

The concept of intelligence: a reply to Michael Hand

John Gingell*

University of Northampton, UK

Michael Hand's interesting analysis of the concept of intelligence crucially depends upon three assumptions: firstly, that there is an ordinary use of the term which, when applied to an individual is perfectly general and not context dependent. Secondly, that this use is best cashed in terms of aptitude. Thirdly, that the aptitude in question is to be explained in terms of theorizing. I shall argue in what follows that the first assumption may be true, but, if it is true, this presents a problem for Hand's analysis and not a path to a solution. That the second assumption is false but, even if it were true, it would sit badly with assumption one. And, finally, that the third assumption runs into too many difficulties to be acceptable.

I.

Hand claims, contra Ryle and his followers, that ordinary usage sanctions a use of 'intelligence' which does not have to be spelled out in terms of particular activities, e.g., intelligent at X, at Y, at Z. So we may say of someone that they are intelligent, simpliciter, with no thought of defining this further. This is probably correct, we do, sometimes, talk in such a way. However, it is also true, as Ryle claims, that very often our talk of intelligence is relative to particular activities. And the claim here is essentially twofold: that such talk either overtly or covertly refers to particular activities and that *an individual's performance over such activities can vary considerably*. So:

... the ingenious punster might be a silly car driver; the boy who copes well with intelligence tests (so called) might be a lame conversationalist, slow and unretentive at learning languages and easily outclassed in the school chess tournaments. (Ryle, 1974, pp. 54–55)

That we do talk in such a way and that such talk is supported by a common experience both seem to me to be incontrovertible facts about our world.

*The University of Northampton, Park Campus, Boughton Green Road, Northampton NN2 7AL, UK.
Email: John.Gingell@northampton.ac.uk

But, if this is so, this is a problem for Hand's analysis. If everyday speech allows two different ways of talking about intelligence then we cannot, as Hand seems to want to do, appeal to the accumulated wisdom present in such speech to tell us which use to prefer. What we can do, however, is ask about the type of evidence which would validate the different types of claim. With the use appealed to by Ryle this is, more-or-less, straightforward. The claim that *P* was intelligent at *X*, e.g., conversing, playing football, philosophy; would refer to the standards inherent in all of these activities and the ways in which the particular individual met such standards. And with Hand's preferred use? It is extremely difficult to see how this could be supported except by *exactly* the same type of evidence. To stand mute here would invite the accusation that the claim was empty of significant content. However, to claim that the given individual is intelligent at everything would, I suspect, be met by incredulity. If this is so, then it must be the case that even in ordinary language, the Rylean use is basic.

Nor is Hand's case saved by his notion that the intelligent footballer is simply demonstrating a general ability like aggression, generosity, or courage when playing football. Partly, because they are obvious cases where such intelligence is not general at all, i.e., the person is good at football, but not much else; and partly, because aggression, generosity and courage are also variable across performances, e.g., the aggressive footballer is a bashful lover, and the courageous soldier is a timid philosopher.

Ryle famously claimed that philosophy is haunted by the myth of the ghost in the machine. As far as ordinary speech is concerned, I suspect that this is haunted by the ghosts of those IQ tests which dominated our educational practice for 20 years.

II.

The second of Hand's claims is that the notion of general intelligence that he is referring to is to be explicated in terms of species of aptitude. He partly argues this to distinguish intelligence from the notion of competence which he sees as embedded in the Rylean account. As Ryle never claimed that intelligence is to be analysed in terms of competence—and, as far as I know, this is true of Winch and White as well—such a distinction is entirely by the way. Indeed, I am sure that all three would support the points made by Hand. But this still leaves Hand's main claim. And what is noteworthy about this is the obvious oddness of such a claim. To say of someone that they are intelligent simpliciter seems to make some kind of sense. To talk of someone having aptitude simpliciter seems to make no sense at all. Such a claim might be made elliptically when the context in question is understood, e.g., when you are discussing a person's ability at football, but all talk of aptitude cries out for application to particular contexts. Such a point is supported by Hand's talking of a species of aptitude. And it is notoriously the case that our aptitudes vary enormously from activity to activity. Of course, as Hand argues, such aptitudes may relate to more general activities, e.g., sport, rather than particular examples of such activities, e.g., football (Ryle makes the same point about intelligence, 1974, p. 55). But again they may not and the intelligent footballer may be an indifferent player at rugby and a terrible cricketer. But, even if the cluster thesis was generally correct, this is a world away from a perfectly general aptitude and therefore, in Hand's terms, a perfectly general intelligence.

III.

Nor is the matter helped when Hand spells out the aptitude he has in mind. The aptitude in question, he claims, is an aptitude for theorizing. Hand is careful to qualify his claim. The level of theorizing involved in different activities may vary and therefore an aptitude in it may only sometimes confer advantage. Also, there is no simple, generic aptitude here, but rather a family of interrelated aptitudes. But all such claims run into a multitude of objections, some of which follow, in no particular order.

Firstly, there are whole areas of life in which intelligent activity is possible but where theorizing seems completely out of place. Think, for instance, of the intelligent conversationalist. Would we expect such a person to have any kind of theory of conversation? What would such a theory possibly look like? A philosopher friend—and able conversationalist—once sent off for a course from a newspaper advertisement to ‘improve his conversation’. What came back was a set of instructions for the sort of behaviour that sends people fleeing from parties and saloon bars, i.e., to become an ‘expert’ on some topic and talk about it on every possible occasion. Some thinkers such as Oakshott (1967) see any attempt to reduce intelligent practice in an area of complex human endeavour to theory as doomed to failure.

Secondly, it is a manifest fact that some people are bad at theorizing about activities and good in their practice (and vice versa). It would be unmannerly, to say the least, to reserve the accolade of intelligence—or aptitude—for only those who excel in the theorizing.

Thirdly, theorizing, whether this is a particular activity or family of particular activities, is something that can be done intelligently or stupidly. Therefore, it cannot be identified with intelligence.

Lastly, as Ryle claims (1990, p. 31) intelligent practice invariably precedes theory. Aristotle was able to formulate the rules of reasoning and Walton the rules of angling because they could draw on their experience of people doing such things intelligently and stupidly. Without such practice there is literally nothing to construct theories about.

If the arguments of the three sections above are sound then it must be the case that Hand’s analysis is, at the most, unproven.

Notes on contributor

John Gingell is the Course Leader in Philosophy at the University of Northampton and the author of several books concerning the philosophy of education.

References

- Oakshott, M. (1967) Rationalism in politics, in: M. Oakshott (Ed.) *Rationalism in politics and other essays* (London, Methuen).
- Ryle, G. (1974) Intelligence and the logic of the nature–nurture issue: a reply to J. P. White, *Annual Proceedings of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain*, pp. 52–60.
- Ryle, G. (1990) *The concept of mind* (Harmondsworth, Penguin) (original work published 1949).