

Are We Getting More Stupid?

I've seen three things lately which suggest that we are progressively becoming less intelligent. The first said that we are not so bright as our Victorian ancestors. Of course, the human race knows more than it did in those days. As Isaac Newton said, we stand on the shoulders of giants. Hopefully, each generation adds to the store of human knowledge. As individuals, of course, Victorians might well have known as much as you and I do, but about different things. A twelve year old boy living in Halling would have been expected to know how to snare and skin a rabbit and to make a fire to cook it on. His sister would have had to learn how to black lead a grate and to darn woollen socks. Most parents nowadays probably discourage their children from playing with fire and knives and throw away their old socks. On the other hand, Victorian boys and girls didn't have to know how to stream a video onto their tablet.

That's knowledge, but what about intelligence? I guess that intelligence is the ability both to learn and to work things out for yourself. Knowledge is easy to test. Intelligence is much harder. I can ask you what you know, but how can I discover what you are capable of learning? IQ tests depend ultimately on knowledge of language and mathematics because the questions and answers have to be communicated. People who do well in IQ tests tend to be people who come from the same sort of background as the people who set them, middle class households with a high regard for education. IQ tests, therefore, tend unfairly to make rich people look smarter than poor people and, in the USA, to make black people appear less capable than white people. Take IQ tests with a pinch of salt. They are not truly a measure of intelligence or capability.

Anyway, the Victorians didn't set IQ tests. So how can we guess whether they were more or less intelligent than we are? The answer seems to be that they had to be smarter because life was so much tougher. If you weren't reasonably intelligent, you didn't survive. There was no welfare state to pick you up if you fell through your own stupidity. In the same way, wild cattle, sheep and goats are more intelligent than farm animals and wolves are probably cleverer than dogs.

The third thing I read to suggest we are getting dumber was that scientists had discovered that having all that knowledge on our 'phones and computers, our memories are getting weaker for lack of use. Use it or lose it applies to mental skills as well as muscles. In the same way, we all lost the ability to do mental arithmetic thirty years ago when we got calculators. 400 years before Christ, Plato observed that people's memories for stories and poetry became very much poorer when they started writing things down! Technology enables us to do a lot more, but we also become dependent on it. A few years ago, Channel 4 put a family in a house unaltered since 1900 to see how they would cope with coal fires, unheated bedrooms, oil lamps and no car, 'phone or computer. They made a pretty poor job of it. I thought I could have survived, except I would grow a beard before I attempted using a cutthroat razor, but I wouldn't like it. Technology makes life easier and more comfortable, though it might make us soft and dependent. I value my independence and would be sorry to lose it altogether.

The second thing they've brought up again recently has been around since safe, effective family planning was invented. If intelligent adults decide to have fewer or no children because they want to pursue their careers, or to have nicer homes and more leisure, or because they are concerned about global over-population, and, if intelligence is inherited, will we finish up with mostly stupid people having stupid children and so diminish the gene pool of the human race? There's a lot to question there. For one thing, it is not all clear how much inheritance may be inherited. Secondly, it isn't obvious that the intelligent choice is to have fewer or no children. Certainly, it's a mistake to have more children than you can afford to bring up, but, on the other hand, it isn't necessarily the case that you will have a more fulfilled life if you have a good job and plenty of money but nobody to love and nurture. I'm sure that really smart people put people before profit. As for overpopulation, the real problem is that the rich consume far too much of the world's resources, not that there isn't enough to go round.

Anyway, it's not intelligence that really matters, as I'm sure many of you thinking. What about common sense? What about basic skills? What about getting on with people? It's actually wisdom that really counts. Now, wisdom is an essentially religious matter. Wisdom is an attribute of God.

Roger Knight, Rector of Cuxton and Halling.

Harvest Festival Services: 2nd October Holy Communion 8.00 am Jubilee Hall & 11.00 St John's. Also 9.30 St Michael's Cuxton. Evening Praise and Harvest Supper 6.30 at St Michael's this year.