

EXONERATION OF THE FEEBLEMINDED¹

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It seems that man's need for self-assurance has always prompted him to look down with contempt or contemptuous pity on those whose disadvantages or misfortunes he did not happen to share. Disease, in civilizations past, was regarded as deserved punishment from the gods for evil deeds or thoughts. Poverty was judged as a disgrace visited upon people lamentably unfit to accumulate wealth. It was so heartening to be able to say to oneself: I am not a pariah, an epileptic, a leper, a lunatic, a pauper, the member of a group which it makes me comfortable to deem inferior to mine.

The influence of humanitarian concepts, aided by scientific progress, has succeeded in removing some of these prejudices. It has managed to change some objects of scorn and intolerance to objects of mere tolerance or even of full acceptance. But it did not, and could not, change human nature. It did not eliminate the need for self-assurance through contrast. This is why the democratic ideal is still struggling for its very existence. People still find it convenient to feel holier than thou, better, stronger, superior in origin, rank, achievement or ability.

Ability, in a culture centered predominantly on cognitive performance, means capacity for competition in the intellectual sphere. Our educational system, our vocational hierarchy and our economic scheme are constructed primarily on the requirement of conceptual cleverness. A reasonably high I.Q. is the admission ticket to anything that is viewed as "success" in our society.

In such a setting, individuals who are less endowed with the potentialities represented by the intelligence quotient go through life with a double handicap. Their limitations inevitably impose on them a restriction in the number and nature of attainable goals. And these same limitations also impose on them, less inevitably but just as

surely, a cultural verdict which gives them a minus quality in the attitude of their fellow men. It is an attitude which says, in effect: I, by the grace of God, by virtue of inheritance, and because of other favorable circumstances, am the lucky possessor of a good I.Q. Whatever you and I may have in common, in terms of intelligence I am one of the Haves, and you are one of the Havenots. Therefore, I am superior and entitled to the better things in life.

Thus the universal need for self-assurance by contrast has another, easily accessible source of satisfaction in the distribution of invisible dunce caps. Spinoza, who was well aware of this need, said: "He that can carp in the most eloquent or acute manner at the weakness of the human mind is held by his fellows (and we might add, by himself as well) as almost divine."

It is hardly believable, though it is true, that even some of our modern psychiatric clinics display a peculiarly haughty indifference toward the feeble-minded. These units, set up to serve their communities with regard to all their psychiatric problems, have in some places developed the habit of refusing to deal with the difficulties of the intellectually inadequate. The door is closed to a sizable number of children because they are not suited for the particular variety of psychotherapy in which the clinic happens to specialize.

In an excellent, recently published book on the clinical treatment of the problem child, the author, Carl R. Rogers, in reviewing the current varieties, reported that "in general it has been felt that below the average range children do not respond particularly well to psychotherapy," that for them psychotherapy is not "a feasible or possible technique." The crux of the matter lies in an attitude that, with a sort of pseudo-aristocratic aloofness, monopolizes and monotonizes the concept of psychotherapy, which is trimmed down to a specific approach, method or technique. To most of us, who have no desire to constrict our fields of vision and activity, psychotherapy connotes the help given to a person, to *any*

¹ Read at a luncheon sponsored by the Devereux Schools during the ninety-eighth annual meeting of The American Psychiatric Association, Boston, Massachusetts, May 18-21, 1942.

person, who needs help, comes for help, is brought or referred to us for help. Once a clinic has narrowed its scope and functions to any one secluded, repetitious procedure, those to whom the procedure is not applicable must of necessity be left out in the cold. They are "rejected" by the clinic. What about rendering assistance to the retarded child? Well, let George do it! *We* cannot be expected to stoop to the menial jobs which do not involve the supremacy of attitude therapy, release therapy, relationship therapy, analytically or otherwise interpretive therapy. *We* can suffer only the intelligent children to come unto us; *we* will have no truck with the feeble-minded. *Our* time and *our* skill are too valuable to be wasted on the feeble-minded.

But is there such a thing as "the feeble-minded"?

"Feeble-mindedness" and "mental deficiency," in spite of existing gradations, are terms used very much in the manner of clichés, somewhat reminiscent of the designations "insanity" and "lunacy" as they were applied in the days of yore. In those days, extending far into the nineteenth century, the insane were dealt with as if they were a homogeneous group. It was legitimate then to make and publish studies of the pulse rate of the insane, the blood pressure of the insane, the gastric motility of the insane. An individual was, and in the practices of contemporary jurisprudence still is, either sane or insane. The fallacy of homogeneity was successfully dispersed by Kraepelin, Bleuler and a few of their immediate predecessors. The fallacy of categorical absoluteness was properly abandoned under the influence of men like Kretschmer, Freud and Meyer, who introduced to psychiatric thinking a wholesomely individualistic and relativistic orientation. Insanity as a generic term has departed from the vocabulary of psychiatrists, except when, much to their discomfort, they are forced to choke on it in the courts of justice and in legal commitment papers.

Feeble-mindedness and mental deficiency, however, still persist as generic terms. From the point of view of cultural semantics, it is exceedingly interesting to note that "mind" and "mental" are made to refer primarily

to the intellect. The emphasis on cognition is carried through when we unhesitatingly speak of mental tests and mental ages in alluding to the evaluation of cognitive performance.

This habit has resulted in peculiar distortions.

There is the garbage collector's assistant who has served our neighborhood for many years. He is a sober, conscientious and industrious fellow, who uses his pay checks for the needs of his household. He is deservedly respected by his employer, his co-workers and his spare time companions. He is a good husband and father. Yet, with an I.Q. of 65, he is rated by us psychiatrists and psychologists as feeble-minded or mentally deficient.

There is, on the other hand, the handsome, dashing, reckless blade who has driven his parents frantic with his alcoholism, debts and amorous adventures, has made his wife miserable, has deserted her and their offspring, has not done a single thing that can be regarded as socially useful, and does not even respond to the fanciest brand of psychotherapy. We may call him all sorts of names, we may bestow on him the title of constitutional psychopath; but with an I.Q. that nearly hits the ceiling, he receives from us the honor of being considered as "mentally" superior.

Of course, I know that there is nothing new or original in making the contrast. But it does illustrate the ease with which we are ready to identify mind with tested intelligence. It does show how we, the intellectual Haves, instinctively sense greater kinship with the unstable young blade, another Have, than with the garbage collector's assistant, an intellectual Have-not. And it gives one an acute pain to realize that, if we had the kind of rigid sterilization laws advocated by some of our eugenicists, they would be applied to the collector's assistant and not to the blade. Some of the high-minded child guiders would not be interested in helping a low I.Q.'d garbage-collector-in-the-making when he staggers under the strain of memorizing the multiplication table or the exploits of the Phœnicians on the Mediterranean Sea. But they would fall over them-

selves to release, relate or analyze the blade *in statu nascendi*.

It is because of such obvious inconsistencies that the best students of the subject have always struggled for a satisfactory definition of mental deficiency. In one of the latest issues of the American Journal of Mental Deficiency, Yepsen, Kuhlmann and Doll, certainly three of the country's outstanding authorities, have each in a separate article stressed the need for clearer delimitation than has been hitherto achieved. Surely, the fictitious notions of homogeneity and absoluteness must be exploded once and for all, as they have been exploded in the field of psychotic manifestations.

For one thing, we have been accustomed to lump together as mentally deficient—or oligophrenic, if you wish—two widely differing groups of persons who can and must be distinguished by one criterion of major practical as well as theoretical significance.

The one group consists of individuals so markedly deficient in their cognitive, emotional and constructively conative potentialities that they would stand out as defectives in any type of existing human community. This group comprises all those whom we designate as idiots and many of those whom we designate as imbeciles. They would be equally helpless and ill-adapted in a society of savants and in a society of savages. They are not only intellectually deficient, but deficient in every sphere of mentation.

The other group is made up of individuals whose limitations are definitely related to the standards of the culture which surrounds them. In less complex, less intellectually centered civilizations they would have no trouble in attaining and retaining equality of realizable ambitions. Some might even be capable of gaining superiority by virtue of assets other than intellectual. They could make successful peasants, hunters, fishermen, tribal dancers. They can, in our own culture, achieve success as farm hands, factory workers, miners, waitresses, charwomen. But in our midst their shortcomings, which would remain unrecognized and therefore nonexistent in the awareness of a more primitive cultural body, appear as soon as scholastic curricula demand competition in spelling, history, geography, long

division and other such essential preparations for the tasks of feeding chickens, collecting garbage and wrapping bundles in a department store. In our midst, also, occupations available to people of limited schooling have low ratings in remuneration and public esteem.

The members of this second group are not truly and absolutely feeble-minded or mentally deficient. Their principal shortcoming is a greater or lesser degree of inability to comply with the intellectual requirements of the community. In other respects, they may be as mature or immature, stable or less stable, placid or moody as any other member of the human species. Their apparent deficiency is an ethnologically determined phenomenon relative to the local culture and, even within the culture, relative to educational postulates, vocational ambitions and family expectations.

It does not seem right to label these individuals as mentally deficient, together with the idiots and imbeciles. A number of years ago, I made this plea, in my textbook of Child Psychiatry: "We prefer to speak of *intellectual inadequacy* for several reasons. We feel that one is not quite justified in limiting the term 'mental' too narrowly to the cognitive functions only. The emotional and conative functions are certainly not less mental. 'Deficiency' fails to convey the ideal of relativity; 'inadequacy' permits the highly important question: Inadequate for what? A person with an I.Q. of 85 may be, and surely is, not fit to occupy the chair of professor of economics but well suited to dispense articles in a Five and Ten Cent Store. One with an I.Q. of 75 may not even be capable of doing that but may well be trained to usefulness as a cog in the wheel of the industrial Taylor System. And one with an I.Q. of 60 may learn to milk cows and wash dishes satisfactorily. 'Intellectual inadequacy' therefore allows a more melioristic attitude than 'mental deficiency.'"

A few months ago, the National Resources Planning Board of the United States Civil Service Commission sent out a questionnaire to psychiatrists, together with an itemized list of interests and experiences to be checked by the individual specialists. It was highly gratifying to me to note that in this

list a definite distinction was made between mental deficiency and intellectual inadequacy. The mental defectives in the true sense of this word have decidedly no place in the war efforts of our country. But the majority of the intellectually inadequate can very well be integrated in the defense industries and, to some extent, even in the armed services.

But, distinction or no distinction, there are people who, however well-meaning, assume the rôle of self-appointed guardians of the collective intelligence of the nation. These people are sorely vexed by the existence of persons who are ignorant of the three main differences between a president and a king, unable to identify the words depredation, ambergris, promontory and homunculus, and incapable of telling in what way a knife blade, a penny and a piece of wire are alike. They view with alarm the fact that individuals with lower than average test scores, especially when they are not even borderliners, mar the appearance of their towns because they cannot inhabit residential district homes, do not contribute to fraternal organizations, and have no appreciation of Proust, Picasso and Sibelius. We, these people feel, bear the brunt of taxation. We make donations to the community chest. We are entitled to the necessities and the luxuries of life because, thanks to our I.Q.'s we are able and privileged to afford them. But why should a portion of our earnings go to those who, with miserable wages, have the effrontery to bear children whom *we* must educate, who, at the slightest economic dislocation, become dependent on us for food and clothes and shelter?

Out of such feelings arises a cry which resounds through the land, a cry of impatience and serious accusation: The feeble-minded are a drag on society. The feeble-minded hamper the progress of civilization. Something ought to be done about this. We cannot allow such a deplorable situation to continue indefinitely.

Let us examine these charges leveled at a large minority of our country's population, at many millions of the world's population. Let us try to recall one single instance in the history of mankind when a feeble-minded

individual or group of individuals was responsible for the retardation or persecution of humaneness and science. They who caused Galileo to be jailed were not feeble-minded. They who instituted the Inquisition were not mental defectives. The great man-made catastrophes resulting in wholesale slaughter and destruction were not started by idiots, imbeciles, morons or borderliners. The one man, Schicklgruber, whose I.Q. is probably not below normal, has in a few years brought infinitely more disaster and suffering to this world than have all the innumerable mental defectives of all countries and generations combined.

You might want to point out that the absence of a vice is not necessarily in itself a virtue. You might say that, though the intellectually inadequate have not done anything to destroy civilization, they have not in any way contributed to it actively.

I am not at all sure that this is true. Sewage disposal, ditch digging, potato peeling, scrubbing of floors and other such occupations are as indispensable and essential to our way of living as science, literature and art. Cotton picking is an integral part of our textile industries. Oyster shucking is an important part of our seafood supply. Garbage collection is an essential part of our public hygiene measures. For all practical purposes, the garbage collector is as much of a public hygienist as is the laboratory bacteriologist. All such performances, often referred to snobbishly as "the dirty work," are indeed real and necessary contributions to our culture, without which our culture would collapse within less than a month.

But this is not the whole story. The fortunate fact that people, regardless of I.Q., are available for these performances frees the time and energies of others for tasks which involve planning and creative activities. This is what makes the so-called psychometric and aptitude tests so valuable. The tests make it possible to assign people to the particular, neither superior nor inferior, but intelligently gauged types of education and vocation for which they are suited. A well organized society will try to allocate its variegated functions in accordance with the specific use it can make of

its individual members. The more nearly the intellectually inadequate can be prepared for and assigned to jobs for which they are fitted, the more occasion is there for the intellectually more adequate to make corresponding use of their cognitive assets.

Can we not then in all fairness reverse the accusation? Can we not then say: The feeble-minded are a drag only on a society which forces them to be a drag on it, which, in fact, is at least as much of a drag on them?

It is true that those of whom we spoke as absolutely deficient, the idiots and imbeciles, cannot be trained in any kind of social usefulness. Are we then justified in passing the black bottle among them? Some people have suggested just such a procedure, which they dignify with the term euthanasia. An idiotic child may have fond parents who want him alive, even if it were in a distant institution. But why, say the advocates of euthanasia, should we allow ourselves to be sentimental about fond parents? Idiots have no social value; they are a drain on the taxpayer's pocketbook. Ergo, off with their heads!

If William Shirer's report is true,—and there are reasons to believe that it is true,—in Nazi Germany "the Gestapo is now systematically bumping off the mentally deficient people of the Reich. A trustworthy German has estimated the number of 100,000. I believe the figure too high, but certainly it runs into the thousands. . . . The letters sent to relatives of 'mercy-killing' victims reflect the (underlying) sociological thinking—'In view of his incurable ailment, his death is to be regarded as a release.'"

Psychiatry is, and should forever be, a science dunked in the milk of human kindness. Shall we psychiatrists take our cue from the Nazi Gestapo? Does anyone really think that the German nation is in any way improved, ennobled, made more civilized by inflicting what they cynically choose to call mercy deaths on the feeble-minded?

Nobody, not even the Nazis, have thought of bumping off those whose I.Q. promotes them to the rank of morons. For them we have reserved the expedient of sterilization. The feeble-minded, so goes the reasoning, beget other feeble-minded. This must be pre-

vented and, if all goes well and if the sociological reactionaries do not interfere, our grandchildren or great-grandchildren will wake up some day to find themselves in a delightful world populated by none but intelligent contemporaries.

Sterilization is often a desirable procedure. Much neglect and ill-treatment of children would be forestalled if persons intellectually or emotionally unfit to rear children could be sterilized. But it is unfair discrimination to decree such a measure solely on the basis of the I.Q. Thus far we know precious little about the laws of heredity. But even if it were true that every person with a low I.Q. begets offspring with low I.Q.'s, do we really wish to deprive ourselves of people whom we desperately need for a variety of essential occupations? If we decided to annihilate the intellectually inadequate today, we would experience a disaster compared to which the present world-wide holocaust would seem like a trifle.

Let us leave the cotton pickers, oyster shuckers and bundle wrappers alone, regardless of their I.Q., so long as they are industrious and good natured! Let us think, when we recommend sterilization, of individual performance rather than of the I.Q.! We may then find that irresponsibility and brutality are by no means the prerogatives of the intellectually inadequate. We may find that we have rashly and one-sidedly picked on a defenseless and inarticulate minority.

Some of us are in the habit of speaking of this minority as a bunch of misfits. Many of them, it is true, are misfits. But this they are because our society has failed to help them to fit themselves for usefulness. They are misfits in schools which expect of them achievements of which they are not capable. They are misfits in life because we, the intelligent planners, have not fitted them for the things which they can do with profit to themselves and their communities.

We have just recently decided with a shudder to spend 50 billion dollars in this one year to rid ourselves of a non-feeble-minded menace to civilization. This sum would be ample to maintain luxurious institutions for all those who need them and

to provide proper education for all the intellectually inadequate for more than half a century.

In return we should get not a world in ruins but the satisfaction of helping ourselves by helping tens of thousands of people. In return we should find that an increasing number of the intellectually inadequate would become skillfully adequate for many useful and needed jobs. We should be able to recognize them as full-fledged human beings capable of virtues and vices like the rest of us, only perhaps with less cunning and plotting, less suited for leadership but also less suited for misleadership.

Already the humanization of the feeble-minded is making progress. Already a number of competent research workers are beginning to break down the notion of the homogeneity of the feeble-minded by discovering hitherto unobserved group differences and individual differences among them. Already many of the spastics, believed to be hopelessly inadequate until a short while ago, have been lifted out of the human waste basket and given a new lease on life and hope. Already psychiatrists and psychol-

ogists are ceasing to set themselves up as diagnostic and prognostic judges, to treat the term mental deficiency as a swear word, and to use the I.Q. for the purpose of modified horoscope readings. Already word has got around that the I.Q. itself is not always immutable.

There is still much to be learned about those whom we call feeble-minded. Valuable work in this direction is done quietly but efficiently in a number of centers. Vineland, Letchworth Village and Wayne County, Michigan, are a few shining examples commanding respect and inviting emulation.

But by far the outstanding contribution that we can, and must, make toward a solution of the whole problem is self-education and education of others toward the adoption of an attitude which extends the democratic ideal to the feeble-minded, by whatever name they go, to cleanse ourselves thoroughly of the need for self-assurance by contrast, and to be friendly planners and helpers rather than carping critics and whining would-be protectors of future generations.

We shall thus exonerate ourselves by exonerating the feeble-minded.