



## What is Intelligence?

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Take a moment to consider a person you know who you think of as “intelligent.” What exactly is it about them that distinguishes them from others who you wouldn’t characterize that way?

Consider the following. Which best describes the person you’re thinking about?

- The ability to be self-aware
- Skill with logic, reasoning, rational thinking, numeracy and planning
- Creativity
- A high capacity for learning and adapting
- The aptitude to solve real problems in the environment
- Maturity, social skills, interpersonal awareness
- Comprehension; the ability to process information well
- Knowing how to live the best life
- Accumulated knowledge gained by effort
- Talents and gifts that are inborn

Looking at the above, it’s evident how some might apply to non-human intelligence such as those of animals, artificial intelligences or even plants and simple organisms that lack a central nervous system. Do you need to possess all these characteristics to be intelligent? Could you be intelligent without showing any of them?

As you can see, defining human intelligence is far from straightforward. In fact, all the above have been suggested as different dimensions of the property we call intelligence.



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## The History of Intelligence

The Latin verb *intelligere* means perception and comprehension, however for ancient scholars the term also implied a metaphysical and moral sophistication. Ancient philosophers and scholars of the Middle Ages spoke of intelligence as the soul's capacity to strive to his highest end, or to live a virtuous life. Modern philosophers have abandoned this teleological approach, however, in favor of one that emphasizes understanding.

The definition of intelligence has changed according to the historical and political environment of the people who sought to study it. For example, Francis Galton was an early pioneer of cataloguing human diversity and one of the first to suggest that some underlying ability could influence outward behaviors. However, his focus on heritable traits like skull shape and size would likely seem alien to the modern psychology student!

In the modern paradigm of psychometrics, human intelligence is conceptualized as largely intellectual and cognitive. Over the decades, numerous theories have led to the development of tests designed to quantify some underlying quality called intelligence. However, a single definition for intelligence remains elusive.

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