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THE MEASURE OF MIND

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John Carson. *The Measure of Merit: Talents, Intelligence, and Inequality in the French and American Republics, 1750–1940.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. xvii + 401 pp. Charts, notes, and index. \$39.50.

It is a simple proposition: democratic and republican governments function on the principle that all citizens deserve equal treatment. And it is a difficult question to answer: how, then, can such governments justify the inequality that derives from the disparity of intelligence and talents among individuals? In a study that ranges over two centuries and two nations that pioneered in republicanism, and among a great array of theorists and practitioners, John Carson takes up these questions. His work will give any reader much to think about. For indeed, any reflecting citizen must form some conclusions about these matters. Does nature arrange that some individuals or human types are inherently superior to others, or is society or special privilege mostly responsible for these effects? If nature is decisive, how far should a democratic state go in allowing a social elite to exercise power? Does it merit that power? Should the talented have an education different from the rest? And what are talents and intelligence anyway? How do we define and measure them? What understanding of these terms befits a democracy, such that it can properly justify the inequalities that derive from them and prevail in the social order?

At the outset Carson himself seems to endorse some notion of collective intelligence, as his sprawling introduction might suggest. But he has read very widely and his ample endnotes will benefit any persons interested in this subject and peripheral ones. *The Measure of Merit* is an impressive piece of scholarship. Of course, many studies in intellectual history have tackled this question, mostly by examining political theories and social philosophies.¹ Carson hopes to shed more light by looking at mental philosophers and psychologists among a larger group that has explored the subject of mind and intelligence. Doing so, of course, places great expectations on this group of thinkers, and it is not always the case that they intended their explorations of mind to have social readings or yield political policies. Carson, to his credit, is sensitive to social and political context and relates his subjects to the changing worlds of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. And his study

takes on much interest when he does. But sometimes he builds a bridge too easily traversed from the scientific realm to the social.

Carson finds John Locke a useful starting point for his discussion. Indeed, Lockean ideas had considerable influence in both the countries he examines. In France Carson finds Lockean schools of associationists and sensationists, and also the influence of the (partly) Lockean rivals, the Scottish Common Sense philosophers. The author brings under review the French Enlightenment thinkers—Condillac, Condorcet, Helvétius, Rousseau. Together they reflected a concern of their movement, that the ancient regime faced a crisis of legitimacy: the old order could no longer be justified, but how might they reclaim a place for elites within a reformed system? Even with this concern as a background commonality, Carson finds much difference among the philosophes, as here and throughout his study he reads the texts with great sensitivity. Thus, for example, Condorcet may have insisted that all people, even the most savage, are natively equal, and with such confidence, he could call for a comprehensive system of education, available to all, but becoming progressively selective. Such a system would develop the talents of a new elite, trained in the sciences. A more skeptical view came from Voltaire, however: “No one will convince me that all minds are equally suitable to science,” he wrote, “and that they differ only in regard to education. Nothing is more false” (p. 25).

Americans also make an appearance in this first chapter. Thomas Jefferson set the terms of discussion for the young republic in articulating his concept of a natural aristocracy and his preference for it. That “natural aristocracy among men,” rooted in virtue and talents as opposed to wealth and birth, Jefferson believed, could secure democracy on a safe foundation. John Adams had a more skeptical view. “Both Artificial aristocracy, and Monarchy, and civil, military, political and hierarchical Despotism,” he wrote to Jefferson, “have all grown out of the natural Aristocracy of ‘Virtue and Talents.’” Adams nonetheless believed that America had so far escaped these corruptions and he had great hope for “our pure, virtuous” republic” (p. 11).

To this point Carson has kept the discussion on intellect and talents close to the social situation. That nexus prevails in the following chapter as he takes the subject into the first half of the nineteenth century. Political spokesmen here share the podium with philosophical thinkers, mostly of the Common Sense persuasion. Under this influence and its quasi-religious effects, political rhetoric flourished with references to character and conscience. Carson skillfully makes the connection to the two political parties in the 1830s and 1840s. The Democrats, in making their case against the expansive state, insisted that a minimal government deprived the powerful of special privileges gained by their connections to the state. President Jackson’s famous bank veto message in 1832 warned that government must not enhance the advantages of superior industry, economy, and virtue with which nature had already favored some

in preference to others. The president purported to speak for the "humbler members of society" against the rich and powerful owners of the national bank and its various branches. Whigs, on the other hand, fearing the uncontrolled, hedonistic forces of the marketplace, looked to the "positive liberal state" to induce an ethical regime reflecting in society the ideal balance of faculties that moral philosophers prescribed in the constructs of individual minds.

The Common Sense varieties attained a virtual hegemony in the American colleges well into the nineteenth century, while in France Victor Cousin's "eclecticism" prevailed in the years of the bourgeois monarchy. All along, however, other readings emerged that complicated the connections between the measure of mind and republicanism. Carson traces the gendered meanings of this term back to the Enlightenment. Here the outline of a universal human nature, concentrated heavily in the normality of a rational, male, Western model provided the dominant meaning of virtue. In the United States, Common Sense standards sustained the sharp gender dualism of the early nineteenth century espoused by even strong advocates of women's interests like Catherine Beecher. It was not always the case, as Carson observes, that she or others insisted on a marked differentiation of the male and female mind. But in all cases, they believed, society must have the balance of traits that served individuals in their own lives. And that concern yielded the gender dualism that maintained in the social realm. Stronger feminists, like the Grimké sisters, also had to show how their case against gender differentiation did not offend prevailing religious notions nor threaten prevailing standards of propriety.

But race as well as gender upset the universal norms of the eighteenth century. A new literature emerged that took the measure of mind in this direction. The Philadelphia physician Samuel G. Morton published his *Crania Americana* in 1839, a study of skulls belonging to various "aboriginal nations" of North and South America. To be sure, the Enlightenment seldom demonstrated much appreciation for cultural difference, historically or among the human varieties the philosophes observed in their own time. But in the next century these partialities took on a more invidious form as the study of mind assumed a more naturalistic and more empirical basis. The Great Chain of Being, given its fullest outline by Carolus Linnaeus in the 1720s and afterward, now became not only a hierarchy of all the living forms, but a ranking of the human types. Many scientists became convinced that they could discover visible signs and measures of intelligence, such as cranial volume, head-face angle, and brain weight.

This preoccupation with multiple human types created problems for many Christian thinkers and it had severe political implications, too. The scientific and religious literature of the midcentury furnished essays aplenty on monogenism and polygenism. Strict Christian apologists insisted that the Genesis account allowed for one creation of the human race and no more. Among

many examples one could cite, Carson properly highlights Louis Agassiz. The renowned Swiss geologist had come to the United States in the 1840s and gained appointment at Harvard College. Influenced in Europe by *naturphilosophie*, Agassiz described each creation as the special reflection of the divine mind. But the religious implications of his science did not assuage defenders of the Scripture account. Agassiz's insistence on separate creation also led him to insist on the separate creation of the human races. Moreover, writing in the Unitarian publication *Christian Examiner* in 1850, Agassiz ridiculed any conviction that the races "have the same abilities, enjoy the same powers, and show the same natural dispositions" (p. 89). Agassiz's prestige in scientific circles effectively sanctioned a stark racism there. Josiah Nott and George Glidden published their book *Types of Mankind* in 1854. They gave an invidious reading to the great chain of being, claiming to see clear connections between the lower races of mankind and the animal kingdom just below them. "Nor can it be rationally affirmed," they wrote, "that the Orang-Outan and Chimpanzee are more widely separated from certain African Oceanic Negroes than are the latter from the Teutonic or Pelasgic type" (p. 86).

Anthropological influences also affected French science, and here, too, with political extensions. Interest moved from "talents" to "intelligence" and the French "craniometricians" championed a positivism that created a vivid leftist, anti-clerical politics under the Second Empire and into the Third Republic. The Société d'Anthropologie exemplified that dedication and one of its stalwarts, Paul Broca, served in the senate. As a group they displayed some of the silliness—cranial measurement, facial angulations—that Americans did. Carson, however, assures that their new measures did not yield the scientific certainty they expected. But one should not discount their influence. Gustave Le Bon freely employed the language of "superior" and "inferior" races. As Americans confronted the subject of slavery and as the French expanded their empire around the world, the new discourse of intelligence entered into the political discussions of race and purported to replace ideology and personal prejudice with the hard facts of empirical study. Carson writes: "As such, intelligence could explain the continued superiority of some individuals or groups and the persistent inferiority of others, and could, as well, be linked to an entire system of laboratory work, instruments, and statistics" (p. 107).

Into the later nineteenth century the French, and the Americans to a lesser degree, demanded even more observable and clinical understandings of intelligence. Hippolyte Taine, author of *D'Intelligence* in 1870, became very prominent in France and sought to relocate mental science further away from the mechanics of powers and faculties, with their associations of innate rules and moral standards, and to reduce the mind to only its empirical perceptions. Taine signifies for Carson "the complete naturalization of the mind's operations" (p. 120). His depiction not only reduced human nature to physical

laws and made individual psychology as fully determinist as any other science, it also discounted individual agency, and removed any place for transcendent reality and higher moral laws. The conservative political forces in France—monarchists and Bonapartists—greatly feared the new thinking as they saw an array of positivist-minded politicians and intellectuals joined in a liberal republican movement to transform the nation.

How far could confidence in empirical science go? Ultimately, to a conviction that it could have a statistical measurement. France took the lead with the work of Alfred Binet and Théodore Simon and the famous test that bears their names. The “intelligence quotient,” or “I.Q.” test, undergoing many revisions over time, purported to measure raw intellectual capacity in individuals. In the United States by the 1870s the movement against the older Common Sense standards had gained full speed. Edward Youmans used the pages of *Popular Science Monthly* to editorialize against all mind-body dualisms; G. Stanley Hall and others championed the “new psychology”; and William James, in *The Principles of Psychology* in 1890, gave a biological rendering of mind, in an emphatic Darwinian mode. Erosion of the older thinking prepared the way for an empiricism reduced to numbers. Among American scientists especially, statistics became the rage. By no means did the I.Q. convince everyone, but most acknowledged its usefulness for asylums and schools.

This review to this point summarizes aspects of the first two parts of the book. Part III, “Merit, Mind, and Matter,” is a good place to raise a consideration about this study. I have in mind the title chosen by Carson, “The Measure of Merit.” But “merit” rarely appears in these first two sections and only in chapter seven (the last) does the author himself use the word with any frequency. I would argue that the book is not really about the measure of merit; it is about the mind. It bears on the subject of merit only indirectly, as the supposed effects of an applied intelligence, that is, the markings of success and wealth that accrue to the intelligent when they have the right character and necessary ambition to render good to society by their works. Merit enters as a reward and justification for those works.

If we understand merit to indicate character or conduct worthy of respect or praise, then intelligence qualifies in a partial way in this study; the scientists and theorists certainly admired and valued intelligence. However, they knew its abuses, too, and they seldom discussed intelligence without references to virtue and character. But “merit” is often understood also to mean something that deserves a reward or compensation. From either understanding, however, we can explain why the principals in this study did not themselves use this term. (I do not remember the use of “merit” in any of the quotations Carson has in his narrative, and he has an excellent eye, and ear, for the quotable). The situation most certainly owes to the fact that the scientists and theorists here were ultimately interested in the social uses of intelligence—in creating

virtuous societies, in constructing educational systems in a way that would best serve the public, strengthen the nation, or aid the advancement of the race. Condillac's educational plan, which advanced the elite into a purely scientific education, spoke for many reformers in its goals. It would allow these select few, as Carson writes, "to generate new knowledge for the benefit of humankind" (p. 34).

Merit properly enters the discussion at another juncture, that is, when questions arise about those who gain from their superior intelligence, about the rich and powerful, the elites and aristocracy. Do they deserve all they have gained? Does the state have a legitimate interest in limiting their wealth or in redistributing it? Many who wanted to measure the mind hoped to effect something like a natural aristocracy, to install a social hierarchy derived less from privilege than ability and usefulness and all resulting from objective rather than subjective criteria. All the discussions that Carson reviews among the mental scientists in the late-nineteenth-century United States would find greater relevance if considered along with some lively debates among sociologists, where "merit" did figure prominently. William Graham Sumner (who has a brief mention in the book) defended the successful capitalist because he saved society from a terrible dilemma and did so because he had not only superior intelligence but a superior moral virtue as well. His rival Lester Frank Ward faulted laissez-faire practices because they gave critical advantages to those born to privilege and because they denied society the potential contributions of talent and intelligence from others locked into poverty and other deprivations.

Another illustration comes in the last part of this book, which examines the first four decades of the twentieth century. Intelligence testing became a matter of great public interest in the United States with its breakthrough moment in World War I. The development of the Army "a" tests (and the later Alpha and Beta) would soon find thousands of recruits (200,000 per month by April 1918) taking the tests. The military utilized the tests to meet a programmatic challenge, not to reward merit among the best in the lot. The military believed that it needed information about the recruit's intelligence and that it could screen its personnel and staff its battalions so as to make the comprehensive operations more efficient and more valuable to the national defense. Any place for merit, as in promotion to higher rank, would emerge long after the tests had served their exclusive and limited purposes.

These points come by way of a clarification, and not a criticism, of what this book does, and does very well. Carson begins by looking at the measure of mind and the republican hopes that attended it in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He concludes with a lively discussion of the interwar years on the testing of intelligence and its implications for democracy. Noted thinkers like Walter Lippmann and John Dewey pressed their criticism of

intelligence testing, but both opponents and partisans advanced their positions by invoking the standards of modern democracy as they idealized them. And despite the controversies, Carson shows that intelligence testing gained a wider use and higher credibility in the United States than it did in France. Herein lies the major thematic irony he draws from his study. A country putatively dedicated to individualism, and honoring the unique and special qualities of each individual, came to place much stock in mass, uniform testing. But a nation so diverse and various in its racial and ethnic make-up required, many believed, some uniform standards of assessment. Perhaps a better democracy would emerge from an arrangement based on such objectivity and fairness; or perhaps this arrangement would be a dangerous step in creating a new elitism that threatened American egalitarian ideals. We all need to consider these issues, and Carson's book can inform the discussion.

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1. Books relevant to Carson's subject have a citation listing in the second endnote in the Introduction (pp. 280–1).