

## The moral sensitivity of gifted children and the evolution of society

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### Abstract

*In this article, I use a combination of clinical observations and theoretical propositions to demonstrate that the cognitive complexity and certain personality traits of the gifted create unique experiences and awarenesses that separate them from others. A central feature of the gifted experience is their moral sensitivity, which is essential to the welfare of the entire society. These inner qualities of the gifted are overlooked in most of the formulations of giftedness and talent. Giftedness defined as asynchronous development, a phenomenological approach, focuses on the inner world of gifted children, and stresses their vulnerability in society. I conclude by emphasizing the relationship between abstract reasoning, complexity, moral values and the evolution of society.*

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*Antoine (age 6) is a worrier. He bites his nails, he loses sleep and if he is really worried about something he finds it hard to eat or sleep. These worries can be the ozone, endangered animals, NASA funding. I think this sensitivity comes from an in-depth understanding of what the actual consequences of his concerns can be. He knows that if we do not protect a species that it will no longer be in existence so his children and their children will never know what they were like. That's what makes him worry.... He is my righter of wrongs; truth, justice and fairness are his requirements.*

When Antoine was nine months old, he and his mother participated in a child development study. The examiner asked Antoine to pick up a doll and spank it three times. He refused. After the third request, he glared at the examiner, grabbed the doll, gently turned it over and spanked it the required three times. Then he hugged the doll tightly to comfort it and would not give it back to the examiner. Antoine is highly gifted (IQ 150+).

Antoine [a pseudonym] is one of over 1,800 children whose stories are recorded in clinical files at the Gifted Development Center. His sensitivity and empathy, surfacing as early as nine months, appear to be innate. When parents are asked to describe their gifted children, "sensitive" appears more frequently than any other trait (Silverman, 1983). Sensitivity takes many forms: their feelings are easily hurt; they are compassionate toward others, protective, and easily moved to tears; they feel others' feelings, respond strongly to criticism, and tend to react strongly to light, noise, textures, air pollution, and certain foods. Perfectionism and intensity also appear with great regularity in parental descriptions of gifted children (Silverman, 1993a). Another personality trait that characterizes at least half of the gifted population is introversion (Dauber & Benbow, 1990; Gallagher, 1990; Hoehn & Bireley, 1988; Myers, 1962; Silverman, 1986). Introverts have deep feelings, are reflective and introspective, and withdraw into themselves rather than acting aggressively toward others. While there are many more descriptors that apply to gifted children, these four — sensitivity, perfectionism, intensity and introversion — have particular developmental, psychological, and social salience. In combination, they demonstrate the emotional complexity of the gifted. Their origin and significance are made clearer within the context of Dabrowski's theory.

### Dabrowski's Theory of Emotional Development

Kazimierz Dabrowski (1964, 1967, 1972), a Polish psychologist and psychiatrist, based his theory of emotional development, (the Theory of Positive Disintegration) on the study of sensitive, nonaggressive, highly intelligent, and creative individuals. He found such individuals oppressed in societies oriented toward competition, power, status, and wealth. Dabrowski postulated that certain innate response patterns provide a foundation for the development of higher order values in adult life. Through neurological examinations, Dabrowski (1972) documented that creatively gifted individuals had more pronounced responses to various types of stimuli. He called this phenomenon "nadpobudliwosc," ("superstimulatability"); it has been translated as "overexcitability." This powerful neural excitation comes in five varieties: psychomotor, sensual, imaginal, intellectual and emotional. The overexcitabilities (OEs) may be thought of as an abundance of physical energy, heightened acuity of the senses, vivid imagination, intellectual curiosity and drive, and a deep capacity to care. Individuals may experience one or more of these OEs at varying degrees of intensity. The greater the strength of the OEs, the greater the developmental potential for following an ethical, compassionate path in adulthood (Lysy & Piechowski, 1983; Piechowski, 1979). Numerous studies have shown the gifted to have stronger OEs than nonselected groups (see Nelson, 1989; Silverman, 1993b; and Miller, Silverman & Falk, in press, for reviews).

Sensitivity, perfectionism, intensity and introversion are all aspects of emotional overexcitability: “emotional ties and attachments, concern for others (empathy), sensitivity in relationships”; “self-evaluation and self-judgment, feelings of inadequacy and inferiority”; “intensity of feeling: e.g., extremes of emotion, complex emotions and feelings”; and “inhibition (timidity, shyness)” (Piechowski, 1979, adapted in Silverman, 1993b, p. 14). Therefore, according to Dabrowski’s theory, gifted children who exhibit high degrees of sensitivity are endowed with high emotional OE. Perfectionism begins as a facet of emotional OE, but can evolve into the drive for self-perfection propelling the individual toward higher level development (Silverman, 1990). Intensity, while a strong indicator of emotional OE, has at times been used synonymously with all the OEs (Kitano, 1990; Lind, 1993). Introversion, often perceived negatively in our extraverted society, is actually a developmentally positive trait since it indicates the capacity to inhibit aggression.

Dabrowski (1979/1994) described overexcitable people as: “delicate, gentle, sensitive, empathic, nonaggressive, industrious, wise though unsophisticated, never brutal, often inhibited, likely to withdraw into themselves rather than retaliate, having deep feelings, idealistic” (pp. 87-90). He felt that, because of their sensitivity and integrity, these individuals are capable of bringing humanity to a higher set of values, but that they are at great risk of being destroyed by society because of their inherent differences. The values Dabrowski (1979/1994) considered indispensable to harmonious living include: an empathic attitude toward others; tolerance (not aggression); responsibility for others and for self; a just attitude (treating everybody by the same standards); helping each other; giving thought to the harmed and humiliated, to invalids, to the sick, to the ineffectual and those devastated by their own loneliness; truthfulness; authenticity; and (9) just social care. However, those who have these values are often pushed aside in an insensitive society, and treated as if they were maladjusted. Dabrowski considered the so-called neurotics with high ideals “a mine of social treasure. If their emotionality, talents, interests, and sensitivity were discovered at an early age, society and science would profit” (pp. 87-88).

### **Moral Sensitivity and the Gifted**

The values endorsed by Dabrowski are seen frequently in parental descriptions of gifted children:

R is honest — will tell the truth even if he gets in trouble; sensitive — shows concern for others’ feelings; sensitive — easily hurt; has a clear sense of right and wrong...

P is quite sensitive to the feelings of others and has a well developed sense of justice. She befriends the outcasts in her class and will not tolerate cruelty from other children. She comments to me if she feels her teacher is not treating children consistently.

N is very sensitive and she is easily upset by criticism or by ignoring her suggestions. She is very mature for her age. She is compassionate, and very aware of other people’s feelings and needs... of fairness... of moral issues and values. She forgives easily those who have offended her.

A has a world awareness and consciousness and a well-developed sense of morals and values that goes beyond rules. She thinks about what is right in this situation, this circumstance.

B has a strong sense of right and wrong. It almost seems that she came this way. We have been guides and examples of strong principles but B knows what is good and what is not by instinct.

Having observed the development of gifted children for over 35 years, I am continuously impressed by the moral sensitivity of this group. Many parents (such as B’s mother above) have reported that their gifted children seemed to have an innate sense of right and wrong. We have dozens of cases on record of gifted children fighting injustice, befriending and protecting handicapped children, conserving resources, responding to others’ emotional needs, becoming terribly upset if a classmate is humiliated, becoming vegetarian in meat-eating families, crying at the violence in cartoons, being perplexed at why their classmates push in line, refusing to fight back when attacked because they considered all forms of violence — including self-defense — morally wrong, writing letters to the President to try to end the Gulf War, and writing poems of anguish at the cruelty in the world. I have found that the higher the child’s IQ, the earlier moral concerns develop and the more profound effect they have on the child. But it usually takes maturity before the child can translate moral sensitivity into consistent moral action.

The early leaders in the field recognized the moral component of giftedness. Lewis Terman (1925) studied the emotional stability, social adjustment, and moral character of the gifted because he recognized that all of these facets of development are interwoven with advanced cognition. That gifted individuals have complex inner lives, early ethical concerns, and heightened awareness of the world, was apparent to Leta Stetter Hollingworth (1942) as well. Many subsequent researchers have found evidence of advanced moral reasoning in this population (Boehm, 1962; dark & Hankins, 1985; Drews, 1972; Galbraith, 1985; Gross, 1993; Janos, Robinson & Lunneborg, 1989; Karnes & Brown, 1981; Martinson, 1961; Passow, 1988; Roeper, 1988; Simmons & Zumpf, 1986; Vare, 1979).

Social psychologist, David Loye (1990, 1993), drawing from psychology, sociology, archeology, history, evolutionary studies, and brain research — particularly the work of Paul MacLean (1973, 1990) biological basis of moral sensitivity. According to Loye (1993), the potential for moral sensitivity is imbedded in a prehuman and human evolutionary sequence; it seems to have originated with the emergence of the sex drive, then expanded with the appearance of parental caring at the reptilian level and sociability at the mammalian level, culminating in full blown moral sensitivity with the human capacities for greater emotionality and higher intelligence largely governed by frontal lobe development. From this perspective, moral sensitivity is believed to be essential to the preservation of the species and appears to increase with higher intelligence (Loye, 1990).

Amplifying the work with Riane Eisler (1987), Loye describes two basic forms of social organization with opposing moral frameworks: a primary *partnership* mode involving equality, freedom, moral sensitivity and peaceful relationships, and a later, corrupted *dominator* mode that relies heavily on competition, power, domination and moral insensitivity. Loye views the re-establishment of the morality of the partnership mode as an evolutionary necessity if we are to avoid species' extinction. Theorists counted among those who detected these two worlds of morality are Kant (1788/1952), Piaget (1932), Fromm (1947), Freud (1966), Dabrowski (1967) and Gilligan (1982).

Csikszentmihalyi (1993), in *The Evolving Self*, also detects two worlds: one that leads toward harmony by the cooperative use of energy and one that leads toward entropy by the exploitive use of energy. He substantiates the evolutionary thrust of moral concern and explicates the role of complexity in morality:

*6) There are two opposite tendencies in evolution: changes that lead toward harmony (i.e., the ability to obtain energy through cooperation, and through the utilisation of unused or wasted energy); and those that lead toward entropy (or ways of obtaining energy for one's purposes through exploiting other organisms, thereby causing conflict and disorder.)* (p. 155, italics in original)

The final principle of evolution is: *(7) Harmony is usually achieved by evolutionary changes involving an increase in an organism's complexity, that is, an increase in both differentiation and integration. Differentiation refers to the degree to which a system (i.e., an organ such as the brain, or an individual, a family, a corporation, a culture, or humanity as a whole) is composed of parts that differ in structure or function from one another. Integration refers to the extent to which the different parts communicate and enhance one another's goals. A system that is more differentiated and integrated than another is said to be more complex,* (p. 156, italics in original)

Reminiscent of Dabrowski, although Dabrowski's theory is not referenced in his work, Csikszentmihalyi (1993) goes on to say; Despite huge differences in emphasis, and striking variations in the metaphors used to explain why some things are right and others wrong, the great moral systems across the world are congruent...in essential respects.... Models of human development still stress the importance of emancipation from instinctual responses, from selfishness, then from conformity to society standards, then from excessive individuality, until at the most advanced levels the autonomous individual ends up blending his or her interests with those of ever larger groups.... All ethical systems channeling thought and behavior away from the past and into the future. The past tradition, the desires of the self future compassionate, more in tune with the reality that transcends our needs necessity weaker, for it is an abstraction, a vision of what *might* be. (P.161)

From Dabrowski's and Csikszentmihalyi's work, it becomes apparent that high moral values require a complex organism with a facility for abstract reasoning. High intelligence is synonymous with abstract reasoning ability and complexity of thought. It is easy to see why individuals with high intelligence are perceived as a threat in highly competitive dominator societies. It is feared that intelligence provides an unfair advantage in the contest for power. However, within more cooperative partnership social contexts, the high intelligence and talents of any member would be seen as a benefit to all. The gentle souls described by Dabrowski are often victimized in dominator cultures, and those who stand firm against injustice are truly a threat to the entire power structure because they can envision a fairer, more humane society in which power is shared. Gifted children, both male and female, seem to have the moral and emotional sensitivity required to help society evolve from a dominator to a partnership mode. Following are some examples of these qualities in very young gifted children.

When Sara Jane was two-and-a-half years old, she saw a television report of an earthquake that hit Russia, leaving countless people homeless. With tears in her eyes, she brought her piggy bank to her mother and said, "Mama, send my money." The following Christmas, at the age of three, Sara Jane requested that her presents be given to needy children: "I have everything I need. I wish you would give my presents to some little girl or boy who won't get any" (Silverman, 1993c, p. 313). At age six, Sara Jane contacted a nearby Soup Kitchen to find out what was needed right before Christmas and wrote a letter to her school community requesting donations of specific foods, soap, toothbrushes, shampoo, and gifts for poor children:



*If you can earn the money to donate a gift/or a poor child, think of how many children will be happy on this holiday. Please try to bring in a small gift that is wrapped and please put a tag on the gift telling exactly when the present is so they will know who should get this gift. You can help make a child's holiday much happier. Please bring food and a small gift by December 15.*

A four-year-old boy who was assessed at the Gifted Development Center was described by his father as an "incredible peacemaker," able to keep harmony in groups as large as 19 of all different ages:

*A is an exceptionally gentle and kind boy. I have never seen him hit or push and, in fact, have had to teach him that it is not good to let his little brother hit him... He is extremely loving (e.g., he sings, "I'm so glad when Daddy comes home" every day to me). He daily praises my wife and me for taking care of his baby brother. He has an intense love of games and frequently seeks out adults to play with him. When he plays with his friends, he will help them find the best move in a game and deliberately lose is easily upset if he believes someone else has been treated unfairly (e.g., was sobbing because someone had taken his friend's toy crying). (Silverman, 1993a, p. 63)*

Another parent described her nine-year-old daughter as sensitive to the feelings of others "to a degree that almost defied belief." Kay can't be convinced "to do anything she perceives as wrong, unsafe, or boring." From an early age, Kay "exhibited an unusually keen awareness of the world around her, particularly as it relates to the feelings and needs of others." She often seemed "burdened by the weight of knowledge she has not had the emotional maturity to deal with" (Silverman, 1993a,p.63).

Mark, at the age of nine, picked fruits and vegetables one summer to sell in his neighborhood so that he could earn money to donate to the homeless. This was his own idea, not inspired by teachers or parents. Matt (age 6 1/2) was described by his mother as showing unusual sensitivity to global events and death at a very young age. "While he wants to know all the whys about these things, his sleep will be disturbed when he has the information. He does not seem fearful" times talking with Matt is like talking with an adult with a child's perspective." Brett, at the age of eight, had to learn through his teachers, parents and counselor that "kids don't always mean what they say" because he expected children to be honest and to do what they said they would do.

This is not to say that all gifted children are morally advanced. There are some children who have been emotionally damaged by neglect, abuse, insensitivity or lack of understanding. Victimized by the dominator system, they don the psychological armoring of dominator insensitivity, and perpetuate that insensitivity (Loye, in preparation). An emotionally damaged gifted youth may be of greater danger to society than a young person with less ability, because this individual has a greater intellectual capacity to put in the service of self-aggrandizement. There are also gifted children who are "onesided" in their development, who have been allowed to develop their specific talents without equal attention to their social and emotional development.

In a society in which dominator principles have prevailed for thousands of years, it would be extremely difficult for a child, no matter how gifted, to resist enculturation. Concepts of power, violence and exploitation become imbedded in the child's understanding of the world. Lovecky (1994) writes:

*My own work with gifted children also suggests unusual moral and social concerns. Both boys and girls worry about war, the environment, the homeless, poverty, crime and drugs. And yet, for many gifted boys, there is also a fascination with violence.... In fact, many of the gifted boys I have questioned see violence as the only solution to interpersonal conflicts. Both the influence of peers and of the media around them appear to place gifted children, particularly boys, in conflict with their innermost feelings and judgments. To continue with the generous, compassionate and altruistic responses of early childhood places many gifted boys at considerable risk for peer rejection and ridicule. They are too vulnerable this way, so they often conceal the moral side of themselves behind the same invulnerability modeled for them by others; that is, they wall off and deny compassionate responses to others, (p. 3)*

While moral sensitivity appears to be correlated with giftedness in early childhood, it is in danger of being snuffed out or buried through environmental exposure, especially exposure to the inexorable media blitz which glorifies domination, even in children's cartoons. By the middle grades, morally aware children, especially boys, seem to face two choices: become victims or prove themselves by becoming part of the dominator system.

A mother writes:

*While he is caring and sensitive to the feelings of others, his own feelings are easily hurt. J's eyes would, and still do, flood with tears at any injustice, or when his feelings were hurt, before being "socialized." He learned early in school that you had to be "tough." J cried when he learned that the earth and ozone layer were being destroyed by pollution*





*and that the rainforests were being cut down and that his parents would die because they smoked... He quickly learned when class got boring, he could be sent to the principal's office just by becoming disruptive. He liked it there. It was so much more interesting...*

*I began his school years as an extremely sensitive child, and as a result of his experiences at school and "socialization" is becoming "desensitized." It saddens me to watch this happen. (T. Csanady, personal communication, May 5, 1994)*

In his work with highly sensitive clients, Dabrowski (1964) learned of the deep-seated feelings of shame, guilt, and moral inadequacy carried by those who had not been able to live up to their moral ideals. These overwhelming feelings of moral failure proved to be the first step in the transformation of the personality toward higher level development unshakable values. In the first stages of higher level development, the individual begins to evaluate his or her behavior against an inner ideal. Tension is experienced between "what is" and "what ought to be" (Dabrowski, with Piechowski, 1977, p. 42). As inner conflict intensifies, empathy deepens, and the person exhibits "positive maladjustment, [a] protest against...standards and attitudes of one's social environment which are incompatible with one's growing awareness of higher values" (Dabrowski, with Piechowski, 1977, p. 46).

In spite of the powerful force of enculturation, Dabrowski (1964) and Maslow (1968) remind us that there are those who transcend their cultural conditioning to become self-actualizers and moral leaders. Studies of moral exemplars give strong indications that these individuals were intellectually gifted (Brennan, 1987; Brennan & Piechowski, 1991; Grant, 1990; Piechowski, 1978, 1990, 1992). Justice, itself, is an abstract concept, as is the apprehension of "what ought to be"; therefore, the ability to see and resist injustice must require a high level of intelligence, in addition to deep empathy and strong will. Intelligence becomes "a major force helping the individual to seize life deeply, wholly, and objectively" (Dabrowski, 1964, p. 13).

### **Giftedness or Talent Development?**

The current Zeitgeist in gifted education, reflected in the national report, *National Excellence: A Case for Developing America's Talent* (OERI, 1993), seeks to replace the term, "gifted," with "talented." The new definition begins: "Children and youth with outstanding talent perform or show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience, or environment" (OERI, 1993, p. 26). The movement is an attempt to broaden the concept of giftedness to include a much larger segment of the population so that we do not appear elitist. It is also fueled by the wide endorsement of Gardner's (1983) multiple intelligences, along with his campaign to kill the IQ test. Students are identified as having special talents by their *performance* in specific domains. On the surface, this all sounds wonderful, but something important is being lost in the transaction.

In the substitution of a mosaic of talents for giftedness, we have lost the entire moral dimension of giftedness. Gifted individuals, because of their greater facility with abstract reasoning, have complex inner lives, early ethical concerns, and heightened awareness of the world. As we split our understanding of the interrelated intellectual/moral/emotional structure of giftedness into many fragmented talents, we risk creating more one-sided children. And as we place too much value on performance — with competitions, media attention, external recognition and rewards — we may be inadvertently teaching gifted children that they are valued only for what they do, instead of who they are in their totality. Annemarie Roeper (1990) would say that we have forgotten the Self of the child. Yes, we have lost something precious in the bargain: our ability to perceive the morally sensitive inner world of the gifted.

The Columbus Group (1991) definition emerged in reaction to the increasing emphasis on products, performance and achievement in gifted education. A group of practitioners, parents and theorists became deeply concerned with the trends and decided to infuse the Self back into the definition of giftedness. They forged a new, more equitable conception, removed entirely from external ramifications, focused instead on the phenomenological experience of the gifted person throughout the lifespan. This perspective builds upon the insights of Kazimierz Dabrowski (1964, 1972).

Giftedness is asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching and counseling in order for them to develop optimally. (The Columbus Group, 1991)

Giftedness as asynchrony provides a window into the interior regions of the phenomenon. The concept is firmly grounded in developmental theory, rather than the potential for accomplishment, which is subject to the whims of a particular culture. Asynchrony is a universal characteristic of giftedness. Gifted children, in any cultural milieu, have greater discrepancies among

various facets of their development than average children (Schetky, 1981; Manaster & Powell, 1983; Terrassier, 1985).

Asynchrony literally means being out-of-sync both internally and externally. A lack of synchronicity in the rates of cognitive, emotional and physical development creates inner tension. For example, when a five-year-old child perceives a horse through eight-year-old eyes, but cannot replicate the horse in clay with her five-year-old hands, she becomes extremely frustrated, bursts into tears and throws the clay across the room. Internal asynchrony is mirrored in external adjustment difficulties since the gifted person often feels different from, or out of place with, others. The greater the degree to which cognitive development outstrips physical development, the more out-of-sync the child feels in relation to the school curriculum. Psychologically, as an *amalgam* of many developmental ages (Tolan, 1989, p. 7), the child may appear to be different ages in different situations:

In terms of development chronological age may be the least relevant piece of information to consider. Kate, with an IQ score of 170, may be six, but she has a “mental age” often and a half.... Unfortunately, Kate, like every highly gifted child, is an amalgam of many developmental ages. She may be six while riding a bike, thirteen while playing the piano or chess, nine while debating rules, eight while choosing hobbies and books, five (or three) when asked to sit still. How can such a child be expected to fit into a classroom designed around norms for six year olds? (Tolan, 1989, p. 7)

Uneven development can also result in marked discrepancies between strengths and weaknesses that may continue into adult life. Complexity and intensity, and the heightened awareness that ensues from them, are also lifelong attributes of the gifted that complicate self-concept and social relations. Defined in this manner, giftedness is not an advantage; it does not give the individual an edge in the competition. Rather, the cognitive and personality traits that comprise giftedness are disadvantages in a society in which those differences are not valued.

The essence of asynchronous development is the discrepancy between the rates at which mental and physical development occur. Binet constructed the mental age as a means of capturing the degree to which a child’s mental abilities differed from those of other children his or her chronological age (Binet & Simon, 1908). Unfortunately, we’ve all but lost the concept of mental age in modern testing with deviation IQs, but it has proved enormously helpful in our understanding of retardation. We recognize the inherent difficulties of having a 17-year-old body with a nine-year-old mind. However, we still do not understand that it is equally problematic to have a 17-year-old mind trapped in the body of a nine-year-old. This type of asynchrony doesn’t get much sympathy in our society.

Although intelligence tests have been under serious attack in recent years, they do provide valuable information about discrepant rates of development. The intelligence quotient (IQ) began as a ratio of mental age to chronological age. It can be thought of as an *index of asynchrony*, yielding at least a *minimal* estimate of the rate at which cognitive development (mental age) outstrips physical development (chronological age).

The higher the child’s IQ, the greater the asynchrony. Chronological age correlates more closely than mental age with physical development, handwriting speed, emotional needs, and social skills, while mental age correlates with interests, peer relations, learning rate, amount of information mastered, and awareness of the world. Gifted children reason more like older children than like their age-mates and set standards for themselves more appropriate for older children (Robinson & Noble, 1991).

Asynchrony, intensity, and moral sensitivity are inherent in the experience of giftedness, whether or not a child demonstrates specific talents in a given domain. The search for domain-specific talent is the search for the potentially eminent, an inequitable criterion of giftedness. It has been documented since 1914 that the criterion of eminence suffers dearly from gender, social class and ethnic biases:

Surely we should consider *first* the established, obvious, inescapable, physical fact that women bear and rear the children, and that this has always meant and still means *that nearly 100 per cent of their energy is expended in the performance and supervision of domestic and allied tasks; a field where eminence is impossible.* (Hollingworth, 1914, p. 528, italics in original)

Ironically, IQ tests — the nemesis of the new movement — *do* yield equal numbers of gifted boys and girls in early childhood (Silverman, 1986), whereas all measures of achievement discriminate increasingly against females from junior high school through adulthood (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). Girls make up 49% of the 53 children above 180 IQ (between 3 and 12) that we have found at our Center. By way of contrast, gifted women comprise only 2% of the eminent (Rossiter, 1982; Sadker & Sadker, 1994)! And even children from diverse ethnic backgrounds stand a better chance of being found on IQ tests than on achievement-based measures, since achievement is more a function of environment than ability. Many extremely gifted African-

American children would never have been located without IQ tests (Ehrlich, 1977; Kearney & LeBlanc, 1993).

The greater the degree of asynchrony, the more complicated it is for the individual to function. Kearney (1992) provides a particularly poignant illustration:

*At 14 [Max] can display a ferocious insistence for justice with the passions and tenacity of a 3-year-old.. this gets confusing! We were told that at age 9 he displayed "cognitive reasoning skills way beyond his years. " I wish he came with a blinking sign on his forehead to let me know just who I am dealing with: the 3- year-old, the 14-year-old, or the 25-year-old.*

*Last summer an ill-placed golf ball landed in the bedroom of a house adjoining a picturesque lighthouse. (Remind me to ask how this boy could ignore the physics of playing golf in a densely populated suburban neighborhood.) ...I heard myself asking Max, again and again, "What were you thinking? "*

*That's the thing — they think when you least expect them to and go blank at the most inopportune times. My guess is that it's the tension of being caught between all those ages I just mentioned. But I don't think my theory would be supported in a textbook, even though I live by it every day in order to give some organized definition to what's going on. (Estes, 1992, cited in Kearney, 1992, pp. 1, 8).*

In the movie, "Searching for Bobby Fischer," asynchronous development is depicted frequently: e.g., a young girl attends a state chess championship match accompanied by her stuffed rabbit and fake eyeballs. This scene reminded me of the 11-year-old I had assessed (187 IQ) who emerged from an airplane with his calculus book in one arm and his Curious George in another. Regardless of the potential for achievement, asynchronous development presents unique difficulties.

The Columbus Group definition recognizes the emotional component of giftedness: the fact that cognitive complexity gives rise to emotional depth and complexity. Thus, the gifted not only think differently from their peers, they also feel differently.

One of the basic characteristics of the gifted is their intensity and an expanded field of their subjective experience. The intensity, in particular, must be understood as a *qualitatively distinct characteristic*. It is not a matter of degree but of a different quality of experiencing: vivid, absorbing, penetrating, encompassing, complex, commanding — a way of being quiveringly alive, [italics added] (Piechowski, 1992, p. 181)

Emotionality traditionally has been considered a feminine attribute and antithetical to higher level cognition (Sommers, 1981). With emotion as a key construct of the definition, it is more inclusive of female experience. Enhanced awareness and moral sensitivity derived from the marriage of cognitive complexity and emotional intensity render gifted individuals vulnerable. The greater the asynchrony and moral sensitivity, the greater the vulnerability of the child within a morally insensitive society. It is their vulnerability that warrants special educational and counseling provisions, rather than their potential to contribute to society.

## Conclusion

Honesty, fairness, moral issues, global concerns, and sensitivity to others are common themes in the lives of gifted children. While exceptions can be found, most of the 1,800 children we have assessed at our Center have shown a high degree of moral sensitivity. It is this sensitivity that makes them vulnerable in an educational environment that looks the other way when they are called dweeb and nerd (OERI, 1993). If we want to have moral leaders, we need to understand and nurture the inner world of the gifted. We need to understand the inherent relationship between abstract reasoning, complexity, moral values and the evolution of society. In forsaking the term, gifted, we seem to have abandoned much more than a name. We have chosen to ignore the rich, deep internal milieu from which moral sensitivity and higher level value systems emerge. We have forgotten the Self or soul of the child. This does not appear to be a wise trade.

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