

A History of Intelligence and ‘Intellectual Disability’: The Shaping of Psychology in Early Modern Europe

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Author: C. F. Goodey

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Reviewer: James W. Trent

Intelligence is a peculiar idea. Most human beings have some sense of the meaning of the word, yet they are all too often left with insipid definitions when they assign meaning to it. Some definers have been reduced to acknowledging that intelligence is what the intelligence tester is testing. Others have claimed that intelligence is merely the absence of lack-of-intelligence. If the definition of intelligence has proven to be illusive and unsatisfactory, its measurement over the past century has proven to be highly successful. Indeed, a whole industry of intelligence tests and intelligence testers has emerged in virtually every literate society. These tests and the industry that sustains the tests have contributed in no small part to the legitimization of modern forms of social stratification – with their awards and punishments, their inclusions and exclusions, and their benefits and losses.

C. F. Goodey is not particularly interested in the measurement of intelligence, except to show that its measurement reflects a social system of modern meaning for the idea. More importantly for Goodey is the meaning that intelligence and its antithesis, lack-of-intelligence, has had over time. By turning to history as his methodology, Goodey presupposes that intelligence lacks a universal, natural meaning. Instead, he assumes (and sets out to show) that intelligence and intellectual disabilities have meant different things to human beings in different historical periods. In doing so, Goodey rejects the claim made by most psychometricians, namely that the reliability of intelligence tests demonstrates intelligence’s ahistorical and transcultural nature. Goody, in short, is no positivist. Intelligence has no nature; rather, it has a history.

If Goodey is no positivist, he also has little sympathy for what he sees as the relativism and ahistoricism of social constructionism. As he writes, 'Talk of the construction of intelligence or its disabilities sidesteps the same question we asked of the positivist: The construction of *what* exactly ... Unanswered, the definition and use of the term will always go to the highest and most powerful bidder' (p. 7). Goodey's task is, in a sense, to carve out a third way. Using history as his method, he begins with the assumption that intelligence is a metaphor that is rooted in ideas that arise over time in different cultures. Also, he assumes that the historically changing meanings of intelligence depend upon intellectual disabilities. There is no intelligence without lack-of-intelligence, although both may assume different meanings in different historical periods. So for Goodey, intelligence and intellectual disabilities have a 'what'. They have a definition, but that definition, rooted in historical contingency, shapes meaning and, in turn, shapes forms of social stratification.

The historical period and place that most interests Goodey is what he calls early modern Europe, or Europe that roughly runs from the late 16th century through most of the 17th century. Despite this interest, Goodey considers intelligence in the ancient world as well as in medieval Europe. Of the former, he links Aristotle's 'natural slave' with reason or rather the lack-of-reason. But this lack-of-reason is quite different from the view of intellectual disabilities that modern people assume. For Aristotle, the 'natural slave' apprehended reason but could not possess it. Unlike late modern views of intelligence, then, Aristotle did not see the slave's 'nature' as fixed and necessary. Finally, Goodey argues that Aristotle's use of reason in reference to slaves and free men had more to do with community than with human or natural differences.

Beyond the ancients, Goodey explores the relationship between perceptions of intelligence and speed. He notes that at different historical moments people regarded intelligence as 'fast and efficient, or slow and deliberative or a mean between the two' (p. 40). The association of intelligence with speed, therefore, is a historically contingent association. Intelligence as a manifestation of speed, as in the 'quick wit', is a modern invention. Only with modernity, when the advent of machines began to speed up social life, did speed become a sign of ability.

Besides association with speed, human intelligence began a linkage with status. As Goodey sees it, status in early modern Europe revealed itself through three modes: honor, grace and intelligence (or wit). Honor was associated with family name, with social rank, and with bloodline. Grace, especially after the Protestant Reformation, was linked with a person's divine election. God's elect were of high status because they were divinely chosen. With the advent of modernity, wit became linked with status. With this linkage, intelligence found itself associated with high social status. Of course, honor, grace and wit each had its own opposite – for honor there was 'honor degeneracy,' for grace there was 'grace reprobation,' and for wit there was the idiot (p. 72). In each case, status differentiation led to social stratification, and with stratification, to social exclusion. Intellectually disabled people who lacked wit were associated with both the dishonorable and the reprobate. In term of social stratification, there was in early modernity ambiguity among the modes of status, each overlapping and complimenting the others.

From social status, Goodey turns to an assessment of the 'dishonourable and the idiotic'. Before the advent of modernity, the absence of wit characterized much of the population of Europe. These 'idiots' were the masses of uneducated people. Indeed, they were Europe's ordinary people. As such, social class was more important than psychology in differentiating pre-modern people. Having acknowledged that fact, however, Goodey argues that by the mid 18th century, the absence of wit in the idiot had become increasingly important in associating lack-of-intelligence with social exclusion. Just as honor gave way to wit in differentiating people, so too did grace give way to wit. For Goodey, before the 19th century with its 'nature versus nurture' fixed dichotomy, a tripartite convention existed with a distinction made among nature, nurture and necessity. 'Nature stood somewhere in the middle, between nurture and necessity, somewhat overlapping both ...: multifaceted, soft-edged, negotiable' (p. 153). As this tripartite custom shifted to 'nature versus nurture' concepts of reprobation (for those who had not received God's grace) moved increasingly to a modern view of intellectual disabilities. The fallen-from-grace reprobate was now the idiot, whose idiocy was fixed and whose numbers were relatively small, at least small as compared to the pre-

modern view of idiocy as a broad social category. With the advent of modernity, then, idiots had replaced the dishonorable and reprobate as society's out-group. This replacement, of course, depended on the replacement of intelligence as a greater social good than either honor or grace. As Goodey writes, 'Intelligence is as absolute in our own era as honour and grace once were' (p. 207).

Goodey next explores 'fools and their medical histories'. He notes that the medical profession has become the 'arbiter of what it is and is not to be fully human' (p. 207). He denies the first medical diagnosis of intellectual disability was made by Paracelsus, Felix Platter, or Thomas Willis, each of whom historians have given the label of 'first'.

The final sections of his book lead Goodey to look at the changeling and the idiot, and especially at John Locke's perspective on those particular outcasts. For Goodey, 'It was Locke, the proto-modern psychologist and natural historian, who was to draw the full conclusion: that changelings, creatures seen as entirely lacking a soul or mind, were non-human' (p. 266). Changelings were born of human beings, but were nevertheless creatures of the devil. The idiot was not a changeling, but like the changeling, the idiot for Locke lacked the fundamentally human ability to abstract. Yet the idiot's difference from the rest of us was more in degree than in kind, while the changeling was clearly different in kind, not merely degree. Eventually, Locke viewed the changeling's empty conscience as overlapping with his inability to reason logically. At the same time, 'Locke replaces an organic, behavioural and provisional model of foolishness with one that is disembodied, intellectual, and permanent' (p. 326).

C. F. Goodey's *A History of Intelligence and 'Intellectual Disability'* is not so much a unified history as it is a collection of historical essays. What links the essays together is the author's claim to regard intelligence and intellectual disability as historical contingencies. From essay to essay, Goodey shows the influence of social, political, and religious factors that shaped the pre-modern and early modern views of intelligence and of lack-of-intelligence. In so doing, he has created a magisterial work – one that should be read by historians, sociologists, policy makers, and students of disability studies. Finally, he has set a high standard for those scholars interested in studying intelligence and intellectual disability in periods before the 20th century.

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