



Isaac Asimov

What Is Intelligence, Anyway?

Born in the Soviet Union, Isaac Asimov immigrated with his parents to the United States in 1923 and earned a doctorate from Columbia University. A well-respected writer on general science, Asimov has published numerous books and is one of the most prolific science-fiction writers of the twentieth century. His works of fiction and nonfiction include *I, Robot* (1950), *The Foundation Trilogy* (1951–53), *The Stars in Their Courses* (1976), *The Gods Themselves* (1977), *Isaac Asimov: The Complete Stories* (1990), *The Best Science Fiction of Isaac Asimov* (1991), *Isaac Asimov's Guide to Earth and Space* (1992), *Asimov Laughs Again: More Than 700 Favorite Jokes, Limericks, and Anecdotes* (1993), and *The Exploding Suns: The Secrets of Supernovas* (1996), to name a few.

Pre-reading Questions

1. What qualities do you associate with intelligence? If you have trouble thinking of specific things, freewrite or cluster the word.
2. What is a fair test of intelligence? Should people who work in different occupations take different tests to measure their knowledge?

1 What is intelligence, anyway? When I was in the army I received a kind of aptitude test that all soldiers took and, against a normal of 100, scored 160. No one at the base had ever seen a figure like that, and for two hours they made a big fuss over me. (It didn't mean anything. The next day I was still a buck private with KP as my highest duty.)

2 All my life I've been registering scores like that, so that I have the complacent feeling that I'm highly intelligent, and I expect other people to think so, too. Actually, though, don't such scores simply mean that I am very good at answering the type of academic questions that are considered worthy of answers by the people who make up the intelligence tests—people with intellectual bents similar to mine?

3 For instance, I had an auto-repair man once, who, on these intelligence tests, could not possibly have scored more than 80, by my estimate. I always took it for granted that I was far more intelligent than he was. Yet, when anything went wrong with my car I hastened to him with it, watched him anxiously as he explored its vitals, and listened to his pronouncements as though they were divine oracles—and he always fixed my car.

4 Well, then, suppose my auto-repair man devised questions for an intelligence test. Or suppose a carpenter did, or a farmer, or, indeed, almost anyone but an academician. By every one of those tests, I'd prove myself a moron. And I'd be a moron, too. In a world where I could not use my academic training and my verbal talents but had to do something intricate or hard, working with my hands, I would do poorly. My intelligence, then, is not absolute but is a function of the society I live in and of the fact that a small subsection of that society has managed to foist itself on the rest as an arbiter of such matters.

5 Consider my auto-repair man, again. He had a habit of telling me jokes whenever he saw me. One time he raised his head from under the automobile hood to say: "Doc, a deaf-and-dumb guy went into a hardware store to ask for some nails. He put two fingers together on the counter and made hammering motions with the other hand. The clerk brought him a hammer. He shook his head and pointed to the two fingers he was hammering. The clerk brought him nails. He picked out the sizes he wanted, and left. Well, doc, the next guy who came in was a blind man. He wanted scissors. How do you suppose he asked for them?"

6 Indulgently, I lifted my right hand and made scissoring motions with my first two fingers. Whereupon my auto-repair man laughed raucously and said, "Why, you dumb jerk, he used his voice and asked for them." Then he said, smugly, "I've been trying that on all my customers today." "Did you catch many?" I asked. "Quite a few," he said, "but I knew for sure I'd catch you." "Why is that?" I asked. "Because you're so goddamned educated, doc, I knew you couldn't be very smart."

7 And I have an uneasy feeling he had something there.

Post-reading Questions

Content

1. According to Asimov, what is intelligence?
2. What sort of intelligence does Asimov, an academic, have? Is it any better than the intelligence of the auto mechanic or blue-collar worker? Why?
3. How did Asimov value IQ tests at the start of his essay, and what made him reconsider his position?

Strategies and Structures

1. Why does Asimov include several short episodes in this paper (e.g., time in the army, a trip to an auto-mobile mechanic)? How do they assist him in defining *intelligence*?
2. What would happen if Asimov placed his trip to the automobile mechanic prior to his discussion of his performance on IQ tests? Why do you think he arranged his material as he did?
3. What might have been Asimov's strategic purpose for concluding his essay with a one-sentence paragraph?

Language and Vocabulary

1. Vocabulary: *KP, complacent, indulgently*. Outside of *KP* (*kitchen police*), the other two vocabulary words deal with qualities associated with someone who is lacking intelligence. What other characteristics do you associate with an unintelligent person? Write a list of them, and, through repeated usage for at least three days, make them a part of your everyday speech.
2. How many of Asimov's words *sound* intelligent? Make some sort of chart of important-sounding or scholastic words (be sure you know their definitions) and spend a day consciously using them whenever you have an opportunity. How did others react to your use of words? Did using *big* words make you feel more or less intelligent? Why?

Group Activities

1. In pairs, in much the same way as Asimov reported his conversations with his mechanic, visit a person who runs a business neither of you knows anything

about and, together, write a summation of this person's intelligence. In what areas do you feel superior to this person, and in what ways is his or her intelligence superior to your own?

2. After the class has been divided into four or five groups, have each group member write down three things he or she knows little about as well as three things he or she knows much about. Compare notes and find a common element of expertise in your group (e.g., math, "street smarts," science, philosophy). Next, make up an intelligence quiz based on questions from your group's area of expertise (ten questions), and make copies of it for the rest of the class. Finally, with the exception of your own, take each group's intelligence quiz, correct them all as a class, and graph the results for each test. What do the results imply about intelligence tests? Did the outcome of the class exercise confirm Asimov's conclusions about IQ tests? How?

Writing Activities

1. Write an essay defining your own conception of intelligence. As Asimov has done, cite some specific instances that demonstrate how and why your definition is valid. Feel free to refer to Group Activity 2.
2. Make up a list of the qualities you associate with stupidity, lunacy, or another human characteristic. Focus on a recurring theme from your list and use it as the controlling idea in an essay defining your topic.