

REVIEW OF *BRAIN WAVE*

What would happen if every sentient creature suddenly got dramatically smarter?

I think some of the most interesting implications would be for humanity's relationship to animals. In the book, livestock escape pens and take vengeance on their keepers, while chimps and dogs learn language. But the treatment of this topic seemed shallow. Wouldn't animal sapience have a wild impact on civilization around the globe? And wouldn't it raise deep, difficult ethical questions? I was disappointed that the book didn't explore this further.

Anderson is more focused on how human society would evolve in response to a drastic increase in typical IQ. I was surprised by how much melancholy and pessimism there is about this in the book; perhaps that's the influence of the Cold War during which it was written. Humans struggle to keep civilization running because too many people suddenly see themselves as too good for menial labor (why? shouldn't superintelligent people very quickly realize the importance of ensuring those jobs get done, and negotiate an acceptable division of labor?). Cities cease to exist because they have no economic value (what?), and people bemoan this loss (if they're so smart, and they think parts of the old world order like cities were nice, shouldn't they be able to figure out how to still have those things?). Everyone spends lots of time in melodramatic hand-wringing about whether humanity can still find meaning in life now that they've been stripped of their old illusions (this seems like a pretty unrealistic portrayal of the effect of learning—generally, learning opens up more and more exciting avenues for further learning, and generates enthusiasm about an ever-wider range of increasingly esoteric hobbies).

One of the worries the book raises is harder to dismiss: that as more people felt empowered to “think for themselves”, maintaining social cohesion would get much more difficult. My hope is that increased intelligence would also make us better at resolving disagreements and reaching compromises on unresolvable ones, and that this latter effect would more than compensate for the former.