

Jenner, on the intellect

Surely no medical practitioner can be unaware of the name and work of Dr Edward Jenner (1749-1823). A Gloucestershire country doctor, he pioneered smallpox vaccination, work for which he is rightly adjudged one of the immortals of medical history, and the anniversary of which is still noted.¹ Even the Royal College of Physicians of London, which assiduously excluded him during life, seems prepared to acknowledge him “one of the greatest doctors in history”.² Besides smallpox, some may know of Jenner’s work on the nesting habits of the cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*), the work for which he was appointed a Fellow of the Royal Society. Few, if any, may be aware that he also had ideas on the classification of the intellectual faculties.

Jenner’s thoughts were published in an article, bearing the long-winded title of:

Classes of the Human Powers of Intellect – Hints for a Classification of the Powers of the Human Mind as they appear in various Descriptions of Men – Examples of Excellence rare – General Division into seven Classes – Difficulty of analysing all the Varieties of Intellect in Individuals

This article [hereafter *Classes of the Intellect*] was first published in the London weekly periodical *The Artist* (no. XIX, Saturday, July 18th, 1807), published by Prince Hoare, foreign secretary of the Royal Academy. Thirteen years later it was reprinted as a pamphlet by the Cheltenham publisher Griffiths, a friend of Jenner’s who was facing financial difficulties in the summer of 1820. The reprint was without any revisions, notwithstanding Jenner’s statement in the original that “I may hereafter treat more copiously” of the subject. Jenner’s first biographer, Baron,³ does not mention the work at all, and more recent biographers, Saunders⁴ and Fisher,⁵ mention it only in passing. In his bibliography of Jenner’s publications, Le Fanu lists it under “Medical Digressions”.⁶ I am unaware of any previous publications devoted to it.

The Artist was, as its name implies, a non-scientific periodical, although it did have a scientific editor, Tiberius Cavallo (1749-1809), who was interested in the therapeutic aspects of electricity. *The Artist* consisted of essays by artists, writers and politicians; Jenner was the only physician to contribute.

Jenner’s paper ran to seven pages, about two thousand words. The classification of intellect, “or, to speak more correctly, of the various degrees of intellectual capacity, which distinguish the human animal”, which Jenner “hinted” at was into seven classes, *viz.*:

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| 1. The Idiot: | “the mere vegetative being” |
| 2. The Dolt: | “the weak, silly, poor creature” |
| 3. Mediocrity: | “the large mass of mankind” |
| 4. Mental Perfection: | “From this point Intellect again diverges” |
| 5. Eccentricity: | “I have in this class a very numerous acquaintance” |
| 6. Insanity: | “the most affecting of all conditions” |
| 7. The Maniac: | “the wreck of the mental faculties” |

Although no doubt based on Jenner’s personal observations, *Classes of the Intellect* lacks (and does not pretend to) scientific rigour, or any kind of empirical verification, so unlike the experimental method, learned by Jenner from his mentor John Hunter (1728-1793), which marks

his work on smallpox vaccination (and, for that matter, the nesting habits of the cuckoo). It has been suggested that the article was written as a diversion or distraction, perhaps light-hearted, from the struggle to establish smallpox vaccination which occupied so much of Jenner’s time and energy, and on which subject he was under attack from various critics.^{4,5}

No contemporaneous reaction to the article is recorded. From the vantage of hindsight, it is probable that many of us may recognise from personal experience some verisimilitude in this scheme, and indeed may find some attractions in it. Yet nonetheless it is difficult to disagree with Le Fanu’s analysis of *Classes of the Intellect* as a “slight essay in psychology ... showing a scientific bent to classification, it is little more than a *jeu d’esprit*”.⁶ Fisher calls it “a fair summary of the common eighteenth-century [*sic*] wisdom on mental attributes, elevated slightly by being ordered into classes”.⁵

The nineteenth century saw the origin of many of our currently accepted neuroscientific concepts,⁷ and so it is reasonable to ask how Jenner’s ideas compared with those of the time. The early nineteenth century saw a gradual increase in research interest devoted to the nervous system such that many physiologists saw it as pre-eminent. Moreover, hierarchical views of nature, espoused particularly by adherents of *Naturphilosophie*, popular in the early nineteenth century, envisaged not only a hierarchy of animal forms reaching its apogee in the human body, but also within the human body itself, with the nervous system its apex. The first four of Jenner’s categories seem to form a hierarchy but, as Saunders points out,⁴ the next three seem aberrations from this pattern. This perhaps reflects the difficulties of attempting to conflate physiological variation with pathological aberration.

As Fisher implies,⁵ Jenner’s ideas were perhaps more akin to those of earlier epochs, when the urge to classify was strong, as exemplified in the work of Linnaeus in the eighteenth century and of John Ray in the seventeenth century. Analogies may be seen between Jenner’s classification and the idea of a “Great Chain of Being”, as seen for example in the work of Edward Tyson published on the threshold of the eighteenth century.⁸ Noting the morphological similarities and differences between an “orang-outang” (in fact, a chimpanzee) and man, Tyson conceived a gradation of forms, in which man was placed above brute animals, of which the chimpanzee was his nearest relative, but below the angels. Jenner’s grading may also be seen to span from the sublime to the fatuous.

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