

An Overview and Discussion of Mensa

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Writing Samples

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Mensa is an international nonprofit organization that is committed to the cultivation of human intelligence. The purpose of this essay is to develop an overview and discussion of Mensa. Toward this end, the essay will progress through four main parts. The first part will consider the origins of the organization called Mensa. The second part will describe the criteria for membership in Mensa. The third part will then turn to a discussion of the activities of the organization. Finally, the fourth part will consist of a critical reflection on the value of membership in Mensa, and whether membership means what it is generally believed to mean.

Origins of Mensa

To start with, then, the origins of the organization called Mensa can be traced to the year 1946. This is how Serebriakoff has put the matter: "In 1945 WW2 ended after an atom bomb massacre. Roosevelt and Hitler died, Churchill lost office and the Chinese Communist government was founded. Amid these great events a trivial one. An English University student and an Australian Barrister met on a train and became friends. Mensa was the outcome" (para. 1). The main idea that emerged from this meeting was that of a society or organization for high-IQ people, through which such people could first of all have a forum for mingling with each other and from that point perhaps develop plans for the betterment of the world. This initial intention eventually panned out into the worldwide organization known as Mensa, which, although it has had its ups and downs over the years, continues to be a thriving organization today.

Within the United States, a national chapter of Mensa was officially founded in the year 1960. As American Mensa itself has indicated: "The first handful of American Mensa members joined between 1951 and 1959. They were mostly expatriated Britons or Americans who had learned about Mensa while visiting England. . . . The founding meeting took place on Sept. 30,

1960" (paras. 4 and 6). So, Mensa was originally an organization that was headquartered in Great Britain, which was the home nation of the organization's founders, Roland Berrill and Lancelot Lionel Ware. As membership in other nations grew, though, Mensa adopted something of a federated structure that enabled individual nations, such as the United States, to develop their own chapters of Mensa. At this point, it may be worth turning attention to how Mensa did in fact recruit new members over time, and what the criteria are for actually becoming a member of Mensa.

Membership Criteria

There is in fact only one single criterion for membership in Mensa, and that consists of high intelligence. More specifically, one must score in the top 2 percentile (that is, better than 98 percent of all people) on a kind of IQ test. As Mensa International has written, "Membership in Mensa is open to persons who have attained a score within the upper two percent of the general population on an approved intelligence test that has been properly administered and supervised. There is no other qualification or disqualification for initial membership eligibility" (para. 7). In a sense, then, Mensa membership is quite democratic: one's background or demographic characteristics are irrelevant for membership, as long as one scores well on the IQ test. On the other hand, however, Mensa membership could also be called highly elitist, insofar as by definition, no more than 2 percent of the general population, or 1 in every 50 persons, could ever actually become a member of Mensa.

To an extent, Mensa's membership criterion would seem to be similar to the practice of grading on a curve. This is the case because when evaluating membership eligibility, Mensa does not look at the absolute score a given person got on the relevant IQ test, but rather compares the performance of that person to the performance of everyone else who has taken the test, in order

to determine whether that person scored in the top 2 percentile. In principle, then, even if every single person on the planet had a genius-level IQ, not all those people would be eligible for Mensa; rather, only the top 2 percent of all those geniuses would actually be able to become a part of the organization. Membership in Mensa is thus intrinsically elitist and competitive in nature: it is not a question just of being very intelligent, but rather one of being substantially more intelligent than the vast majority of people (whatever that baseline average intelligence level may be within a given culture or society).

In this context, it would perhaps be possible to criticize Mensa's membership policy on the same grounds that the practice of grading on a curve in general is often criticized. Center for Teaching & Learning, for example, has written the following: "some may argue that curving grades prevents grade inflation. Although curving does limit the number of 'A' grades in a course, it may also interfere with the accuracy of grades as indicators of the actual work and learning accomplished by students" (para. 4). In other words, membership in Mensa is essentially relative and competitive, as opposed to being more absolute or neutral, by virtue of its means of evaluation. Of course, though, it can be suggested that this itself may be part of the charm of Mensa membership in the first place. The clear implication of membership is not simply that one is very smart, but rather that one is part of an intellectual elite. This concept of the elite would seem to be intrinsic to the concept of Mensa itself, to the point that the vitality of the organization would perhaps be inconceivable without it.

Activities of Mensa

One of the main purposes of Mensa is simply to give high-IQ people a chance to meet and mingle with each other. Highly intelligent people may often feel alienated from others around them in the immediate vicinity; and if Mensa could bring such people together into a

community, then this in itself would be adequate justification for the organization as a whole. As Serabriakoff has written, speaking on behalf of Mensa: "No-one knows the good we do. People have met, made friends, married, written books and papers, formed partnerships in constructive efforts of all kinds, and good commercial companies and groups and projects of immense diversity. Above all, we have enormously enjoyed each others' company" (paragraph 7). One of the primary purposes of Mensa, then, is to simply foster community and camaraderie among high-IQ people. Those people, when they get together, have often embarked on projects that they may not have otherwise been able to pursue in the absence of the social support provided by their Mensa colleagues.

This premise, however, can easily turn on itself and undermine the stated purpose and mission of the organization. As Gilbert has written apropos of reflecting on her year with Mensa: "The first thing you need to know is that no one has a good reason for joining Mensa. Pretty much anyone who tries to join a high-IQ society does so, ultimately, because he or she is an insufferable jerk. . . . [I]t's never for noble reasons, however hard someone might pretend otherwise" (paragraph 1). In other words, the very nature of Mensa is such that people who seek to join it probably feel like outsiders within the context of their everyday lives within general society; and while their sense of being on the outside may perhaps be justified on the basis of their exceptional intelligence, this still suggests some degree of emotional and/or psychological maladjustment as a core factor driving Mensa membership.

In truth, Mensa would seem to have no organizational activities per se other than hosting the events and conferences that enable the organization's members to mingle with each other. Of course, the individual members may pursue any number of activities from this point onward. But Mensa, per se, is primarily meant only to bring these people together. Mensa understands this

function as contributing in a significant way to the cultivation of human intelligence and the future of humankind in general. The main idea here would be that by providing a forum where highly intelligent people can come together and develop affinities and projects with each other, Mensa contributes in a meaningful way to the kinds of innovations that drive the species as a whole forward. As Gilbert has suggested, however, even if this does turn out to be a long-term consequence of the existence of Mensa, it has little to do with the actual reasons why Mensa thrives in the present: the organization would seem to primarily consist of oddballs who are just looking for friends.

Critical Reflection

As an organization dedicated to the cultivation of a sense of community among people who over their lives may have often lacked such a sense, the existence and mission of Mensa can only be seen as admirable. Within this context, though, a couple concerns can be raised. The first consists of the validity or reliability of the IQ test used to select people for Mensa, as well as the fact that this test is essentially graded on a curve. Taken together, these facts could produce a situation in which people, on the basis of a somewhat arbitrary metric, begin to entertain fantasies in the style of Nietzsche about being a new kind of human being, or in some way metaphysically superior to all other normal human beings. Such a sentiment could easily give rise to the worst instincts of human nature and significantly undermine the seemingly benevolent orientation of Mensa regarding the future of mankind.

The main point that can be made here, then, is that Mensa as an organization could in fact be very good for humankind as a whole, insofar as it continues to serve as a forum through which highly talented people can mingle with each other and develop plans and projects that can be enacted within general society. However, this good will only continue to exist if the members

of Mensa do not let their own membership go to their heads—if they do not, for example, begin to take inordinate pride in the statistically unusual IQ levels and consider themselves superior to all other human beings as a result. If this were to happen, then Mensa would merely become a forum for outsiders in society to congratulate themselves and each other in a self-satisfied and exclusionary way, and the organization would no longer be a dynamic engine of creativity but rather just a kind of cesspool of resentment that would only make it even harder for its members to participate in ordinary society after organizational events.

Conclusion

In summary, the present essay has consisted of an overview and discussion of the organization known as Mensa. The essay began with a consideration of the origins of the organization, proceeded to description of the membership criteria, turned to a discussion of the activities of the organization, and finally culminated in a reflection on the general value of the organization. An important conclusion that has been reached here is that Mensa is inherently elitist in nature, insofar as the organization by definition only accepts people who score in the top 2 percentile of the IQ test (as opposed to accepting all people who clear a certain IQ threshold). This elitism is part of the basic charm of Mensa, and it is also why members of Mensa often find it so valuable to meet and mingle with each other. However, care must be taken that this inherent elitism does not turn into a kind of resentful self-indulgence through which the members of Mensa increasingly cut themselves off from general society as a whole.

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