be different from that of 'normal' people at all ages. Such assumptions may be totally wrong, but they can affect the individuals who may try to live up to them. The personal morality of the gifted and talented is like two sides of a coin, and people who see one side cannot always see the other. Either the gifted are seen as having a higher morality, a view overwhelming more popular than the alternative that they are morally more fragile.

Investigation into the development of morality in children is usually done using Kohlberg's moral development theory. The form of the test is a base of cognitive organisational stages

onto which stages of moral developmental are superimposed (Kohlberg, 1984; Leroux, 1986). In this, moral stages become increasingly comprehensive, idealistic, and of a higher order than the preceding stage. Individuals move through the levels at different rates, though they cannot skip a level and may never reach the top one. There are three levels, with two stages in each. The first is the pre-conventional, notably with concern for physical consequences. The second is conventional, showing support for the established order. The third is the post-conventional, autonomous, or principled level. Kohlberg believes that the majority of adults in America are at the conventional level.

Youngsters who score highly on paper-and-pencil IQ tests score equally highly on paper and pencil tests of moral development. Terman's Californian study has shown the greater law-abidingness of his gifted sample over two generations (Holahan and Sears, 1995). Herrnstein and Murray (1994) provide considerable evidence to demonstrate that the lower the IQ, the more likely a life of crime and depravity, whereas the "cognitive elite" with an IQ of above 125 are less likely to commit crimes, become pregnant out of wedlock, abuse illicit drugs and alcohol, or remain unemployed or underemployed, while having success in school, career and income.

The assumption that the gifted are morally superior is particularly evident in the selection of children for leadership courses by IQ (almost all in the USA). The selected children are tutored in the appropriate skills to direct the lives of others. From earliest childhood, the potential leader is supposed to show enthusiasm, easy communication, problem-solving skills, humour, self-control and conscientiousness, as well as very high intelligence (Sisk, 2001). Sisk also sees the gifted as in greater need of moral education than non-gifted, saying: "Moral education is particularly essential for gifted students in order for them to further develop and utilize their capacities to reason" (Sisk, 1982, p.221).

The less popular opposite side of the coin claims that the intellectually gifted are morally more susceptible to temptation and delinquency than other children. Hence, if they are frustrated when they do not get the education they need to stretch their powerful minds they are more likely than lower-IQ children to turn to crime. Instead of spending years in higher education, they will spend these in prison. This was the premise on which Margaret Branch

founded the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC, UK) in the 1960s. A recent British textbook for teachers states without hesitation: "There is evidence that some of these [gifted] children who are not recognised and supported become involved in crime and turn to delinquency", (George, 1992, p. viii). What evidence? In my detailed overview for the Office for Standards in Education (UK) of world-wide scientific research on the development of the gifted, I could not find the slightest evidence of any greater moral weakness of the gifted (Freeman, 1998).

In my own in-depth longitudinal research (Freeman, 2001), there were 170 children at the 99<sup>th</sup> percentile of the Raven's Matrices, while Stanford-Binet IQs ranged from the 46 children with less than IQ120 to 18 with above IQ160: 13 reached the Stanford-Binet test ceiling of 170 IQ (n=210). Family finances ranged from very poor to very rich. Attrition over the decades has meant that the 2007 sample is only of 97 subjects, though fortunately, the original groupings are in the same proportions. For these, their individual styles of thinking and reasoning were already well formed even in their teenage years. Now in their forties, their attitudes to morality have hardly changed and are very much in line with those of their parents, as they usually had been since childhood. It is not possible to say now that the gifted in this sample are morally any different than the non-gifted, though what had happened to the sample drop-outs is unknown.

So many of the gifted high-achievers seemed to have spent such a high proportion of their young lives in ardent study that they had difficulty with my questions which asked for a touch of imagination. This was particularly noticeable with the one on how they would deal with vast sums of money. Responses were mostly conventional, such as banking it for a rainy day, buying small luxuries like tape recorders, a car, or even a new house for Mum and Dad. One or two, though, decided to give it all away. On the whole, this sample had little interest in politics, and in fact not one has taken that up as a career. They felt deeply about the environment and inequality, long before it was fashionable, but very few have sought to do anything about it in adulthood.

## Gender comparisons

It is only relatively recently that females were seen as deserving of the same opportunities in learning as males, at least in Western society (unlike other parts of the world, such as most of the Middle East) Across European history, educating women like men was immoral in the eyes of the church and society. As a woman, Dr Marie Curie encountered this more than a hundred years ago. I summarise Quinn (1995).

*When Marie Curie won her first French science prize the judges did not send the informing letter to her. It went instead to her husband, Pierre, who was congratulated on his wife's success. Later, her Nobel Prize hung in the balance for the same reason; it seemed more appropriate to give it only to her husband. But fortunately the excellence of her work was known to her associates who pleaded her case, and the Swedes finally awarded it to her. The world was fascinated with this female first, though she was still cast in a feminine supporting role. The New York Herald (among many similar put-downs from the world's papers) reported that Madame Curie "is a devoted fellow labourer in her husband's researches and has associated her name with his discoveries". A French journalist who camped outside her home to watch the Curie's daughter, Irene, being served her supper, described Marie's poor morality, describing how the child was neglected so that her mother could win the Nobel Prize*

In fact, a major clue to the relationship between morality and intelligence is to use males and females as experimental control groups. Looking at moral behaviour over the millennia, the evidence is clear. Women rarely start wars, torture people or behave in other highly destructive ways; they are traditionally carers. Indeed, if actual moral behaviour, rather than high IQ, was the entry ticket to leadership courses for the gifted, they would be filled almost entirely by girls – which they are not. Only if it were possible to demonstrate wide intellectual differences between the genders – were the law-abiding girls to be significantly more intelligent - could we conclude that morality is associated with intellectual gifts.

As it happens, a natural and statistically analysed comparison has emerged between boys and girls, without a designed experimental set-up, in the gender outcomes of school study of the

sciences and mathematics. In the UK, gifted girls have completely reversed the situation of many centuries by gaining higher grades than gifted boys in all these ‘hard’ subjects, but not so in the USA, where boys have higher the grades (see Freeman, 2003). If high-level achievement (and by association, the intelligence needed to reach that level) and morality are indeed correlated, it would be possible to reason that girls have moral superiority in the UK and boys have moral superiority in the USA. It is more likely, though, that morality is independent of high-level school achievement and thus probably of intelligence too. The most likely reasons for these educational gender differences are both cultural and educational. There have been changes in education in the UK, notably improved provision and expectations for girls, which has probably altered the balance between girls’ and boys’ school achievements - in all subjects - in favour of the girls.

### **THE CONFUSION OF GIFTEDNESS AND MORALS**

It all began in 1869, when Sir Francis Galton published his *Hereditary Studies of Genius*, in which he first spelled out his positive association of high-level intelligence with high-level morality - the kind he approved of. In his eyes, this morality was shown only by people from the ‘right’ social level in the ‘right’ society; an early pronouncement on the “right stuff” that Thomas Wolfe wrote about in the USA. Galton’s interest in the “mental peculiarities of different races” was stimulated by his trip to Africa. On his return, he wrote that high intelligence can only be associated with “high culture”, meaning European culture, promoting what he called the best of the “English race”. He considered men of other races, particularly black ones, to be the bottom of the human pile, although women and Jews were only marginally better. There could be no change in this moral order: he believed totally in the unalterable inheritance of abilities, and accordingly of morality.

Many years after Galton was dead the effects of the widespread acceptance of his views - then and still today - were pointed out by Kamin (1974). He quoted documents showing how in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, immigration to the USA had been controlled by the manipulation of IQ tests to detect immorality. The new science of mental testing was used by psychologists in New York to vet the non-English speaking immigrants as they staggered sick and exhausted off the boats. The efficient white-coated psychologists considered IQ to

be a clean objective measure, unsullied by culture (as some still do). Their results showed that 83% of Jews, 87% of Russians, 80% of Hungarians and 79% of Italians were "feeble minded". It was, they claimed, for the secure future of decent American society that those morally deficient "races" must be kept out, whereas the higher scoring "races" from Britain, Canada and Scandinavia should be allowed in.

This tangled thread of moral expectations associated with IQ ran through Terman's *Genetic Studies of Genius* (1925-29), with its heavy weighting of white middle-class subjects as exemplars of the high-IQ child. More recently, it emerged again in the survey of research by Murray and Herrnstein in *The Bell Curve* (1994). These authors were in no doubt as to the relationship between intelligence and virtue, reiterating Galton's claims that: "high intelligence also provides some protection against lapsing into criminality" (p. 235). Arthur Jensen, notably in his famous 100 page paper in the *Harvard Educational Review* (1969), has always been sure that IQ and crime are associated. He has stated that 60% of black Americans have an IQ below 90 and that a peak crime rate occurs in the IQ range 75-90.

Eysenck too, in his posthumous book, *Genius* (1995), surveying more than a century of research, was in general agreement with Galton, although he was less concerned with race. But to Eysenck, all geniuses are men and gender differences, he wrote, "are of course genetic". He demonstrated this by showing how genius was tied to high scores on his psychoticism scale, on which males score twice as highly as females. Real genius, he concluded, demands psychopathology, which men have in far greater abundance than women. He recognised, though, that high-level psychopathy implies a fine line between a life of universal acclaim and one of big-time criminality. Thus, on Eysenck's psychopathy scale, women are more moral than men, a decided handicap in making money.

## **MEASURING PEOPLE**

When one person sets out to measure another there is always some value judgement implied in the comparison. Galton was one of the founders of The Eugenics Society, an organisation devoted to a policy of improving the human gene-pool by selective breeding - ideas enthusiastically taken up by the Nazis. However, a paler version of this happened in other



countries too, including the United States and Sweden. Fearing the effects on society of the assumed poor morality of children of low-intelligence, the authorities set about sterilising them - almost always girls - often without either the parent's or the victim's knowledge. Thousands of girls, many of them with normal intelligence, were denied motherhood, but how strange not to sterilise the boys too. Not only was the male operation easier, but boys, whether of or high IQ, whether moral or immoral, had by far the greater ability to procreate. In 1975, William Shockley, the Nobel Prize-winner who invented the transistor, took a gentler approach by suggesting that extra welfare payments might be awarded to low-IQ women who volunteered to be sterilised. Again, low-IQ (immoral) males were exempt and free to have as many children as they wanted.

### **The morality of questions in IQ tests**

Looking carefully at some frequently asked IQ questions, it is possible to see the moral values of the test makers which were (and still are) taken-for-granted and assumed by to be culturally universal. In the beginning, the test-makers were all white Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) men - men of a decided Protestant Ethic (Weber, 1930). For nearly a century later, tests continued to be modelled on the older ones in order to be seen as valid, and so the thread of testing for WASP morality continued. Correct answers to the morality questions gains the testee IQ points, even though the child may not only be lying to make a good impression, but their actual behaviour can be quite different. The important thing is to be marked as virtuous. Here are some examples from the two most popular IQ tests:

#### *From the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale*

- “What’s the thing to do if another boy/girl hits you without meaning to do it?” The correct response, for which the highest scores are given, must involve the Christian ideal of forgiveness. There is no eye-for-an-eye or tooth-for-a-tooth morality here: no question of the honour-vengeance practiced in many parts of the world.
- What would you do when another child takes your toy? Instead of grabbing it back or fighting over it, which is a healthy normal reaction, the virtuous child is expected to be cool, rein in any anger, inhibit any reflex to lash out, and say politely that he would tell the teacher. How prissy. What a poor lesson for real life. What higher authority would

you run to in the cut-throat market place when someone snitches the deal from under your nose?

*From the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children*

- What would you do if you see a train approaching a broken bridge? The virtuous answer is to raise your tiny arm and signal the driver to stop. In parts of Brazil, youngsters say that they would run away to protect themselves. This, in Western moral terms, is selfish behaviour. But then, the Brazilian children have never seen a train and regard the idea as equivalent to seeing a rocket hurtling to earth. You'd be pretty stupid to stand there and signal it.
- What should you do if a smaller child starts to fight you? To score well, a child of any age should say that he or she would place a protective arm around the weaker child and explain gently, like a Steptford Mommy, that, hey, that's not a good idea. But in the rough and tumble of everyday life a youngster often replies – I would hit him, because that way the smaller child will learn not to fight bigger people, the message being - Don't take on City Hall. Which is really the more caring response?

The world of the psychologist and the child may reflect quite different cultures and moral value systems. Perhaps it is the still-prevalent Protestant work ethic (Weber, 1930) which has brought about the common assumption in testing that children will do their sincere best, so that comparisons between them are normally taken as comparisons between bests. Lying is neither expected nor allowed for in marking IQ tests.

**Mistaken relationships**

What, then, about the unarguably positive correlation between scores on IQ tests and morality tests, such as Kohlberg's popular test of moral development (1984)? The assumed morality of some of the questions on that test is questionable. Look at this one and consider the answer you would give before you read the paragraph under it.

*A married couple are extremely poor. The wife is dying and the husband can't afford the drugs needed to save her. The underlying assumption is that because he hasn't enough money he can't get the drugs and his beloved will die. The child is asked whether the man should break into a pharmacy and steal what she needs.*

I ask - what sort of society obliges a man to consider such drastic immoral action to save his beloved? Most developed countries have adequate social benefits, providing essential medicines and medical treatment. What intellectual convolutions do gifted European children have to perform to score a point on this test when they live in a caring society which provides medicines as of need? In fact, they must play the test-maker's game. A clever child knows how to do this. But if the child were to think more deeply and question the question in terms of social morality, he or she would quite simply lose the mark.

There is often a difference between what children reply in the test situation and what they do out of the sight of adults. In a wide survey of research into intelligence and morality, no recognisable relationship between measured giftedness and actual behaviour could be found (Pagnin & Adreani, 2000). A study of young gifted children showed that although their scores were higher than average in tested moral reasoning, their playground behaviour was often very different (Abroms, 1985). It was rather - "Let's share: I'll go first". Rothman (1992) pointed out that "IQ explains but little in the development of moral reasoning" (p.330). He suggested that the correlating higher morality scores of high-IQ children are due to their special social relationships with adults. So, it seems that although the intellectually gifted know what they should answer on the morality tests – they know how to play the game - they may or may not choose to abide by the rules in real life.

In fact, it is clear that there is not necessarily any relationship at all between an extremely high IQ and decency. Many top ranking Nazis were extremely intelligent and beautifully cultured (Zilmer *et al*, 1995). Hitler's propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, could easily have risen to the dizzy heights of Mensa, though the Führer himself might not have made it. The IQs of other cruel despots are not known, but it can be guessed that if they were running a country and countering clever plots to topple them, they were probably highly intelligent.

Whatever you may feel about their morality, Fidel Castro is extremely intelligent, as is/was Osama bin Laden.

For the ordinary person, their moral code is part of how they live their lives. For example, if pick-pocketing is what is valued in your society, and you've got the intelligence and agile fingers that it takes, you would become successful at it and gain money, as well as high esteem from those around you. A high intelligence also makes it less likely that you would be caught. Prison populations are, of course, made up of those who have been caught, and the average intelligence of prisoners is modest.

## CONCLUSION

In spite of the beliefs and many anecdotes about a strong relationship between morality and giftedness – positive or negative - the only evidence lies in paper and pencil tests, and those tests share an association based on WASP Western morality. The assumption of a positive correlation is tapped by the questions which at times demand some moral acrobatics in the testees if they want the scores. But in real life, there is no measured evidence of a relationship between morality and gifts, whether in children or adults. Some very talented people, though, almost seem to be culturally exempt from the obligation to share the same morality as most of us. The stereotype of the Bohemian artist with loose morals shown in the behaviour of, for example, Pablo Picasso, Augustus John, Jackson Pollock or Lucien Freud seems rather more generally acceptable than it might be in an accountant.

We should even ask ourselves why we are trying to help gifted and talented children, and in what way we are encouraging them. We may believe that we are contributing to the improvement of the world, but that is just what the ideologists of Fascism and Communism thought, not to mention the Eugenics movement as they weeded out future generations of children who they thought were likely to be less than intellectually perfect. We have begun to realise that what we call the 'civilised' values of reason and morality are in fact only a veneer which cracks and breaks only too regularly. There seems currently to be a zeitgeist of disenchantment in the Western world, so that many are never quite sure whether they are right or wrong in what they do, along with a deep distrust of those who do believe they know

exactly what to do. Suicide bombers are no less intelligent than those who band together to talk about ways of making peace, and both groups believe wholeheartedly in the morality of what they are doing.

In accord with Ethical Competence Theory, morality can be taught in schools e.g. via class discussions and working through real-life problems (see Tirri & Pehkonen, 2002). Moral character can be seen as a set of skills that can be honed towards expert levels of performance through training and practice. The skills of moral sensitivity enable quick reading and decision-making for moral dilemmas in a variety of contexts. These skills include keeping a goal in mind, staying on the task and making sure the ethical task is done.

Yet in the end, the only morality each of us can promote is what we believe – flexibly - to be the best way. The gifted, I suggest, have no greater claims to morality than anyone else, but what they do have is the capacity to understand moral conundrums in life and to perceive arguments for what they are, set in their social contexts. Whether they actually chose to use their gifts to understand and see different points of view is another matter.

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