

# Being Smart

by Bill Herbst

*Version 1.5 (posted on 29 March 2022)  
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- I am usually smart enough to know when things in general aren't right, and I'm often smart enough to recognize where, when, and sometimes even why they went wrong, but I'm not always smart enough to set things right.*
- I am usually smart enough to know when something specific is broken, and I'm often smart enough to figure out what caused the breakdown, but I'm frequently not smart enough to fix it.*
- I am usually smart enough to have a pretty good feeling for how life should be, and I'm often smart enough to understand why life isn't that way, but I'm rarely smart enough to actually improve life enough to realize the ideal.*
- I am usually smart enough to see when I'm in trouble, and I'm often smart enough to figure out how I contributed to that trouble, but I'm typically not smart enough to understand how to end the trouble or get out of it.*
- I am usually smart enough to see future troubles looming on the horizon, and I'm often smart enough to imagine how they might come to pass, but I'm only occasionally smart enough to head them off in advance or change my direction so they don't happen.*

Now, when I use the word "smart" here, I'm writing mainly about rational intelligence — intellectual acumen of the kind measured by I.Q. scores, and the whole neocortex brain thing that some humans are so fond of. When I was a child, the society I was growing up in — white, middle-class, 1950s America — put a premium on the whole idea of rational intelligence. Being "bright" mattered, as did being good in school, and those traits were typically rewarded with praise and privileges. Conversely, not being good in school also mattered, but that wasn't so much punished or criticized as it was played down, at least by the authorities. Nonetheless, as students, we all knew which group we were in. The "smart" kids tended to look down on the "dumb" kids, but the dumb kids responded by looking down on the smart kids just as much, calling them "geeks" and "nerds." Even back then, class warfare was a real thing, as were the cultural biases of pro- and anti-intellectualism.

I was good at school. Basically, rational intelligence was about the only thing I was good at. I wasn't handsome, I wasn't a great athlete, my family wasn't rich or socially prominent, but at least I was smart. Sure, I was also, in many ways, seriously damaged (some of that visible, some not), and my young life was held together with spit and bailing wire. I was a fat kid who suffered from a

debilitating speech impediment — I stammered badly and had trouble getting certain sounds to come out of my mouth. Even so, I wasn't considered a "loser" because I was bright — one might say "wicked smart." Both society and many individual adults were quite willing to overlook the fact that my life was obviously a disaster, because — in spite of that — I did well in school. I got good grades, scored high on tests, had friends my own age, and wasn't a "problem" kid in terms of outrageous behavior or disobedience.

Being smart was my ticket out of hell. And I clung to it, wearing it like a life preserver in an angry ocean. In a very real way, being smart saved me.

I survived the traumas of primary education — elementary school, junior high, and high school — and finally reached the Valhalla of college, entering in 1967. But that was when the wheels started to come off the bus. It didn't take more than a year or two for me to realize that being bright or smart wasn't all that it was cracked up to be. Not even close. The promised land of the intellect turned out to have feet of clay.

The four years I spent as an undergraduate were supremely enlightening to me. Some of this was influenced — no doubt powerfully — by what was happening in the world at the time. The late 1960s were arguably one of the most turbulent periods of cultural change ever. Through all the tumultuous shit of the 20th century — World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, and then the atomic age and all the madness of the Cold War, the many revolutionary upheavals hadn't really changed culture all that much. Yes, the dramatic external events of that crazy half-century had changed modern life. The cars, electricity, washing machines, telephones, televisions, and burgeoning suburbs of the industrial revolution had literally transformed the way we lived, but all that hadn't produced a similar transformation in the collective consciousness of human beings. Sure, that more fundamental inner change was cooking the whole time, simmering away on the back burner, but it wasn't until the last half of the 1960s that the pot boiled over. That's when I was in college, and it was one hell of a background.

What I realized back then (at least, what I realized that's relevant to this commentary) was that being "smart" didn't matter in so many of the ways I'd been told that it did and which I assumed it would. In a nutshell, what I saw was that being smart didn't correspond to becoming a better, more mature, or more whole human being. You could be smart as a whip, get good grades in school and advance up the ladders of society, but still be an idiot, a jerk, or a complete dipshit. Wow. What a revelation that was. I had begun to see this phenomenon earlier in high school, but it wasn't until I got to college that the realization and all its implications hit me with full force.

The achievements of rational intelligence through the institutions of formal education might have been the golden pathway to economic success and social

status (this is almost certainly less true today than it was 50 years ago), but they had precious little to do with the myriad other levels and kinds of experience that were essential to the development of true personhood. I began to consider even the disturbing possibility that our obsessive focus on rational smarts might get in the way of becoming fully human.

I came to understand also that there were many different kinds of “brightness.” Bodies had their own natural intelligence. High I.Q. didn’t guarantee social savvy, which was more than just a set of learned skills. And then there was intuitive intelligence — the ability to sense the complex web of interconnections and subtle correspondences that operated often invisibly beyond the more obvious linear connections of logical rationality.

Let me pause in the story-telling to insert a short (and admittedly crude) section on biology. In our brains, the neocortex — which is where rational intelligence lives, along with various related “smart” functions, such as sensory perception, cognition, generation of motor commands, spatial reasoning, decision-making, and language — is the new kid on the evolutionary block. The thinking functions of the cerebral cortex evolved relatively recently in the pantheon of species evolution, showing up in the brains of mammals and higher primates. By contrast, the emotional centers of the frontal lobe and limbic system are considerably older. Finally, the brain stem and midbrain, which monitor all the most basic and essential physical functions — breathing, heart rate, digestion, etc. — are much, much older than the limbic system. Taken together, the stem and midbrain are often called the “reptilian brain.”

The brain stem and midbrain regulate and organize all the metabolic functions that occur within cells into coherent systems that run and maintain our bodies. When they work correctly (a critical caveat), this occurs entirely beneath the threshold of consciousness. We are almost never aware of heart rate, blood pressure, the nutrient balance in the bloodstream, cycles of replacing cells, along with a thousand other essential but unconscious functions. And thank god for that, since otherwise we’d never be able to experience anything beyond moment-to-moment survival.

The frontal lobe and limbic brain regulate the various hormonal systems that correspond to emotions and values. (The amygdala in particular is critical in managing strong emotions, such as fear, pleasure, and anger.) These sections of the brain are incredibly important in shaping human experience. Most of us “live” in our limbic brains more than anywhere else.

The neocortex is the least efficient section of the brain. Rational intelligence is extremely energy-intensive. I don’t want to suggest that thinking is difficult, but it’s expensive in terms of life-energy and consciousness.

When I refer to “the brain,” I don’t mean just the tangible organ inside our skulls. Sure, that’s like the central train station, from which all trains arrive and depart, but the tracks extend throughout our body. So, it’s more sensible to think of the brain as a whole-body organ — the entire railway system, not just the switching station. Brains are more than Grand Central.

Here’s the problem with the neocortex: Rational intelligence is *always* the servant and *never* the master. It is subservient to the emotions of the limbic system, and it never, ever trumps the core functions of the brain stem. And yet, modern human beings tend to maintain the illusion that “rational thinking” is somehow the king of the hill, the pinnacle of evolution. I don’t think so. Heck, it may not even be the icing on the cake. From where I sit, rational intelligence is an ongoing evolutionary experiment, and I’m not at all convinced that the experiment is going very well. Depending on what happens over the next century or two (and perhaps less than that), the experiment may come to a bad end, and life might go back to drawing board and start over.

Obviously, the techno-evangelists disagree with me about this, and I’m not certain enough of my position to assert for sure that they’re wrong. Maybe rational intelligence is indeed the crown of creation, but I just can’t see it. Even if that’s true, however, nagging problems remain.

We frequently tell ourselves and others that we’re being “logical” when we’re not. Generally speaking, we don’t apply logic to a situation and then come to a conclusion. No, we assess the values we hold (desire, fear, pleasure, etc., which come from the emotions of the limbic system), then the neocortex dutifully finds a logical scheme that reflects, justifies, or “proves” those values. See, logic has rules, but no values. Values are more primal and decidedly more influential. What we want, like, or fear inevitably and quite literally shapes our thinking.

OK. Enough biology. Back to my story.

What I realized about intelligence in my college years and over the decades beyond took two different but related directions. The first was that our intellectual intelligence doesn’t guarantee that we’ll be smart in other kinds of intelligence. The second was that how “smart” a person is (in terms of rational intellect) has zero correlation with the values essential for mature personhood. Put simply, I came to understand (or I guess I should say, believe) that one can be as smart as a whip or stupid as a rock and still be a wonderful and good human being — kind, open-hearted, and compassionate. Sure, lower rational intelligence may limit creativity, ingenuity, cleverness, or that social “sparkle” that often comes with being “bright,” but the core qualities of maturity — the ones that really matter — aren’t necessarily reduced at all. Conversely, anyone can be smart as a whip or stupid as a rock and still be a terrible and evil human being — narcissistic, cruel, and disdainful. That’s when smart devolves into cunning.

In fact, it's the smart people of the world who are responsible for much of the terrible shit that's happened over the past 300 years. To me, what's even more disturbing is that — time and time again — they aren't held accountable for their misdeeds. Far too often, smart people get away with shit that less smart people never would. And, of course, rich people get away with more crap than anyone else. The difference between who goes to jail and who doesn't often comes down to having the money to hire smart lawyers.

I understand, of course, that I'm painting with a very broad brush in this piece. To equate "rational intelligence" or IQ with "being smart" is far too simplistic. Much of what is assumed in culture to indicate "smarts" is bogus. A doctorate from Harvard is no guarantee that someone has a high IQ or is in any real way "bright." I know of certain people with degrees from Ivy League colleges who are socially prominent and successful, but I'd label them stupid and despicable.

So yes, take what I'm writing with a large grain of salt. Still, I think the basic point is worth consideration. As I asserted earlier, rational intelligence (being bright or smart) — in all the ways we commonly think of — is not always what's it's cracked up to be. It can be wonderful or terrible, depending on the person.