

# Paul Julius Möbius, *On the Physiological Mental Deficiency of Women*, 8th Edition (1907)

## Abstract

Paul Julius Möbius (1853–1907) was a famous clinical neurologist. A pioneer in understanding the etiologies of mental illnesses, he stood at the forefront of the German psychotherapeutic community. He was also a prolific author who, in the swan song of his career, provoked one of the most acrimonious and resonant knowledge-related conflicts in Wilhelmine Germany. In this popular pamphlet, first published in 1900, Möbius lent his considerable scientific reputation to dubious claims about the physical and mental capacities of women. The pamphlet provoked a firestorm of criticism, which itself generated a new wave of academic work on women's physical and mental competencies. In this way, the conflict helped usher in contemporary German feminism.

## Source

### A. First Part

The physiological mental deficiency [*Schwachsinn*] of women can be addressed from two perspectives.

1.

It is not easy to define mental deficiency. One can say that it lies between complete idiocy and the normal condition. Nevertheless, the difficulty arises in demarcating mental deficiency from the normal condition. We do not even have a German word for the latter, and "health" is certainly not the appropriate term. Many German words contain *Sinn*, "mind," but, for example, *vollsinnig*, "in possession of one's senses," refers to the senses, not the mind; *scharfsinnig*, "astute," means development of the mind beyond the norm; *geradesinnig*, "upright," relates to moral behavior. In ordinary life, we have the opposites, smart and stupid; smart refers to a person who can make distinctions, while the stupid person lacks that critical ability. Indeed, there is probably no fundamental difference between stupidity and the mild forms of mental deficiency. The objection cannot be made that stupidity is normal and mental deficiency is abnormal, since this juxtaposition is popular in the negative sense and is essentially based on the improper mixture of value judgments. From a scientific standpoint, common stupidity can be an unhealthy deviation, such as abnormal smallness of stature or amblyopia, etc. At the same time, real physiological mental deficiency exists; children are mentally deficient compared to adults, and growing old cannot be designated as an illness (despite the adage *senectus ipsa morbus*, i.e., "old age is itself a disease"), even though sooner or later mental faculties diminish with age. Furthermore, in language, the term stupid also denotes abnormal changes: he was rendered stupid by drinking or by an illness with fever. However, even if we count stupidity as a mental deficiency, the difficulty does not go away because the upper boundary of stupidity is not clear. In a certain sense, everyone is stupid, one person in music, another in mathematics, this person in languages, that person in trade and commerce, etc. Accordingly, a distinction should be made between partial and general mental deficiency. It may be said then with a certain justification that special talents do not count, that it is only necessary to have good faculties on average. That is precisely it: what does average mean, and how are norms determined? Here, as everywhere else, in the determination of subtle pathological forms, which cannot be

---

accomplished with the crude information of the ordinary clinic, we appreciate the lack of a canon for mental disorders. We have a canon for physical conditions and can easily determine whether a certain number of centimeters is normal. For mental faculties, however, rules are wanting; here arbitrariness dominates. Consider the differences in opinion on doubtful cases. It would be absurd to maintain that the present prevailing uncertainty is necessary, because no boundaries can be drawn where in reality there are none. The situation is not that dire; if efforts are only made, then it will be possible to establish an approximate canon, and the uncertainty will at least be reduced, if not eliminated. In general, and also as to mental deficiency, the correct way may be to no longer speak merely of a person, but rather of particular classes of people, and to ask what can be expected from this age, this gender, this people. The normal behavior of the child is pathological in the adult, that of the woman in man, that of the Negro in the European. Comparing various groups is then the main thing, for only in this way can it be learned what is to be expected from a member of a particular group, and only in this way can it be avoided that a person is called stupid or mentally deficient because he does not accomplish what some other person is capable of. In other words, mental deficiency is relative, and mental deficiency, for all intents and purposes, can only be significant in comparison with someone of similar kind. If the member of one group may not be measured against the member of the other, then the groups themselves may still be compared. An Eskimo who cannot count to one hundred is not mentally deficient as an Eskimo, but because it is so, the Eskimo as such is mentally deficient compared to the German or the Frenchman. So how is it then with the sexes? To begin with, it is certain that male and female mental faculties are very different, but is there a balance (since women are more accomplished in one way and men in another), or are women on the whole mentally deficient compared to men? The old adage would suggest the latter: long hair, short wit. However, modern wisdom will have none of it: the female mind is at least equal to the male mind. A sea of ink has been devoted to these matters, and there is still no agreement or clarity. The best summary that I know of is the first part of the book by Guglielmo Ferrero and Gina Lombroso, which addresses the normal woman. Of course, I cannot agree with all the authors' statements or adopt all their constructions, but on the whole evidence of female inferiority is very well presented there. The Italians' account takes up 192 printed pages and is still aphoristic. To be thorough would require a thick book. It is therefore clear that I can only raise the most important points here.

It is always good to take both direct and indirect approaches, that is, to consider not only psychological but also anatomical observations.

Physically, aside from sexual characteristics, the woman is something between a child and a man, and mentally she is, too, at least in some respects. Of course, there are specific differences. The child's head is relatively larger than the man's; the woman's head is both absolutely and relatively smaller. Naturally a smaller head also contains a smaller brain, but here the equivocation can be raised (and in the case of Theodor von Bismhoff's brain-weighing experiments, too) that a small brain may be just as worthy as a large one because it may just as well contain the parts essential for mental activity. Consequently, the comparative studies of individual brain parts are more important, or at least more convincing. In this context, Nicholas Rüdinger's findings especially should be taken into consideration; they do not appear to me to be as well-known as they deserve to be. Rüdinger showed that in the case of full-term newborns "the entire gyrus group framing the Sylvian fissure is simpler and has fewer convolutions in girls than in boys", and that "the Island of Reil [insular cortex] in boys is on average somewhat larger in all its dimensions, more convex, and more furrowed than in girls." In adults, he showed (*ibid.*, p. 32, Plate IV) that the woman's Gyrus frontalis tertius is simpler and smaller than the man's, especially the section immediately adjacent to the Gyrus centralis. Inspection of the plates shows that the differences are quite considerable. Rüdinger further showed that "in women's brains the entire medial gyrus line of the parietal cortex and the interior upper annectant gyrus are decidedly underdeveloped." He found the condition of the

---

parietal cortex in mentally inferior men (for example, Negroes) to be similar to that in women, while in mentally superior men the massive development of the parietal cortex presented a completely different picture.

Rüding er found the very simplest condition in a Bavarian woman; in that case, he spoke of an outright "animal-like" type.

Thus, it has been proved that the parts of the brain that are extremely important for mental activity, the gyri of the frontal and temporal lobes, are less developed in women than in men, and that this difference is already present at birth.

Just as men and women have the same brain gyri, only of a different size, they also have the same mental attributes; having more or less of this one or that one makes the difference, no attribute belongs only to one sex. The senses appear to be about equally sharp in both sexes. Lombroso believes to have found that women's skin is less sensitive to pain. Assuming that his observations were generally verified, it would not be a matter of decreased sensitivity but rather of decreased mental reaction to strong stimuli. Furthermore, the fact that men are better at making fine distinctions, for example, in inspecting tea or sorting wool, is likely attributable to their superiority in judging small differences in sensation. On the other hand, women's delight in colors is not to be understood as a better color sense, but rather is attributable to mental circumstances. It is different with regard to motor function, for a woman's strength and dexterity is far lower than that of a man. Because of their weakness, women are primarily assigned tasks that require a certain dexterity, giving rise to the belief in women's clever fingers. However, whenever a man assumes a woman's work, as a tailor, a weaver, a chef, etc., he performs better work than the woman. Basically, dexterity is a function of the cerebral cortex, as is the judgment of sensory impressions, and we are again prompted to seek the difference between the sexes in actual mental faculties. One of the most significant differences is that instinct plays a greater role in women than in men. It is possible to devise a spectrum with beings who act purely instinctively on one end and those who act only after reflection on the other. In general, it is characteristic of mental development that instinct plays an increasingly less significant role and deliberation an increasingly greater one, and that the species-nature becomes more and more individual. We speak of instinct when a purposeful act is performed without the actor knowing why; as soon as certain circumstances recur, an apparatus in us goes to work and we perform an act as if an external force of reason drives us to it. However, we also speak of instinctive insight when we reach judgments without knowing how. Basically, no act or insight is without instinct, for part of the process is always in the unconscious, but there are differences in degree. The more the individual consciousness participates in cognition and action, the higher the level of the individual's development and the greater his independence. We call the intermediate state between purely instinctive and clearly conscious "feeling." To act on a feeling, to consider something true because of a feeling means that it is done half instinctively. Instinct has great advantages: it is reliable and without concern. Feeling draws on half of these advantages. Instinct makes women animal-like, dependent, secure, and cheerful. Their actual power resides in instinct; it makes them admirable and attractive. Very many feminine characteristics are associated with this similarity to animals. First, their lack of independent judgment. What is generally considered true and good, is true and good for women. They are strictly conservative and hate anything novel -- excepting, of course, cases in which the novel entails personal advantage, or when their loved one is taken with it. Animals since time immemorial have always done the same thing; therefore, the human race would have remained in its primeval state had it consisted solely of women. All progress comes from men. For that reason, women often hang on men like lead weights. They prevent some turmoil and meddlesome developments, but they also inhibit the noble, because they cannot tell good from evil, and they make absolutely everything subject to convention and "what people say." Their lack of discrimination is also expressed in suggestibility. Instinct does not prevail almost completely, as it does in animals, but it is combined with individual thought; yet this is not strong

---

enough to stand alone, and it must rely on others' input, which seems trustworthy on account of prejudice, love, or vanity. This gives rise to the apparent contradiction that women are the guardians of old customs yet chase after every new fashion, are conservative yet entertain any absurdity as soon as it is cleverly suggested. With detachment from the primal instinctive state, with the genesis of the ego and the growth of individual thinking, egoism, or more correctly, the individual being who is egoistic by nature and who, as long as it only obeys its own impulses, acts unconsciously to the advantage of others, will act, when it begins to think, contrary to social impulses. Only high-level mental development affords the insight that the individual good is also promoted by the common good. Most women remain in the intermediate state; their morality consists entirely of the morals of feeling or of unconscious rectitude; conceptual morality is impenetrable to them, and reflection only makes them worse. To this one-sidedness is added the narrowness of their intellectual horizon, which is conditioned by their natural situation. They live for their children and husbands; nothing outside the family interests them. Justice without regard to the person is an empty concept for them. It is entirely wrong to call women immoral, but they are morally one-sided or defective. As far as their love extends, as long as first-hand suffering awakens their compassion, they are capable of making any sacrifice, and not infrequently do they put the colder man to shame. But they are unjust at heart; they laugh secretly about the law, and break it whenever fear or training permits. To this are added an intensity of emotion and an inability for self-control. Jealousy and wounded or unsatisfied vanity set off storms that no moral reflection can temper. If women were not physically and mentally weak, if they were not as a rule rendered harmless by their circumstances, then they would be extremely dangerous. In times of political uncertainty, people have been horrified by women's unfairness and cruelty, likewise in the case of women who unfortunately have risen to power. In ordinary life, those two attributes usually only manifest themselves in the activity of their tongues and in their writing; rants, slander, and anonymous letters. The tongue is a woman's sword, for her physical weakness prevents her from fighting with her fists, and her mental weakness allows her to eschew proof; only an overabundance of words remains. Quarrelsomeness and garrulousness are always justifiably included among feminine character traits. Idle chatter affords women endless pleasure and is the true feminine sport. Perhaps that can be understood from the practice exercises of animals. The cat chases the ball, and in the process, practices hunting mice; women exercise their tongues for their whole lives in preparation for verbal battles.

[...]

Source: Paul Julius Möbius, *Über den physiologischen Schwachsinn des Weibes*. 8th edition. Halle an der Saale: C. Marhold, 1907, pp. 11–20.

Translation: Kathleen Dell'Orto

Recommended Citation: Paul Julius Möbius, *On the Physiological Mental Deficiency of Women*, 8th Edition (1907), published in: *German History Intersections*, <<https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/knowledge-and-education/ghis:document-162>> [April 20, 2024].