

## Can Adults Think?

Stop And Think. Have You Changed Your Mind In The Past Ten Years? These Tests Will Tell You How Much Of A Mental Giant You Are.

By Mortimer J. Adler

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It may be true that you can't teach an old dog new tricks. But men are not dogs and ideas are not tricks. The legend that grownups cannot learn so easily as children—or can't learn at all—has hung on for a long time. It may have comforted many a lazy adult who preferred movies or the radio to the painful process of thinking. But it just isn't so.

### *Never to Old to Learn*

The legend is reduced to a myth by scientific evidence on adults' ability to learn. Doctor Thorndike, of Columbia, has come to the conclusion after painstaking research, that while the ability to learn seems to reach its height at twenty-five and drops until at forty-five it corresponds to what it was at eighteen, the change from eighteen to forty-five is so slight that there is no reason for diffidence, on the part of those in the prime of life, about undertaking new branches of learning."—He estimates the decrease after twenty-five at no more than 1 per cent a year. Professors Sorenson and Price, of Minnesota, conducting further investigations of the problem, found that "the decline in the mental abilities of adults is functional; it results from disuse and not from organic degeneration."

Even if there were no scientific evidence, we ought to know just by common sense that people don't stop thinking at eighteen or

twenty-five or forty-live—or at least they don't have to stop thinking. What nonsense that phrase, "the prime of life," would be if it referred to the period when men and women no longer had the ability to think. Now it is obvious that anyone who can think can learn. Anyone who stops thinking stops learning. And thinking would be a funny thing, indeed, if it were something only the young could do, or do well.

But the myth persists that adults cannot learn, or at least that they do not do much learning as the years overtake them. It is not a myth concocted by children to humiliate their elders. It is a story we adults tell about ourselves, perhaps to avoid a frank confession of guilt. For all of us, if we are at all honest about ourselves, know that we don't do much thinking, and hence very little real learning, in the course of the hurried years. And most of us gradually get to the point where we resign ourselves to letting others do the thinking for us.

The mind does not grow weaker just by aging, but by disuse. If, as a matter of fact, our minds did weaken with the years that land us in the prime of life, we could not do anything about it, however much we regretted that this was Nature's way of doing things. But that isn't the case. The decline in our mental abilities is something of our own doing. It is something we can prevent, just as we can prevent flabby muscles by exercising them, or a ragged game of golf by practicing our strokes.

### ***Mental Calisthenics***

The familiar mental tests which are given to school children to measure their I.Q.'s are a way of detecting the amounts of native intelligence with which they were gifted at birth. There are other tests which measure the amount of educational accomplishment at various levels of schooling. And there are quizzes in books and on radio programs by which adults measure the stock of assorted information they have gathered from the passing show. But none of these tests measures the mental condition of adults—the state of the equipment with which a grown man or woman is supposed to be doing his daily thinking about the questions of the hour, about his own life or his country's. The kind of test I am thinking of is one which would tell each of us what we have been doing with our mind since we left school or college, whether we have been using it actively, whether we have been improving the talents we were born with.

I should like to propose a test by which adults can measure their own I.Q.'s. By "I.Q." here I mean the "Improvement Quotient," not the "Intelligence Quotient"—the ability we have acquired, not the

native ability with which we started. The thing to be discovered is not whether an adult knows more or different facts from those he memorized to graduate from school or college; but, rather, whether he can think better about any of the major problems of human life. We can certainly be sure of one thing: if he doesn't think differently about these problems, he cannot be thinking better. There is no improvement without change, though, of course, since change may be for better or for worse, there can be change without improvement.

The first part of the test, therefore, is a way of finding out whether you have changed your mind. It invites you to consider some basic questions, and to see if, in answering them you give the same answer you would have given ten or twenty years ago or, shall we say, at the moment of graduation from school. Compare your answers now with those you remember having given before. Are they different or the same? If they're the same, are they at the same depth of understanding, or has your mind changed in the sense that you now know what you stabbed at many years ago? If they're different, can you give the reasons for their being different? If you can't, you may have only changed your prejudices, and that would hardly be improvement.

***Now what's your answer?***

Take questions like the following—don't forget that the important thing in answering each question is the *why*—and test yourself, or, perhaps, your friends.

1. Is freedom good? Is it good in itself or only as a condition for getting other good things? Is it the greatest good?
2. Does God exist? Did God create the world?
3. How does man differ from other animals? Does man have an immortal destiny?
4. What is truth, and how do we know it when we see it? Is anything either right or wrong for all people at all times; and, if there is such a thing, how does one discover it?
5. Are pleasure and pain standards for judging whether a line of conduct should be pursued or avoided? Are there any other standards? Are they better than the standards of pleasure and pain?
6. Is that government best which governs least? Is all good government self-government?

7. Is war always wrong; and, if it isn't, under what conditions is it right?
8. Are all men created equal? Is every man created with a right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness? Can he lose that right?
9. Should all men work together on the same basis, or should they work, some as masters and some as servants? Would you rather be a well-fed slave or a starving freeman? Should there be any limit to the acquisition, possession or transmission of private property, and, if there should be, what limits should he set, and by whom?
10. In what does human happiness consist, and how does it differ, if at all, from the happiness of other kinds of creatures?

These are some of the hardest questions men can ask themselves, and all men ask them at one time or another, though they may use other words to do so. If the education we received in school was any good at all, we probably learned some answers to questions of this sort. However superficially we held these answers, the teachers we had and the books we read did something to form our minds. Now the question is whether we have done anything for ourselves since then, whether through experience, through facing practical problems, through further reading, we have deepened the formation of our minds by the continued exercise of our mental faculties.

Any adult who answers these ten questions simply by remembering—perhaps vaguely—what he once thought about these problems long, long ago has obviously done very little for himself in the way of thinking. Even if the remembered answers are true in fact, they were not, as given by the schoolboy, profound or penetrating. The things that are said in a schoolboy bull session may contain lucky flashes of insight, but they are seldom tested by much experience. The answers we give today should be either different or differently understood. That is the minimum we can expect in the way of mental improvement. Through all the benefits of experience and insight which age is supposed to confer, we should certainly have changed our mind on these fundamental questions.

But change of mind is not enough. It must be change for the better. The second part of our test, therefore, must discover the quality of the change. This is much more difficult to measure than the mere occurrence of change itself. Of course, one standard we might use is the criterion of truth itself. A mind has changed for the better if

the answers it now gives to fundamental questions are true where before they were false, or if they are closer to the truth. But this criterion cannot be used unless we can get everybody to agree beforehand about what the truth is in answer to each of these questions. And if it were possible for all of us to agree in this way, we should all know the whole truth and there would be no room for mental improvement in any of our minds. Hence we must take a different tack.

### ***How Much Have You Grown Mentally?***

The standard I propose for measuring the quality of mental change is simply this: *new ideas*. The answers we give to fundamental questions can be better or worse in two ways. They are better if they are truer; but they are also better if we understand more deeply whatever answer we give, if we see around its corners, if it is not a flat affirmation or negation, but a complicated system of perspectives through which we see the many related aspects of the matter before us.

Now since we cannot make truth the criterion of mental improvement in a *self-administered* test of this sort, let us use this other standard. This is in a sense the minimum standard I mentioned before—our answers need not be different, but they should be differently understood. Mere difference in the answers indicates mere change, but a difference in the way we understand any answer we give—whether it be the same or different—is a sign of improvement. And though we cannot employ the other criterion, we should never forget that the ultimate standard of improvement is getting nearer to the truth.

Look over the list of questions again, and take stock of the ideas you employ now in answering them. If the ideas you summon up now are the same old ideas you had in college, the signs certainly don't point to much mental activity in the intervening years. In mental, as in military affairs, you cannot get very far by standing pat. The mind which has slept for years behind the same set of ideas will find itself, like the French behind the Maginot Line, outflanked.

In any group of people you can always spot the man who has been actively thinking about the subject under discussion. He dances all around the others. He has a dozen ideas to their one, and their one isn't very good because it is probably the same old idea, lame and halt from years of disuse.

A mind cannot be improved except by its own activity, and mental activity not only produces new ideas but keeps the old ones alive

and vigorous by putting them to use. Taking count of your new ideas should, therefore, serve to measure the amount of mental activity which is basic to an adult's Improvement Quotient.

Let me be sure you understand what I mean by a "new idea." If you understand what I mean you will never be in doubt as to whether you have had one recently. A new idea is like a new pair of glasses which completely transforms the whole scene. The things you squinted at before now suddenly become clearer in outline. Take, for example, the idea of monotheism or the idea of evolution, the idea of democracy or the idea of communism. These are ideas which transformed the world and everything in it for those whose minds they changed. When minds are changed by such ideas, they experience growth of the most fundamental sort. Horizons are enlarged, perspectives altered, and almost every fundamental question is seen in a new light. If you have achieved a new idea of this sort, you will not be answering the ten questions I listed in the same way you did before.

There are, of course, people who have long harbored such basic ideas in a dead way. They, too, would have their minds changed radically—and for the better—if these ideas were brought to life, activated by an effort really to understand what they mean; vitalized, in short, by the activity of a mind using them, not simply a tongue playing with the words which express them.

### ***How New are Your Ideas?***

To separate the two parts of this test of adult mental improvement, it might be well to consider another set of questions. The first set of questions is useful for discovering whether you have changed your mind at all with the years. But if, now, we take some questions on which it is highly probable that you have not changed your answer since you were in school, you will be able to pay exclusive attention to the other factor in mental change: the deeper understanding of the same answer; achieved by the use of *new* ideas resulting from mature mental activity about the matter.

1. Are the sexes equal in their powers of reasoning and judgment?  
In abstract thought and practical deliberation?.
2. Is it better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all?
3. Should parents sacrifice themselves for the well-being of their children? Within what limits?
4. Is there real progress in human affairs? In everything, or only in some things? If in some, which?


5. Are instinct and emotion better guides for conduct than reason and knowledge?

It is not unlikely, I say, that a man will hold the same views about these matters which he defended many years ago in a bull session or on a college debating team. But all the experience that comes with the years, the seriousness and responsibility of mind which are born of suffering life's ordeals, not to mention the reading and talking which an adult has had the opportunity to do—all these things should make a difference in the quality of our answer. If we do not have an altered vision of the truth, once vaguely apprehended, now clearly focused, what have we done with our time? What use have we put our experience to, what advantage have we drawn from our suffering, what kind of books have we read and how have we read them, if the orbit of our thinking today is limited by the same small circle of ideas we had in school?

Anyone who does not like either set of questions I have proposed, for the purpose of measuring mental improvement in adults, can easily make up other questions to suit himself. It makes no difference whether he picks questions to which he gives a different answer now, or the same answer as before, for the thing he should be trying to find out is *how* his mind has changed with respect to relevant ideas. If the light which ideas can throw upon the matters being reconsidered is no greater today than once it was, he should be prepared to admit, to himself if to no one else, that he has grown older in years only.

On the arch of the assembly hall in the New York public school I attended, this maxim was engraved: "We grow in deeds, not years." That is only a half truth, and the more important half is that we grow in thoughts, for without new ideas there is no growth in the human spirit, either in deeds or in years. And just as the growth of the body requires food but cannot actually be accomplished without the exercise of our organs, so feeding a mind experience and books avails nothing without the assimilative work of mental activity. The digestive juices of the mind are the ideas it is able to secrete.

So long as a man lives, and his body is in normal health, he can change his mind. For the very essence of life in its normal functioning is the capacity for change. In answer to those who delude themselves with the myth that adults cannot learn, I insist that all of us can change our minds, and for the better, so long as we have the power to think. I go even further, for I believe that an adult who *uses* his power to think can change his mind much more fundamentally than a schoolboy, precisely because he is a man and not a child—mature through experience, enriched through

suffering, stable in character, serious in purpose. In the normal span of a healthy life, we do not lose the mental power we were born with, nor does it diminish. But those of us who suppose that learning and growth are the privileges of the immature forfeit the power they have by failing to use it. 

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