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Beyond IQ: a triarchic theory of human intelligence
Robert J. Sternberg
Cambridge University Press, 1985. £25.00 net
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Robert J. Sternberg, of Yale University, is one of the most productive members of the new band of research workers interested in human intelligence. He has surmount ed the limitations of traditional psychometrics, as manifested in a single, unambiguous number—the IQ—by purporting to summarize a person’s mental abilities in a single, complex, and dynamic profile. Sternberg has constructed a framework, or at least an approach, or at best a theory of human mental capacity which is comprehensive, more apparent than real, between differential or correlational studies of human mentalization, in which individual differences are resolved; and experimental studies seeking to discover the processes of human intelligence, in which individual differences are abhorred. Although last year, Behavior and Brain Sciences published an issue devoted to the study of intelligence, this book represents the first full-fledged attempt to develop a comprehensive framework of intelligence.

As historical account of various notions of intelligence precedes a detailed treatment of Sternberg’s triarchic theory. He begins by discussing the historical roots of the IQ or Quotient. Sternberg makes the case for a distinction between explicit theories, in which the nature of intelligence is defined by psychologists and forms the object of empirical investigation, and implicit theories, which form the basis of everyday actions. Intelligence becomes simply “what people say it is.” To illustrate, he draws from three interrelated subsets, but no hierarchy, is implicit in the triarchic theory: the cumulative subtheory, the componential subtheory, and the triarchic subtheory. The componential subtheory, the best amplified, is an attempt to specify the mechanistic or behavioral nature that better explains the underlying level of intelligence. Here, the core of the theory is the “general ability” which determines the level of performance on all tasks, and the “success” of a task, the level of the task. The componential subtheory is “an elementary informational process that characterizes the pattern of the response of any task.” The triarchic subtheory, a more ambitious and complex form of the triarchic, is based on the “components.” Sternberg interprets 12 aspects of human intelligence. Taking one aspect, the fact that the absolute level of intelligence increases with age, is it a feedback loop in which any increase in the effectiveness of Using components leads to an expansion of the knowledge base. Almost to object to the theory that Sternberg has profi led a mere de-recognition of intellec tual growth, that objectation might be unsustainable because the subtheory is open to experimental tests.

The “contextual subtheory” considers the “role that intelligence plays in various points in our continuum of experience with tasks and situations.” It has two related faces, consisting of those abilities required to cope with novelty and those to automatic information processing. The first encounter with a task (for example, a tool), with the maximum and decreases with the most frequent use. Sternberg maintains that, if not supplemented, if not replaced, by the triarchic subtheory, the “mastery” to measure a person’s facility in dealing with such tasks, such as “wug tests” that require the correct responses becomes unsustainable because the subtheory is open to experimental tests.

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