

Review

JENSEN ON JENSEN

Frank Miele, *Intelligence, Race and Genetics: Conversations with Arthur R. Jensen* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2002), 243 pp., ISBN 0-8133-4008-X, £19.99

In 1977, Arthur Jensen, the well-known University of California psychologist, flew to Australia to address the Psychology Department at the University of Sydney. His arrival was almost a state secret. He was booked into a downtown hotel as ‘William James’ (his own choice of pseudonym). His talk was not publicly advertised, and not even the psychology staff members were informed of the nature of the meeting to which they were summoned.

No-one, however, can accuse Jensen of shirking confrontation, and these ‘conversations’ bear out his reputation for fearlessness, persistence, thoroughness, and intellectual rigour. The subterfuges at Sydney were imposed by his hosts, who feared a repetition of the violent demonstrations that had recently prevented British academic Hans Eysenck from speaking on the same campus on topics quite unrelated to race and IQ. Eysenck was, however, known to hold views similar to Jensen’s on the race/IQ issue, and both had for years been denounced as racists by their many critics.

On this occasion, Jensen’s talk posed the question, ‘Is culture-fair testing of intelligence possible?’ By then, he had delivered his affirmative answer hundreds of times. Today, his elaborate structure of inductive and deductive theorizing, in combination with a large body of empirical research, derived largely from psychometric observations, has become known as ‘Jensenism’. Academic supporters and opponents have been numerous, vociferous, and diligent. Their views about race and IQ – fitting into the long-running ‘nature/nurture’ controversy – have arguably been the cause of more debate than any other area of twentieth-century psychology.

Frank Miele, senior editor of *Skeptic* magazine, is an old hand at interviewing controversial figures, including quite a few with strong hereditarian leanings. This particular set of discussions was conducted entirely by e-mail, in 1999, while Jensen was working in London. Miele sent questions, and Jensen replied. The resulting text, published with minimal editorial intervention, illustrates the power of the medium in capable hands. Miele's stated aim was explicit: to enable the general reader to decide whether Jensenism represents the highest standards of scientific inquiry, or 'a dangerous diversion down a blind alley of old and disproven (*sic*) ideas, deceptively dressed up in modern scientific jargon' (p. 2).

The Prelude that opens the book gives a biographical sketch of Jensen up to 1969, when he published his landmark article in the *Harvard Educational Review* (39 (1), 1–123), entitled 'How much can we boost IQ and scholastic achievement?' 'Not much', Jensen concluded. For the next thirty years, he continued to study social class and racial differences in general ability, which he claimed were in significant part due to genetic variations between groups. Appendix A lists Jensen's 435 publications as of 2002. All but seventy-five of these postdate the 1969 paper, and the vast majority of them continue to address the same set of issues. While many are intended only for specialists, enough are accessible to the layperson to raise the question whether Miele's presentation can have anything new to offer.

In fact, the book has much to recommend it. It is readable, well sequenced, concise yet comprehensive. At its core are six chapters. The first presents an overall view of Jensenism and its origins. The next three tackle Jensen's key notions: the conceptual status of intelligence and its relation to IQ testing; heritability, the prime statistical tool used by quantitative genetics; and the question of race as either 'biological reality or cultural construction'. The last two hard-hitting chapters consider, respectively, the reasons behind the outcry against Jensenism, and Jensen's views of the proper relation between science and public policy.

This final chapter represents, in Miele's view, new thinking by Jensen himself. While much of it has a familiar ring, Miele has prompted Jensen to draw together – with admirable lucidity and tough-mindedness – assumptions and conclusions arising from years of work. For example, he reflects upon the educational challenge presented by individual differences in ability *within groups*,

which Jensen has always insisted are at least as significant as differences *between groups*. He believes the democratic goal of equal opportunity can now be achieved through computer technology by, for example, providing every child with a specific educational programme tailored to individual levels of ability and aptitude. He goes on to advocate policies of positive eugenics (such as are presently found in Singapore), although seeing a more urgent need to control population growth, especially in the Third World. Jensen still vigorously defends the notion of race as biological reality rather than cultural construction (Chapter 4). However, he does seem to have become more concerned with national rather than ethnic group differences.

Remarkably for one who has been so prolific, Jensen claims that 'it won't matter to me in the long run if what I have said in these interviews eventually turns out to be proven either true or false, right or wrong' (p.189). The important thing is that scientific research be 'allowed to advance unfettered'. A clue to understanding this seemingly modest disclaimer may be found in his acknowledgment of an issue now paramount in psychometric theory, that of the scientific value of IQ scales. Increasingly, it is being acknowledged that these scales differ significantly from physical scales, in that they do not represent absolute values – that is, they lack a true zero point and equal intervals throughout. Jensen speculates that the future for differential psychology may lie in response-time measures of cognitive processes in units of milliseconds, now measurable in brain research.

Jensen obliges himself to answer Miele's question, whether his whole life has been spent exploring a blind alley in science. His personal resolution is to concede that much of twentieth-century psychological research, to which he himself has been such a huge contributor, has in fact been misdirected. However, Jensen asserts, any error on his own part must be attributed to his reliance on the prevailing methods of intelligence measurement, and by no means to his having addressed a question which he insists remains eminently answerable – the relative contributions of nature and nurture to differences in ability.

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