The Ignorance of Intelligence

The only thing dumber than our presumption of intelligence is our lack of awareness.

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"Two things are infinite: the universe and human stupidity."
— attributed to **Albert Einstein**

We break down intelligence into intellect and emotion and most discussions stop there, but there must be at least two more aspects to it. Memory is certainly one, not just what but how you remember. Memory is presumed to be impersonal and objective, which it is not. It very much depends on your situation. There is still a large fourth part which I'll call intuition.

I'm frustrated with all the natural and accepted ignorance around me. I see it in social behavior and I work to address it in my clients and myself. I'm largely successful so I know we can learn to think better.

My purpose here is to direct your attention to what needs to be fortified because you will not improve anything unless you distinguish it as something you can focus on. To make this clear let's explore these first aspects of intelligence starting with memory.

Memory

Memory is crucial but it's not what you think. You don’t remember facts, you remember associations. Even the words you remember, and often don’t remember, have a context. The wider the context and the more associations you have, the better your memory.

As we age and context fades, our memories fade too. I am often (too often) reminded of a word I cannot remember. There was one yesterday, it started with the letter “b.” I eventually recalled it but now I can’t remember. There is no context.

Much of who you are, what you do, and feel yourself to be relies on memory. Life experience changes your personality only to the extent that you can form associations that reside in your subconscious. You have subconscious memories too. Managing your memory defines your relationships with everything.

Do you work at improving your memory? Are you even aware of how wide or sharp it is? Do you learn new things? If your answer to these questions is no, then I suspect the adage “use it or lose it” applies. Nowhere in our adult lives are we specifically asked to pay attention to our memories. At the same time everything in our adult lives relies on our memories. For something so central is it not amazing that we have so little direct appreciation of it?

Narrow Focus

Most of what we spend our days doing is problem solving. Problem solving is more complicated than we recognize. It involves recognizing, stating, organizing, breaking down, creating a plan, acting, rearranging priorities, establishing continuity, reflection, feedback, and learning.

We normally approach all of these things intellectually, or at least we think we do. But all of these steps involve memory, varying degrees of emotion, and a dash of intuition.

Some people think more widely than others, and some people could be said to be shallow thinkers. You may solve your problems using a variety of approaches and there will be great differences in the amount you learn.

Most solutions apply to more than one problem, yet you’ll only appreciate those aspects of the solution relevant to you. Schooling that teaches you how to regurgitate information teaches you only that. You may know what the Gettysburg Address was, but you won’t know why.

What Understanding Is

I want readers to consider how much more involved they could be with their thinking. To go beyond solving the immediate problems of the moment, how could you solve future problems if you thought more deeply, built more associations, and were more sensitive?

We decry the materialist lifestyle, though we also celebrate it in our comfort and appearance. We do not recognize that we have become habituated to something we might call “conceptual materialism.”

Conceptual materialism is thinking only in terms of material problems and their solutions. The conceptual materialist considers each issue as a problem to be solved and largely wipes their slate clean after each solution. Such a person does not see a bigger picture, and does not engage a larger context unless it presents itself as a material problem.

There are certain problems that are not material, relationships being one example, and finding a sense of comfort, calm, and fulfillment is another. Addressing these issues requires thinking more broadly, remembering more extensively, and interacting more deeply.

For problems that are not materially defined you must collect more than the obvious resources, expend more energy than is immediately rewarded, and entertain doubts that you cannot immediately allay. And you must do these things effectively, that is to say without pain, prejudice, resentment, or anxiety.

And here is where our limitations arise: most people cannot avoid some degree of pain, prejudice, resentment, or anxiety when dealing with issues they cannot materially or immediately resolve. This prevents people from learning. It prevents people from exercising their intelligence in order to evolve themselves. Without exercise, practice, reflection, and self-criticism, limited thinking begets more limited thinking.

What Emotion Can Be

Humans exercise great intellectual skill compared to other animals, but our emotional control is undistinguished. The reason we bond so closely with our pets is because we have equal levels of emotional control and reaction.

Our schools teach intellectual skills relegating emotional skills to demonstration, performance, and persuasion. We confuse emotion with instinct although the two are entirely different. Despite all the talk of emotional intelligence we don't treat or train emotion as a source of insight.

A full understanding of emotion recognizes it as a broad appraisal, a summation of facts, history, circumstances, and objectives. You do not choose between intellect and emotion, you integrate intellect into emotion.

Refined emotional thinking is the next step in our cognitive evolution. Our current level of awareness is measured both individually and socially. You may be a particularly intelligent person, but in few cases will a person be able to improve the intelligence of those around them.

The typical definition of emotion conflates instinct, lust, need, hunger, and dependent behavior.

Currently high global levels of violence, inequity, poverty, disease, indifference, and xenophobia indicate how far we have yet to go before we can consider ourselves emotionally intelligent.

What We Accept as Normal

The only fair definition of intelligence is one that is comprehensive. Without being comprehensive we fail to recognize different paths, general solutions, and insightful behavior. To be comprehensive requires intellect, emotion, visual, mathematical, kinesthetic, and spiritual channels of perception. As a culture, and often as individuals, we lack these comprehensive skills and instead rely on what's normal, which is to say what's average. This forms a very low bar.

If you'd like to improve your mind and your world, book a conversation on my calendar.

https://www.mindstrengthbalance.com/schedule15

Consider artificial intelligence as currently offered by large language models. This form of intelligence is based on memory and association. It specifically lacks insight, evolution, and emotion. Computers have particularly strong abilities in memory and association and on these measures they outpace humans to an almost unlimited extent. Humans can use A.I. to great effect in technical fields or areas where similarity is a virtue, as in reporting news, marketing plans, and executing fraud.

I don't use A.I. as a substitute for insight but I do use it for research. A question like, "How can I contact John Doe of My Great Podcast in order to suggest myself to appear on his show?" previously took me at least 20 minutes to answer, but it only takes a few seconds when asked to Google's A.I.

On the other hand, my physics requires solving mathematical equations and I can ask Google to give me the answer. One solution I requested came back clearly backwards, clearly stated but self-contradictory. I couldn't understand what went wrong, so I submitted the equation again with an additional term that made no difference. This time I got the right answer in clear contradiction to the previous answer.

This was not really an A.I. question. It was simply a question of looking up the equation in a reference book, but the A.I. system generated a wholly incorrect answer. My point is that we assume A.I. exists on a similar spectrum to natural intelligence. We assume that high intelligence means you get most answers mostly right, and low intelligence means you get unreliable answers most of the time, but this is not true for artificial systems.

A.I. can do amazing things most of the time and then generate a complete train wreck on occasion. Consider self-driving cars. Mostly they'll get you to your destination but when they fail it won't be because they hit the curb or miss a turn, it will be because they'll drive you off a cliff. Despite the rare cliff, self-driving cars have 90% fewer collisions of almost every type. Artificial intelligence needs to be held to a different standard.

> “There’s a future where manual driving becomes uncommon, perhaps even quaint, like riding horses is today. It’s a future where we no longer accept thousands of deaths and tens of thousands of broken spines as the price of mobility. It’s time to stop treating this like a tech moonshot and start treating it like a public health intervention.”—**Jonathan Slotkin**, neurosurgeon (2025)

Consider Donald Trump, who is an analog for an artificially intelligent agent. Here’s a man who should be in an institution for the criminally insane but, because we trust his role in office, we quaintly question his homicidal behaviors. At what point does one take the gun away from the serial killer? The answer is that you won’t challenge the system until you recognize it’s malfunctioning.

Real Intelligence is Different

Real intelligence is functionally successful. You could say that a bacterium is intelligent if it can solve the problems in its environment. It would be fair to say that most people are unintelligent with regards to the safety of e-bikes because they don’t understand how different they are. It would also be fair to say that most democracies are unintelligent with regard to playing an effective role in new and unfamiliar cultural, economic, and natural environments.

Real intelligence is broad intelligence. To be considered intelligent you must be able to solve the problems you face. We are familiar with using intellect to solve rational problems. We’re poor at applying our emotional powers to communicate and resolve conflicts. We’re abysmal at tapping our intuition and distinguishing wisdom from idiocy.

I believe this is a world-wide problem and its solution is fairly obvious: more failure. But failure, while largely assured in new situations, is not enough; you have to be able to learn from it.

This brings me back to learning, which is my favorite topic. As a physicist, learning means figuring things out. To some extent it also means looking things up, but when you're dealing with unsolved problems, what results from looking things up is almost guaranteed to be wrong. Every one of my scientific mentors cautioned me against looking to other people for answers. Even Paul Dirac, whom I did not meet, said he never reads because it distracts him.

As a psychotherapist, I deal with people who have not "learned" a way to solve their problems. I find this fascinating and, in some cases, I can direct them in how they can learn better. This involves talking, honest feeling, and reconsideration.

It always involves a certain degree of brain retraining, which is the easiest to do but the hardest to convince people is necessary. Consider brain training to playing a musical instrument. Most of my clients think they're playing their instrument just fine. Their instrument is their brain and the music they produce is like that of an amateur violinist. They don't know this because they can't hear it, but I can.

How do you learn to play a musical instrument? You might answer "by practicing," but that is not correct. You learn to play a musical instrument by attuning your hearing and paying closer attention to complexity, rhythm, melody, and intonation. Without greater sensitivity, more practice won't generate improvement. As the saying goes, "Do you have 20 years of experience, or one year of experience repeated 20 times?"

What We Need to Do

Therapists aren't supposed to tell people what to do, they're supposed to offer useful suggestions. But I'm not acting as a therapist, I'm acting as a thought leader and I have to prophesize. My prophecy is that if you don't think, act, and encourage others to be more sensitive neither you nor they will become more capable.

It's always the case that complacent people don't change, and this is the curse of comfortable materialism. If you're satisfied with your condition, then it will take a disaster to convince you to act differently.

The essence of living in a changing world is dealing with changing needs and requirements. You cannot be complacent in a changing world or you'll only recognize the need for change when it overwhelms you. You need, or I should say we need you, to think and act more broadly. These are two separate things but they both obey a similar rule: dealing with novelty requires learning and learning requires failure.

To learn to play a musical instrument you must hear what your music lacks. To learn to live your life better you must recognize what your life lacks. Don't expect to see the solution when you're just recognizing the problem. Instead, approach new problems with curiosity, honesty, and commitment. You want to know what's real, reach beyond your preconceptions, and recognize that you are particularly well suited to improve your situation.

References

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