

# CURRENT OPINION

November, 1921

p. 640

## INTELLIGENCE OF NEGROES AS COMPARED WITH WHITES

**A** CAREFUL study of the mentality of the black man in America has been made by Dr. George Oscar Ferguson, Jr., of the University of Virginia. His conclusion, as stated in an article in the *Scientific Monthly*, is that "psychological study of the negro indicates that he will never be the mental equal of the white race."

This conclusion applies to the racial average. So far as individual attainment is concerned, we are told that few whites have greater intelligence than the highest of the negroes, and few negroes have less intelligence than the dullest of the whites. What keeps the racial average of the blacks down is the fact that the proportion of those in the higher grades of intelligence is small in comparison with the proportion of whites. Yet there are some negroes in the highest grades.

There is, in any comparative estimate, we are reminded, great overlapping in intelligence between whites and negroes. There is great variation in ability among the members of any large group of whites. Also, it is probable that there are no two large occupational classes of whites which differ so greatly in ability that there is no overlapping between them when comparative diagrams or statistics are drawn up. It is possible to state the difference between the average negro and the average white in terms of the difference between the average abilities of a certain occupational group of whites and that of another group. That is to say, the difference in intelligence between the professional class and the clerical class of whites, or between the clerical and the semi-skilled labor classes, is not far from equivalent to the difference between whites and negroes as groups. The intellectual difference between the average policeman or fireman and the average doctor or lawyer, or the difference between the average street-car employee or salesgirl and the average elementary teacher or small business man is not far from equivalent to the difference between the average white and the average black.

It is a common opinion, says Dr. Ferguson, that in the emotional and dynamic sides of life the negro differs from the whites to a greater degree than in intellect proper. His emotions are generally believed to be strong and volatile in their manifestations; instability of character is ascribed to him; it is contended that he lacks foresight and persistence, that he is



improvident and content with immediate satisfactions, that he has small power of serious initiative and that he lacks ambition. Along with high emotionality and instability of character, defective morality is ascribed to him, and the statistical records of crime and sexual immorality are cited in this connection.

Dr. Ferguson does not dispute this common opinion, but he seems to entertain the belief that the emotional and dynamic qualities ascribed to the negro are due to his demonstrable intellectual deficiency rather than to the inherent strength of his active tendencies. Pronounced and changing expressions of emotion, improvidence of character and a tendency to immoral conduct are not unallied. They are all due to uncontrolled impulse. And a deficient development of the more purely intellectual functions may produce all three. "Where the implications of ideas are not apprehended, where thought is not lively and fertile, where meanings and consequences are not grasped, the need for the control of impulse will not be felt. This is strikingly evident in cases of feeble-mindedness."

That mulattoes have greater ability than pure negroes is borne out by the results of mental tests. Skin color is not an accurate index of the amount of white blood in an individual. When, however, considerable numbers of negroes in the schools are classified on the basis of skin color and compared age by age or grade by grade, it is found that those of lighter color obtain higher average scores on intelligence tests than those who are darker. "While mulattoes as a group have greater intellectual capacity than pure negroes, the overlapping in ability between the two classes is very great. It is greater than the overlapping between mulattoes and whites, since the greater number of mulattoes have a preponderance of negro blood and since probably a majority of them are descendants of inferior elements of the general population." According to the relative size of the total groups of mulattoes and pure negroes, there should be three or four times as many persons of marked attainment in the latter as in the former. But there are at least as many mulattoes as pure negroes among the leaders of the race in this country.

The negro, when compared with the white, seems to have relatively greater capacity to deal with the concrete, the tangible and the practical than with the abstract, the symbolical and the theoretical. He is highly capable in sensory and motor capacities and in native retentiveness. His shortcomings are logical and rational and more purely intellectual. He is well equipped for manual and industrial training and for acquiring the simpler skills. It is a common observation of teachers that colored children excel in handwriting and in rote memory work. The nature of the mental capacity of the negro lends sanction to the movement to render his schools less literary and "cul-



tural" and "more practical" and vocational. "But since very able colored persons are found in every large group of negroes, tho the proportion of such individuals is much smaller than among whites, opportunities for advanced and professional education should be open to them. The widely-held doctrine that the negro's mental growth ceases at adolescence finds no sanction in experimental studies of his ability. And there is no reliable evidence that the variability of negroes above and below their racial type is appreciably less than the variability of white men."

There is a point at which intellect seems to shade off into some other trait, like good taste, or spirituality, or even talent. To what extent the mental traits are indispensable to a display of these qualities remains uncertain. The negro reveals the qualities now and then when his blood is mixed with that of the white man, when he is a mulatto or a quadroon, or whatever one prefers to call the mixture. It is in the display of these traits that the colored man ceases to be merely a mimic of the white man. Perhaps a considerable proportion of the display of the intelligence of the negro is mimicry. He finds himself obliged to copy the white man in many things which, in the opinion of the colored man, ought not to be copied. The negro has to make many adjustments. This must be remembered in any comparative estimate of his intelligence. How many white men would reveal so high an order of talent if they had to act, to dress and to talk like the black man in Africa?