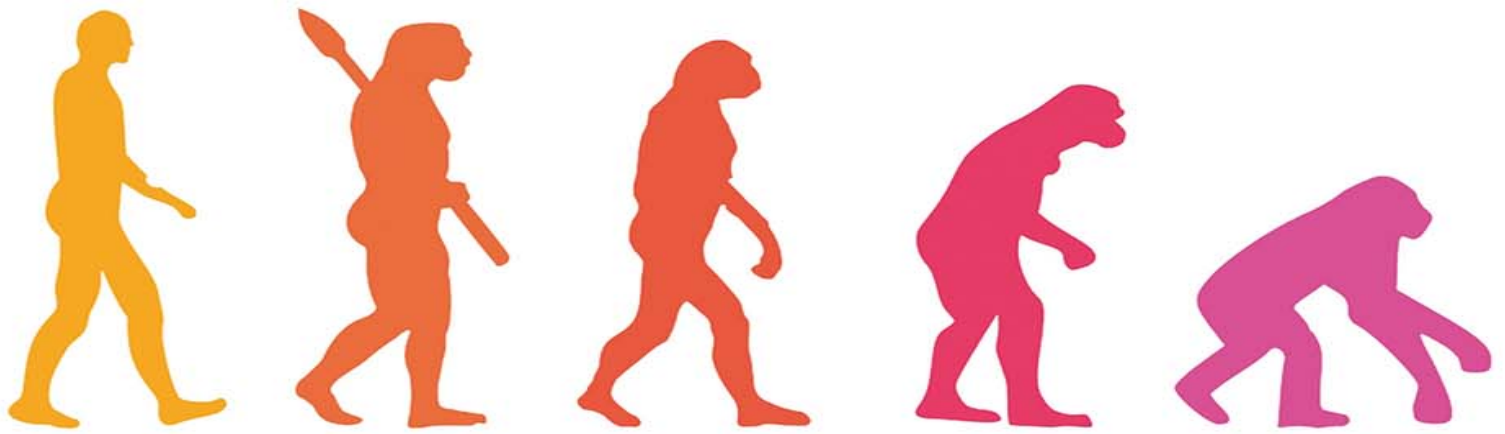


THE PSYCHOLOGY OF STUPIDITY



EXPLAINED BY
SOME OF THE
WORLD'S SMARTEST
PEOPLE

EDITED BY

Jean-François Marmion

THE NUMBER ONE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

the
PSYCHOLOGY
of
STUPIDITY



Edited by Jean-François Marmion

Translated from the French by Liesl Schillinger

MACMILLAN

› CONTENTS ‹

[ON STUPIDITY: A WARNING | JEAN-FRANÇOIS MARMION](#)

[The Scientific Study of Idiots | Serge Ciccotti](#)

[A Taxonomy of Morons | Jean-François Dortier](#)

[A Theory of Assholes: A Conversation with Aaron James](#)

[From Stupidity to Hogwash | Pascal Engel](#)

[To Be Human Is to Be Easily Fooled | Jean-François Marmion](#)

[Let Justice Do Its Work \(of Digestion\) | Jean-François Marmion](#)

[Critique of the Pure Reasoner | Jean-François Marmion](#)

[Common Biases \(and Heuristics\) | Jean-François Marmion](#)

[Stupidity and Cognitive Bias | Ewa Drozda-Senkowska](#)

[Thinking, Fast and Slow: A Conversation with Daniel Kahneman](#)

[The Nudge | Jean-François Marmion](#)

[Kahneman and Tversky: A Beautiful Friendship | Jean-François Marmion](#)

[On Stupidity in the Brain | Pierre Lemarquis](#)

[Intentional Idiocy | Yves-Alexandre Thalmann](#)

[When Very Smart People Believe Very Dumb Things | Brigitte Axelrad](#)

[Why We Find Meaning in Coincidences: A Conversation with Nicolas Gauvrit](#)

[Stupidity as Logical Delirium | Boris Cyrulnik](#)

[The Language of Stupidity | Patrick Moreau](#)

[Emotions Don't \(Always\) Make Us Stupid: A Conversation with Antonio Damasio](#)

[Stupidity and Narcissism | Jean Cottraux](#)

[The Biggest Media Manipulators: The Media Itself: A Conversation with Ryan Holiday](#)

[Manipulation on the Internet: The Art in Its Infancy | Jean-François Marmion](#)

[The Same Old Song | Jean-François Marmion](#)

[Stupid and Evil Social Networks | François Jost](#)

[Animated Wisdom | François Jost](#)

[The Internet: The Death of Intelligence? A Conversation with Howard Gardner](#)

[Stupidity and Post-Truth | Sebastian Dieguez](#)

[The Metamorphoses of Nationalist Folly | Pierre de Senarclens](#)

[How Can We Fight Collective Error? | Claudie Bert](#)

[We All Consume Like Fools: A Conversation with Dan Ariely](#)

[The Paradoxes of Abundance | Jean-François Dortier](#)

[The Human: The Animal That Dares All | Laurent Bègue](#)

[More Meat Than Reason | Laurent Bègue](#)

[What Can Be Done About Assholes? | Emmanuelle Piquet](#)

[Stupidity from the Child's Perspective: A Conversation with Alison Gopnik](#)

[Do We Dream of Stupidity? | Delphine Oudiette](#)

[The Worst Stupidity Is Thinking You're Smart: A Conversation with Jean-Claude Carrière](#)

[Making Peace with Your Stupidity | Stacey Callahan](#)

[Shameless | Stacey Callahan](#)

[Unconditional Self-Acceptance | Stacey Callahan](#)

[Stupidity Is the Background Noise of Wisdom: A Conversation with Tobie Nathan](#)

[CONTRIBUTORS](#)

[NOTES](#)

ON STUPIDITY: A WARNING

Abandon all hope, ye who enter here

“Good sense is the most equitably distributed thing in the world,” wrote Descartes. And what about stupidity?

Whether it oozes or drips, trickles or gushes, it’s everywhere. Without borders and without limits. Sometimes it emerges as a gentle, almost bearable lapping; other times as a nauseating, stagnant swamp. Still other times, it’s an earthquake, a storm, or a tidal wave that engulfs everything in its path, smashing, trampling, befouling. No matter what form it takes, stupidity splatters us all. Rumor has it that we ourselves are the source of it. I am no exception.

The Unbearable Heaviness of Being

Everyone sees bullshit, listens to it, and reads it, every single day. At the same time, each of us is guilty of generating it, thinking it, pondering it, and speaking it aloud. We are all morons from time to time, spouting nonsense as we go about our lives, without any real consequences. The crucial thing is to be aware of it and to feel sorry about it; because to err is human, and admitting your faults is halfway to having them forgiven. There will always be those who take us for fools, but we recognize our own folly far too rarely. Apart from the perpetual purr of idiocy that surrounds us, day in, day out, there’s also, sadly, the roar of the masters of stupidity, kings of stupidity—assholes with a capital A. Those assholes, whether you encounter them at work or at home, do not strike you as anecdotal. They hound you and harass you with their obstinacy in crass wrongheadedness, their unjustified arrogance. They prosper, they sign on the dotted line, and they would happily wipe out all of your opinions, emotions, and dignity with one

stroke of the pen. They erode your morale and make you doubt there can be any justice in this vile world. No matter how hard you try, you cannot detect a speck of kindred connection in them.

Stupidity is an unkept promise, a promise of intelligence and confidence that the idiots among us betray, traitors to humanity. These jerks are like dumb beasts—they're total animals! We might want to indulge them, to turn them into friends, but they're not on that level, which is to say, our level. They suffer from a disease that has no cure. And since they refuse to heal themselves, convinced they are one-eyed kings in the land of the blind, the tragicomedy is made complete. It's no surprise that people are fascinated by zombies—with the simulacrum of existence they embody, their intellectual vacuity, and their overwhelming, fundamental need to drag the living, the heroic, and the simply decent down to their own level. And that makes sense: idiots, like zombies, want to eat your brains: these failed human beings never fail you. The worst thing about them is that they can sometimes be intelligent, or at least make a show of it. They're so skilled at transforming the lineaments of learning to the bars of a cage that they would gladly burn books—along with their authors—in the name of some ideology, or of something they learned from some purported sage (idiotic or not).

Uncertainty Makes You Crazy, Certainty Makes You Stupid

Morons will condemn you instantly, with no appeal possible and no extenuating circumstances admitted, on the sole basis of the appearances they glimpse through their narrow blinkers. They know how to rouse their sympathizers, to goad them to lynching in the name of virtue, custom, respect. The idiot hunts in a pack and thinks in herd fashion. As the Georges Brassens song goes, "The plural is useless to mankind; whenever / More than four are gathered, you'll find a band of fools." He also declared: "Glory to the man who, lacking lofty ideals/ Contents himself with not being a nuisance to his neighbors." Alas! Our neighbors don't always return the favor.

Not content with making you miserable, the irksome idiot is delighted with himself. Unshakably. He is immunized against self-doubt and

convinced of his rights. The happy imbecile tramples your rights without a second thought. The fool takes his beliefs for truths graven in marble, whereas all true knowledge is built on sand. Uncertainty makes you crazy, certainty makes you stupid; you've got to choose your camp. The asshole thinks he knows better than you—not only does he know what you should think, feel, and do with your ten fingers, he knows how you should vote. He knows who you are and what's good for you better than you do. If you disagree with him, he will despise you, insult you, and assault you, literally and figuratively, for your own good. And if he can do that in the name of some higher ideal, he won't hesitate to attack the scum that your existence represents for him, with utter impunity.

And here's a bitter truth: justified self-defense is a trap. If you try to reason with an idiot or to change his mind, you're lost. The moment you decide it's your duty to improve him, the moment you think you know how he should think and act (like you, of course), the jig's up. There it is; now you're the idiot—and you're naïve to boot, since you think you're up to the challenge. Worse, the more you try to reform an idiot, the stronger he gets. He delights in seeing himself as a victim who annoys others—and who must for that reason be in the right. In reproofing him, you allow him to believe in good faith that he's a hero of anticonformity, someone who ought to be defended and admired. A member of the resistance . . . Tremble before the vastness of this curse: if you try to reform a moron, not only will you fail, you will also strengthen him and encourage imitators. Before, there was only one moron: now there are two. Fighting against stupidity only makes it stronger. The more you attack an ogre, the more souls he devours.

The Horsefeathers of the Apocalypse

Thus, there is no way that stupidity can lose its power. It's exponential. Are we living today—more so than yesterday and less so than tomorrow—in the golden age of idiocy? As far back as the written record extends, the greatest minds of their ages believed this to be the case. Maybe they were right, at the time. Then again, maybe, like everyone else, they were just old fools. Nonetheless, the novelty of the contemporary era is that it would take only one idiot with a red button to eradicate all stupidity, and the whole world

with it. An idiot elected by sheep who were only too proud to choose their slaughterer.

The other great characteristic of our age is that, even if we admit that stupidity has not yet reached its pinnacle, we know that it has never before been so visible, so unabashed, so outspoken, and so peremptory. It's enough to make you despair of your benighted fellow man. On the other hand—who knows?—it might inspire you to turn to philosophy to address the situation, given how hard it is of late to deny the vanity of everything and the narcissism of everyone, not to mention the inanity of appearances and the prevalence of sweeping judgments. If only a second Erasmus would write us a new *In Praise of Folly* (but in 280-character bursts, to save us from migraines)! If only a new Lucretius would arise to bring us relief, and perhaps joy—which we could relish, safe on shore, as the ship of fools sinks in the swirl, sabotaged by its passengers, who cry for help as they drown. Like a greedy gourmand, we lick our lips at the prospect of that desirable nectar: the war of fools among themselves, hackles raised, egos cocked. Great minds think alike, small minds collide. As you struggle to remain a spectator, not an actor, in this battle scene, it would be foolhardy to imagine yourself less vulnerable to stupidity than your bitter, braying, miserable, agitated contemporaries. But if by chance you turn out to be right, what a victory! It's wiser to be modest; if you try to rise above the throng you won't be forgiven. Escape from the herd and you'll still be led to the slaughterhouse. Howl with the wolves, bleat with the sheep, but never go it alone; everyone will cry foul. Needless to say, if you truly believe yourself to be smarter and more admirable than the average joe, the fateful diagnosis is near at hand: you yourself are most likely an unwitting carrier of stupidity.

Given the immensity of the catastrophe, the project of this book, which is to attempt to investigate stupidity, can hardly be anything but another act of folly. To tackle such a subject is to reveal yourself to be presumptuous, touchingly naïve, or at the very least, exceedingly foolish. I know this very well, but it's time that a brave idiot entered the breach. With a little luck, this endeavor will prove merely ridiculous. And ridicule is not fatal. But stupidity is! And it will outlast us. At any rate, it will bury us. That is, unless it follows us into the grave. . . .

One final point: these reflections on fools are not restricted to the male of the species. Let female fools take comfort! Neither sex has a monopoly on stupidity. And so I proclaim, O idiots of every stripe and morons of all kinds—blowhards and bitches, genial dumbasses and silly twats; dirty bastards and nasty ballbreakers, pathetic ninnies and evil louts, dunces and ditzes, oafs and space cadets, poor slobs and dizzy dames, lunkheads and airheads, scatterbrains and dingbats, lummoxes and nitwits, imbeciles, boobies, numbskulls, dolts, wastes of space, blockheads, zeros, clowns, dummies, dim bulbs, raging assholes, and empty-headed rubes, dickheads, pipsqueaks, lowlifes, daydreamers, mouth-breathers, pains in the ass and motormouths—this is your moment of glory: this book speaks only to you. But you will not recognize yourselves. . . .

Your devoted dumbass,
Jean-François Marmion

THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF IDIOTS



› Serge Ciccotti ‹

Psychologist and researcher at the University of Southern Brittany

The ignorant man affirms, the scientist doubts, the wise man reflects.

—ARISTOTLE

Is it possible to make a scientific study of idiots? It's a provocative question! We know of asinine studies (for example: "Farting as a Defense Against Unspeakable Dread"¹), and studies on pointless jobs that have no social value and bring little personal satisfaction;² but studies on idiots themselves? What would that even look like?

Actually, if you look at the scientific literature in the psychological domain, you'll find that bullshit, in a general way, has been fairly well researched. In this sense, you could say that, yes, it's possible to conduct a scientific investigation of idiots; but in so doing, it's important to recognize that the study of idiots is no more or less than the study of all mankind. A portrait of the idiot can be drawn from some of the variables that different studies have explored. This will allow us to gain a relatively precise idea of the idiot (interfering, stupid, rather limited in attention span or intellect), and of some of their variations, such as the conceited, brutal blowhard, whose stupidity contains an element of toxic narcissism, not to mention a total lack of empathy.

Stupidity and the Short Attention Span

Rather than study the idiot as an object, psychological research focuses on understanding *why* people act like idiots sometimes.

Studies of behavioral scripts³ show that most of the time people do not analyze their environment deeply before they act. They depend on familiar, habitual routine actions, which they execute automatically in response to internal or environmental factors. That's why, if you happen to be crying, there's always some moron standing by who says, "Hey, how are you doing?" That's as stupid as checking your watch a second time, right after you've just looked at it.

When you want to know what time it is, you look at your watch. The script unfolds mechanically. This mechanism allows you to be inattentive, because the effect of the script is to reduce the amount of attention required to complete a task. Consequently, because you're not paying attention and are thinking of other things, you look at your watch without seeing it. The information is not retained; which is why you have to look again to check the time. It's stupid, isn't it?

In the field of research on attentional resources, psychologists have demonstrated that people often are blind to change,⁴ and that even an important alteration is not always perceived by the individual. That's why, if you've lost fifteen pounds on a diet, you always run into some asshole who doesn't see the difference. Research on the illusion of control⁵ allows us to understand why, for instance, you'll always find some jerk pressing the elevator button like a maniac when it's already been pressed. Studies on social influence show that when a moronic driver goes down a dead-end street, some idiot always follows him; and when you ask a contestant on a quiz show if it's the sun or the moon that revolves around the Earth, the moron asks to poll the audience.

Human beings tend to cast aside pure reason and expected values. The dumbest among us, as a rule, is the one whose outlook reflects the greatest divergence from the average of studied effects. Generally, his vision of the world is simplistic: he has trouble with large numbers, with square roots, with complexity, and indeed with the bell curve itself, where he is to be found on the fringes. Stalin once said, "The death of one man is a tragedy; the death of millions is a statistic." As a rule, people are more receptive to anecdotes than to scientific reports stuffed with figures. But the idiot devours anecdotes. He will know someone who fell forty floors and didn't get a scratch . . . anyway, "that's what I heard on the news."

Stupidity and Faith

Studies of belief show that people have faith in justice ("Belief in a Just World"⁶), which is probably the most common shared belief on earth. The worst assholes illustrate how this belief can be misused when they say things like: "Sure, she was raped, but did you see how she was dressed?" The dumber a person is, the more likely he is to blame the victim. Another sort of asshole will deride the poor as "filthy beggars."

Idiots excel in their capacity to believe anything and everything, from folktales to conspiracy theories, from the moon's influence on behavior to the effectiveness of homeopathy (it works on the dog, there's proof!). On May 28, 2017, a motorcycle was filmed driving several miles on the highway without its driver, who had fallen off. Some confirmed idiots

attributed this phenomenon to the supernatural specter known as the “woman in white”; brainier types put it down to gyroscopic effect.⁷ There seems to be a negative correlation between holding mystical beliefs and winning a Nobel Prize.⁸

Studies⁹ in the realm of belief always distinguish between the naïve credulity of greenhorns and the entrenched stupidity of old fools.¹⁰ It’s been proven that negative memories fade with time, whereas positive memories endure. This is why the older a person gets, the greater his tendency to regard the past in a positive light, which is why old fools like to complain wistfully, “Everything was better in the good old days.”

A large swath of irrational human behavior has been scrutinized by psychologists, who have determined that it springs from the individual’s need to control his environment. Every living organism expresses this need (think of how your dog races to the door every time the bell rings, even though it’s never for him). This compulsion can result in absurd actions by members of the human species, like, for instance, going to see a psychic. There are about a hundred thousand people in France who declare themselves to be “psychics”; they earn more than \$3 billion a year. Researchers have never identified any genuine gift in self-styled psychics, but that doesn’t keep these so-called seers from benefiting their clients. It’s estimated that 20 percent of women and 10 percent of men have consulted a psychic at least once in their lives. Generally, psychics report that they don’t regret having chosen this fraudulent line of work to earn their crust; apparently, idiots making other idiots the basis of their livelihood works perfectly well as a business model. The need for control is often accompanied by the illusion of control; and idiots probably delude themselves that they are in control more than others.¹¹ One proof of the power of this illusion can be shown through the everyday example of driving or riding in a car. When you’re a passenger, you fear accidents much more than you do when you are the driver. There are some fools who find it impossible to sleep when they are passengers; apparently they can sleep only when they’re the driver!

The idiot will throw the dice as hard as he can to get sixes; he will choose his own numbers in the lottery. He will stoop to pick up a penny for luck and make sure to avoid walking under ladders. The fool has everything under control: if he wins the lottery, it’s because he dreamed of the number

6 for six nights in a row, and because $6 \times 6 = 36$, he played the 36 and won. By the same token, it must be accepted that the idiot is in good mental health overall; because the illusion of control is much weaker among depressed people.[12](#)

Studies About Idiots That Help Explain Your Job

In another area studied widely by scientists, idiots have been found to employ an exceptionally wide range of strategies to shore up their self-esteem. Studies on bias and false consensus[13](#) demonstrate that people tend to exaggerate the number of other people who share their faults. This is why, when you point out to some jerk that he has blown past a stop sign, he will retort, “But nobody stops at this sign!”

The typical asshole often indulges in retrospective bias. At the maternity hospital, he’ll say, “I was sure it was going to be a boy.” As he stands in front of the television on election night, he’ll declare, “I was sure Trump was going to be president,” and sometimes when you’re talking with him he’ll tell you, “I knew you were going to say that!” Is the idiot showing bad faith? Is the idiot a fortune-teller? Not at all: the idiot deploys “I knew it” to strategic ends, to demonstrate that he’s better informed than he really is. “I know, I know. . . .” Of course, you must never mention these studies to idiots, as they will deny that they do such things.

To protect their self-esteem, many people overestimate their abilities. This bias has been proved by psychological experiments that demonstrate that, in multiple arenas, a large number of participants rate themselves higher than average in such categories as, for instance, intelligence and everything connected with it. On one side of the axis, you have those humble souls whose human qualities of simplicity, humility, and discretion lead others to perceive them as simpleminded or naïve, and to criticize them for lack of confidence and treat them like dummies who can be easily manipulated. On the other side of the axis, you find the high achievers, which is to say, overconfident idiots. One of these smug morons can exact a high price on society when he (for example) gets lost at sea, or gets stranded in the mountains after off-piste skiing—even if he mostly contents himself with exaggerating his prowess at maintaining speed on the highway.

Another form of bias, egocentric bias,¹⁴ permits us to distinguish minor-league imbeciles from the gigantic assholes who don't acknowledge their own role in stupidity. The jerk who's been divorced three times because all three of the women he married were bitches, the blowhard whose business failed because he was working with a bunch of losers. Even when he was a teenager, he claimed that it wasn't his feet that stank, it was his socks. One day he was stopped in his car for speeding; that was just bad luck. He can't understand that luck is the spin that assholes put on probability.

The researchers David Dunning and Justin Kruger could not have published an article with a title like "Studies About Idiots That Help Explain Your Job." If they had presented their work that way it never would have made it through peer review at a scientific journal. Yet in their research, this is what they abundantly demonstrated. These two specialists discovered that incompetent people tend to overestimate their own level of competence. That is why a fool who's never had a dog will tell you how to train yours. Dunning and Kruger attribute this tendency to the difficulty that unqualified people have, in certain contexts, with assessing their true abilities. But that's not all: according to these psychologists,¹⁵ not only does the incompetent person overestimate his own level of competence, he also fails to recognize competence in those who possess it.

Thanks to their research, we can understand why a stupid client will tell a professional how to do his job, and why when you lose something some moron is bound to say to you, "Wait, where was it the last time you saw it?" It also explains why a fool will feel compelled to say, "It's easy to be a lawyer, law is top-of-the-head stuff"; "Quitting smoking? It's just a question of willpower"; "Flying an airplane? It's like driving a bus"; and so on. This is why when an idiot strolls out of a lecture on quantum physics of which he has not understood a single word, he will feel free to look the expert straight in the eyes and say: "Could be, could be . . ."

Dunning and Kruger suggest that if we were prudent we would be tempted not to vote in elections. Given how useless we are at economy, geopolitics, and running major institutions, we are incapable of evaluating electoral platforms or of having any idea how to improve the country's direction. All the same, any idiot at a bar will say, "I know how to solve the crisis!" A number of studies conducted with Asian participants display an inverse Dunning-Kruger effect;¹⁶ in other words, they underestimate their

abilities. It appears that in the culture of the Far East, where the prevailing norm is to avoid standing out, the desire to prove that you've mastered every subject does not exist.

Bullshit Detector

Even though many more mechanisms could be included here to help us define stupidity, let's wrap up this short synthesis with a discussion of cynical mistrust, a quality in which the idiot and the asshole are more deeply steeped than other people.¹⁷ Cynicism is defined as a collection of negative beliefs about human nature and its motivations. The asshole is often prey to sociopolitical cynicism—just ask him. A few phrases punctuate his running commentary: “They're all corrupt”; “A bunch of crooks and losers”; “Psychologists? Charlatans, every last one of them”; “Journalists? Bootlickers.” They think that people who act honestly do so only out of fear of being caught.

The asshole lives in a world of incompetence and deceit. Studies show that cynical idiots are so uncooperative and mistrustful that they miss out on professional opportunities, and therefore earn less than others do.

In sum, the idiot embodies a sort of exaggerated version of the various tendencies the researchers observed. An idiot who manages to accumulate all these tendencies will become the “emperor of idiots,” which is to say, the most gigantic asshole the earth has ever seen.

But the key question, tied to our starting point—“Is it possible to make a scientific study of idiots?”—is probably: “Why are there so *many* idiots?” Because it is undeniably true that there are. If you shout “poor bastard” in the street, every head will turn around. Once again, the scientific literature provides the answer; indeed, many answers.

First of all, we're all equipped with a bullshit detector called negativity bias.¹⁸ This is a tendency that leads us to give more weight, attention, and interest to negative things than to positive ones. Negativity bias has significant consequences on people's opinions, on their prejudices and stereotypes, on discrimination and superstition. As with housework, we notice the little things only when they *haven't* been done. It's because of our negativity bias that we find it easier to deal with an idiot than with a genius

in a complex social setting. In addition, this bias leads us to read more meaning into a negative event than a positive one. If you're looking for something that you've lost at home, your reflex is to think that you didn't lose it, someone else must have put it somewhere. "Who took my . . .?" Ultimately, when anything fails, there's a tendency to think that there's a reason for it, that some idiot must have wrecked everything.

And finally, let's note that researchers have discovered a fundamental distortion in the attribution process.¹⁹ When you observe someone, you attribute their behavior to deep-dyed character, as opposed to any external factors that may be relevant. In many cases, you come to the natural conclusion: the guy's an idiot. As a result, when a car zooms past us, it must be because the driver is a brute, and not because one of his kids got hurt at school; when a friend doesn't answer an email for two hours it's because he's angry, not because he had an internet outage. If a colleague hasn't handed in a file yet, it's because he's lazy, not because he's overworked; if a professor responds to me curtly it's because he's a jerk, not because my question was stupid. This mechanism increases our tendency to spot idiots everywhere. Those are at least two of the reasons why we are so sensitive to stupidity.

A TAXONOMY OF MORONS



› Jean-François Dortier ‹

*Founder and editorial director of the magazines Le Cercle Psy
[Psychological Circle] and Sciences Humaines [Social Sciences]*

If there are multiple forms of intelligence, as psychologists assert, it stands to reason that there must also be an impressive range of forms of stupidity. Given the embryonic stage of development of this science (to which this book adds a few important milestones) and the dearth of authoritative studies, we should begin with an overview of representative samples.

Backwardness

Backward, slow, ignorant, idiotic, useless, foolish, lug-headed, imbecilic, stupid, witless, cracked, silly, moronic, dippy . . . the vocabulary of stupidity is endless. These semantic riches reflect subtle gradations in meaning, variation in usage, and the effects of social trends.

On the whole, however, the meaning always comes down to the same thing: whatever the variety of epithets and metaphors, the fool is a person who is judged to be of reduced intelligence and limited mental scope. Thus, stupidity is always defined invidiously, as a relative concept. A person is not inherently stupid (if everyone was stupid, nobody would notice it). Put another way, stupidity is measured from a fixed point established by a person who considers himself superior.

Rubes

Also known as rednecks or hillbillies, rubes are stupid, cruel, racist, and selfish. At least that's how the French satirist Cabu, who immortalized their traits in his comic strips, depicted them. They dominate the ranks of the voters who elect populist parties, because they're stupid; which is to say they're incapable of political probity, and they rely on short-term logic and sweeping generalizations. Their thinking is categorical—everything is black or white, with no nuance. They're stubborn and obtuse, and rational arguments hold no sway with them: they won't ever back down from their opinions. They think what they think, period.

They're cruel because, lacking any empathy, they seek out scapegoats and lash out at innocent victims like Arabs, blacks, and migrants in general.

They're selfish because only one thing matters to them: their well-being and comfort; their pocketbook.

But do these rubes conform to an actual psychological profile? If this were the case it would be necessary to demonstrate an organic relationship between stupidity (in the sense of a low level of intellect) and cruelty (defined as selfishness combined with contempt for others).

And yet, the link between these two qualities is only conjectural: a person can be stupid and kind (consider the "village idiot"), just as a person can be intelligent and cruel. Is that not the case of the caricaturists Cabu and Jean-Marc Reiser, who worked for a magazine called *Hara-Kiri*, whose motto was "stupid and nasty"? Those men were not truly stupid (even if the systematic use of caricature and cliché ultimately produces a deadening effect on the wit). Nasty: that they often were.

The Universal Idiot

"They're all morons!" This phrase is uttered, usually rather loudly, by someone sitting on a barstool. But who is this "they"? Politicians, the voters who elect them, bureaucrats, incompetents, and by extension, pretty much everybody—since the phrase does not carry a lot of nuance.

This absence of discernment in analysis, this arrogance that places itself above the common run of humanity to levy judgment on the rest of the world: these are almost foolproof signs that you're dealing with a true idiot. "The peculiar nature of error is that it does not recognize itself," Descartes observed. This is especially true of stupidity. Obviously, a fool cannot recognize himself. On the contrary, he himself constitutes a kind of lightning rod of folly. Wherever you happen to be, if you hear someone declare "They're all morons!" you can be sure that there's a moron in the vicinity.

Artificial Stupidity

"Computers are totally stupid."¹ This assertion doesn't come from just anyone. Gérard Berry teaches computer science at the Collège de France. A specialist in artificial intelligence, he does not hesitate to challenge the

speculations (ill-informed) on the capacity of machines to surpass human intelligence.

Certainly, artificial intelligence has made significant progress in the last sixty years. And certainly, machines can recognize images, translate texts, and produce medical diagnoses. In 2016, the Deepmind computer program AlphaGo succeeded in defeating one of the world's best players of Go, the Japanese game of strategy. While this performance was impressive, we should not overlook the fact that AlphaGo knows how to do only one thing: to play the game of Go. The same was true of the Deep Blue program that beat Garry Kasparov at chess in 1996, more than twenty years ago. All that these so-called intelligent machines do is develop an extremely specialized competence, which is taught to them by their human master. Speculations on the autonomy of machines that can "learn on their own" are nothing but myths. Machines don't know how to transfer skills acquired from one domain into another; whereas one of the basic mechanisms of human intelligence is analogical transfer. The strength of computers is the power of their memories to retain the work they've done, and their electrifying capacity for calculation.

"Learning machines" that work on the principle of "deep learning" (the new generation of artificial intelligence) are not intelligent, because they don't understand what they're doing. All that Google's automatic translation program does, for instance, is learn how to use a word in a given context (drawing on an immense reservoir of examples); but it remains perfectly "stupid" in the process. In no case does it understand the meaning of the words it uses.

This is why Gérard Berry feels justified in saying that, at root, "the computer is completely stupid."

Collective Stupidity

Collective intelligence designates a form of group intelligence, as displayed by ants, or neurons, for example. Each element in isolation is not capable of much; but as a group can produce great feats. By the magic of self-organization, ants are able to build hallways, bridal chambers, pantries,

hatcheries, and ventilation systems in their anthills. Some of them practice agriculture (growing mushrooms), animal husbandry (raising aphids), etc.

Even though its functioning remains unexplained, collective intelligence has become a respected model in a very short time, resting on the simple idea that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Collective decision making and cocreation are better than individual decisions.

Nonetheless, it sometimes happens that the many make a worse decision than the individual. Collective intelligence has its counterpart: collective stupidity. In groups, our capacity for good judgment can be severely reduced. In his studies on group norms, the psychologist Solomon Asch long ago addressed many well-known instances of this phenomenon. To name one: if a majority of people embraces a manifestly false and idiotic theory, others will go along with it merely because of the power of conformity. To name another instance: the false virtues of brainstorming. Take a group of ten people and make them work together for half an hour on a project (like tourism slogans to promote a town, for example). At the same time, set another group to work in which each member works separately on the task. Gather up their reports: the proposals of the second group are much richer and more plentiful than the proposals of the first group. Put another way, sometimes the whole is less than the sum of its parts.

It would be beside the point to conduct large-scale psychological experiments to investigate collective folly. Everything that could be proven in the lab is experienced every day in offices, where collective efforts in meetings produce so many stupid ideas that it's hard not to think that one foolish person had dreamed them all up on his own.

Gullibility

What could be more gullible than a child? You can make a kid believe almost anything: that there's an old guy with a white beard somewhere up in the sky who travels in a flying sled pulled by reindeer, delivering gifts to good children; or that a little fairy hunts under pillows for baby teeth, which she replaces with a quarter when she finds one. . . .

Gullibility is a form of stupidity that is altogether appropriate to childhood. That, in any case, is what the psychologist Jean Piaget thought. The philosopher Lucien Lévy-Bruhl thought that “primitive peoples” were very credulous, too, because of their animist beliefs in “forest spirits” endowed with magical powers, which proved, he thought, that the “savages,” like children, had not attained the age of reason.

But with the advance of scientific research, it has become necessary to concede that children were not as naïve as people thought: they accept that reindeer can fly, but only in a parallel universe that does not obey the laws that apply down here, where they know very well that reindeer can’t fly. We ourselves, rational adults, are prepared to believe in the existence of particles that exhibit strange behaviors (the ubiquitous miracle of long-distance communication) without any confirmation from experts. Some of these scientists are people of faith, some of them even believe in the Resurrection of Christ.

These realizations have led psychologists and sociologists to take another look at what it means to be gullible. Gullibility can no longer be seen to reflect a lack of logic (in other words, infantile stupidity). Believing in things that appear to be unbelievable is related to a system of reference, rather than to naïveté or to an absence of discernment.

At the end of his life, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl admitted that he had been mistaken about the mentality of the “primitives.” It’s to his credit that he acknowledged his error, a pretty rare occurrence in the world of philosophers.

Slowness

When, at the end of the nineteenth century, Jules Ferry made primary education obligatory in France, it appeared that certain students were incapable of absorbing routine instruction. Two psychologists, Alfred Binet and Theodore Simon, were asked to create an intelligence test in order to identify such children so that they could receive an adapted education. This test formed the basis of what would later become the famous “IQ”—the Intelligence Quotient.

By convention, the average IQ of a population is 100 percent. The emergence of the IQ tests led to the definition of mental deficiency and its subtypes: from “borderline deficiency,” among those whose IQ was less than 80 (and higher than 65); to “moderate deficiency,” applying to those who scored between 50 and 65; to “profound deficiency” (members of this category were once deemed “imbeciles”), with an IQ of 20 to 34. Still further below, with an IQ inferior to 20, are the “profoundly backward” (formerly classified as “idiots”).

Today, the words “retarded” and “impaired” are out of favor in psychology; they have been replaced by euphemisms. We speak of “learning disabilities” and we avoid the expressions “handicapped” and “differently abled.” In the same way, we no longer speak of “geniuses” or “gifted” children; we speak of “precocious children” or of children with “high potential.” This doesn’t keep anyone, in practice, from using tests to classify children according to their degree of mental disability, so they can be guided to specialized methods of instruction.

Imbecile, Idiot

At the dawn of psychiatry, the terms “imbecility” and “idiocy” were used to describe people who displayed a very low level of intellect, who could not read, write, and in certain cases, speak. Philippe Pinel, the French physician who is sometimes called the “father of modern psychiatry,” considered Victor de l’Aveyron (better known as the “wild boy of Aveyron”) to be an “idiot.” Today the boy would be classified as autistic. In the words of the psychiatrist Jean-Étienne Esquirol, “The idiot is an individual who knows nothing, is capable of nothing, and wants nothing. Every idiot embodies, more or less, the acme of incapacity.”

Dr. Paul Sollier, in his 1891 book *Psychologie de l’Idiot et de l’Imbécile: Essai de Psychologie Morbide* [*The Psychology of the Idiot and the Imbecile: An Essay on Psychological Morbidity*], devoted one chapter to “idiots and imbeciles.” Apologizing for the tardy progress of French psychology, as compared to English and American achievement in the science, he noted that there was no consensus on the right way to define idiocy or imbecility: some use intelligence as the evaluative factor, others

rely on language (the inability to speak correctly); still others apply moral considerations (a lack of self-control).

Over time, psychologists would abandon the concept of the “idiot.” The only remnant of this notion that still pops up on occasion is the term “idiot savant,” though even there, the term “savant syndrome” is preferred. The profile, which incorporates certain cases of autism and of the developmental disorder known as Williams syndrome, is marked by deficits in language or in general intelligence, and also by unusual difficulties with mathematics, drawing, and music.

For centuries, the village idiot was the archetype of an intellectually disabled person, the fool, the simpleton. Not too long ago, every village had its “crackpot” (*fada* is the expression used in the south of France), who would be hired for menial tasks. This oaf was regarded as pleasant and harmless, always smiling and happy, laughing over nothing. He wasn’t considered dangerous. In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Dopey, with his beatific smile, big eyes, and crooked cap, illustrates the type.

Loons

“Loon” is a cute way to talk about fools, not angry fools, but the dreamy kind caught up in a fantasy world. The loon is a step away from the weirdo—that is to say, a loon who does bizarre or excessive things. And the weirdo is not far removed from the freak, who, according to the rigorous National Center for Textual and Lexical Resources, is “generally a fantasist who displays eccentric behavior.” In current French usage, the expression “freak out” can mean horse around, show off, or act goofy; and it also approximates the French expression “*faire le zouave*”: to act like a clown. In English, “get your freak on” recently entered the *Oxford English Dictionary*, meaning, roughly, to engage in uninhibited sexual behavior, or to dance like a maniac.

A THEORY OF ASSHOLES



A Conversation with
› Aaron James ‹

*Professor of philosophy at the University of California, Irvine, and author
of Assholes: A Theory*

Q. According to your theory, what is an asshole?

A. It's a man, or more rarely a woman, who accords himself special advantages in his social life and feels immune from reproach. The typical example is the asshole who cuts in line at the post office, granting himself a privilege that's normally reserved for pregnant women and emergencies. In the moment, he has no justification beyond feeling that he's rich, handsome, or smarter than everyone else, so his time is more valuable than theirs. If you ask him to stand in line like everyone else, either he won't listen, or he'll tell you to get lost. It's not that he despises other people; rather, it's that he doesn't think they deserve his attention. The moment that you don't understand how extraordinary he is, he decides you're unworthy of his interest.

Q. Do assholes behave like assholes in every arena of their lives?

A. Not necessarily. Someone can act like an asshole because he's going through a rough patch, it might be a bad week, or some hangover from his adolescence. But for me, the bona fide asshole, the true asshole, is consistently an asshole in multiple arenas, but not in all of them. He might be an asshole at work and on the road, but not at home, or the other way around. The all-purpose asshole, who's an asshole whatever the context, is rare. Stalin appears to have been not only a genocidal maniac, but also an asshole in every sphere.

Q. Can extremely cultured and intelligent people be the worst assholes?

A. The worst, I don't know; in any case they're as bad as everyone else. Intelligence doesn't keep you from being a serious asshole; it can even contribute to it by planting the idea in the skull of the asshole that he's above the throng. Along with financial prosperity and beauty, intelligence is one of the qualities that make it easier to admire yourself and to attract the good opinion of others. This means that privileged people have a much greater risk of becoming eminent assholes.

Q. So you're saying that assholery has less to do with intelligence or attitude than with the way we conduct ourselves in our social lives?

A. Yes, it has to do with social behavior, but the internal trip wire is the failure to show interest in others. Assholes think it's up to everyone else to adjust to them, no matter what the situation. Oftentimes, some of their friends will humor them in that. And so one part of it is the social dynamic, but the primary cause is something personal and deeply rooted that's very hard to dislodge.

Q. Is an asshole who's aware of his assholery still an asshole?

A. The problem is that an asshole can be well aware that that's what he is, and be proud of it. "Yeah, I'm an asshole. That's your problem!" Awareness isn't enough to change anything. The asshole is so entrenched in his assholery that it's hard for him to question his actions. But it's not impossible: if he has an existential crisis, or a car accident, or a tragedy, he might take stock of himself. Or when he gets old. But by that time, it's mostly because he's low on energy or testosterone! And that's still quite rare; you can't count on it. In any case, awareness in itself is not sufficient to deeply affect the conscience of an asshole.

Q. Can children be assholes?

A. Although you might think so, given the egocentrism they sometimes display, I don't think you can include assholery among their fixed character traits. They change too quickly for that. But adolescents can go through assholeish phases, though most of them grow out of it. It's really only in adulthood that assholery becomes constant and systematic.

Q. How many adults may be considered assholes? One in ten? One in two?

A. Everything depends on the culture, the subculture, and the social sphere. The ratio is much higher in the United States than in Canada, Italy, or

Brazil or Japan—for that matter, pretty much nowhere has less asshole than Japan. Of course, this changes all the time: I think there are many more assholes in the United States today than there were in the past, and they're a lot more visible because of the media. One in two would seem too high to me, no matter which country, because every society depends on the civility and cooperation of its members for its survival, and that's not the strong suit of assholes.

Q. How can the persistence of assholes be explained? Do they have an evolutionary advantage?

A. Something probably went on with the behavior of primates and their masculine domination tactics—all those power games to reach the top that perpetuate the pattern of assholes believing themselves superior. But I don't think those factors played a very decisive role in the development of civilization and institutions, whose structure generally allows for the suppression of assholes. In a culture where individualism prevails, like the United States, they present more problems.

Q. What can we do about them? Can we change them?

A. I think they can change, but it's better not to get involved. Sometimes an asshole will be kept on in an organization, because he brings in money, for example, or academic prestige. Robert Sutton was right to propose his “No Asshole Rule,”¹ but that objective cannot always be achieved. A method must be found to marginalize them in multiple ways, and to join forces against them, because it's by dividing people against each other that assholes accomplish their goals. This is much easier in small groups than in a political context. But there's a lot society can do to reduce the number of assholes, even though it's hard, because they have a knack of blocking our path.

Q. What about the assholes in our own families?

A. This is both banal and very delicate. Often, you try to isolate the asshole. Sometimes it's that a woman can't, or doesn't want to, get divorced

from an asshole, but tries her utmost to avoid him and to reduce contact with him. To preserve our mental health, there's often not much else we can do.

Q. Are assholes happier than ordinary people?

A. Good question! Plato and Aristotle formulated an objective vision of happiness: to act justly. That does not produce assholes! Also, the quality of assholes' relationships is abominable. All the same, whether he admits it to himself or not—and often this is not the case—an asshole may be happier than other people if you take a more subjective view of happiness, combining it with satisfaction. The asshole is satisfied with himself when he gets what he wants: attention, fame, money, power, prestige—everything he feels entitled to. But often, he can maintain his feeling of superiority only at the cost of enormous anxiety. Because, however good he is at this little game, and he's excellent at it, he needs to feel he's smarter than other people and to take them on, one against all, with no apologies, even in the thick of everyday interactions. Among dogs and gorillas, the male alpha often dies young because of the stress caused by keeping track of his rivals. Even if the asshole convinces himself that he's happy with his life, you'd like to say to him: "You know, pal, if you were more accommodating, you'd be less stressed!"

Q. Are we secretly jealous of assholes?

A. Not really. You can feel impotent, frustrated, indignant when you're confronted with someone who repulses you. How can a person be that way? Emulation doesn't enter into it. But when assholes succeed, you can feel jealousy: "That's how you get famous, by acting like an asshole? I could have done that! But he thought of it first, and he was quicker about it." If you're a bit of an asshole yourself, you can appreciate the technique of a connoisseur. But when you see an asshole on the highway, it's contempt you feel in the end.

Q. Should we feel grateful to an asshole, if only because he shows us that we're better than that?

A. Even if you learn to get along with one, I don't think it's possible to feel gratitude for assholes, unless they end up recognizing your value as a human being. You can always congratulate yourself on understanding them and handling them better, like I felt after I finished my book. But I feel no gratitude, because they do bad things for bad reasons with no consideration for me. They cause too many frustrations and problems. At the end of the day, I might sometimes think I've dealt with them or responded to them well, but I don't give them credit for it: I would have preferred not to have run into them!

Q. In 2016, you devoted a book to the dangers posed by the election of Donald Trump. Do you consider him a supreme asshole, or is he worse than that?

A. Yes, Donald Trump is a supreme asshole, an überasshole, if you like. I mean by that, that he's an asshole who inspires respect and admiration for his mastery of the art of assholery, despite heavy competition from his peers. Assholes generally have to fight for the title of "asshole in chief" or "baron" of assholes, but few can match Trump's prowess at piling assholery upon assholery (Kim Jong-un, in North Korea, being a notable exception). Those who manage it for a time, like Chris Christie, the former governor of New Jersey, often end up becoming more docile.

Q. Were there any assholes among the world's illustrious philosophers?

A. It's funny, but I've written about Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose reflections on self-esteem are very important to our understanding of the mind-set of assholes and the destructive dynamic it produces. But Rousseau himself abandoned his numerous children, and I believe I heard that he practically bought a twelve-year-old girl and installed her in a little cottage to give him sexual favors. Despite his genius, in some ways he definitely resembles an asshole!

Q. Have any assholes congratulated you on the success of your book about them?

A. Yes, readers have written me to say, “Thank you for this book, my children gave it to me, and there’s no question that I’m an asshole.” Their comments have always been kind. “Bravo, well played.” And some have even sworn that it was going to change their life and that they were going to behave differently . . . not at all. As for the assholes I know, I don’t know if they’ve read it or not: I try to limit my interactions with them as much as possible!

Interview by Jean-François Marmion.

FROM STUPIDITY TO HOGWASH



› Pascal Engel ‹

*Philosopher and director of studies at the École des Hautes Études en
Sciences Sociales*

How shall we classify the various forms of stupidity? Moronic, idiotic, cretinous, silly, dumb, foolish, imbecilic, clueless, inept, and that supreme qualifier, *fucking* stupid? Do they all come down to the same thing? Is *stupid* the genus to which all the other species cling? In France, the word “*con*” could stand in for all the others. But how can the word “stupidity” even be defined, given the blurriness of its categories and the fact that they so often can be reduced to mere insults? It’s hard to determine if all the different gradations represent actual, distinct qualities. Indeed, the vocabulary of stupidity is so ingrained in language and culture that it seems impossible to establish universal principles at all. Is *tonto* in Spanish really analogous to the French *idiot*? Is *moron* in American English the same as *dunce* in British English? Does *asshole* in English mean the same thing as *connard* in French? So great is the variety of forms of stupidity that, since antiquity, many of those who have taken on the task of attempting to define its essence have given up, choosing instead to give illustrations of it.

Comedy and satire often (or perhaps exclusively) attack human folly; and practitioners of the art from Aristophanes to Lucian, from Persius to Juvenal, from Erasmus to Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope, from Molière to Voltaire, from Feydeau to Alfred Jarry, from P. G. Wodehouse to Flann O’Brien, have contributed so many incarnations of stupidity that it’s hard to find any one unifying element. Ship of fools? Circus? Pandemonium? Zoo? How are they different? Most of the taxonomists of folly have contented themselves with enumerating examples of it, and every time a philosopher tries to propound a theory, it’s immediately disproved by others. Only literary authors, from Gustave Flaubert to Léon Bloy, from Robert Musil to Witold Gombrowicz, from Jean-Paul Sartre to Milan Kundera, would seem to be up to the job; but they don’t go beyond the discouraging conclusion: “That’s the way it is.”

Degrees of Stupidity

Even if the classification of stupidity is difficult, it’s not impossible. Stupidity has degrees, which may be described by composite portraits of individual types. At the lowest step of the ladder is the dull-witted stupidity,

literally bestial, of those whose intelligence is so low that it approaches the animal kingdom (donkey, buzzard, dodo)—perfectly embodying brute stupidity. It also applies to those who react to everything with befuddlement, lower lip drooping. This kind of denseness is earthbound (like the backward Boeotians in ancient Greece) and stony (like the La Fontaine fable about the well-meaning bear who smashes the head of his human friend with a paving stone to protect him from a fly). Among the French, slang has mostly reduced this category to one word: *con*, the vulgar term for female genitalia. For men, though, a couple of other words sometimes come into play: scrotum or dickhead.

One step higher up the ladder you find idiots and imbeciles, those whose understanding is so weak (aka feeble) that their debility seems almost pathological. This category also includes cretins afflicted by congenital infirmities. Another step higher you find those who, while somewhat sharper than the brute contingent, are nice but bumbling. These are the simpletons, the ninnies, dolts, and nitwits.

One step higher still, you find the fools. The fool does not necessarily lack for intelligence, and on occasion may show good judgment. But he deploys it badly, and is undermined by his vanity; he likes to circulate, and he needs the company of others. Whereas brutes are solitary, he is social. He's pompous and full of himself, like a conceited character in a Molière comedy. The fool is not passive. Often, like Flaubert's Bouvard and Pécuchet, he buzzes with activity. He isn't hostile to knowledge, and he's not incapable of acquiring it; his folly resides in the fact that he doesn't know how to apply it or to put it to use.

At a level still higher than simple foolishness, you find what Musil calls "sophisticated" or "intelligent" stupidity, which he claims extends into the highest realms of wit.¹ The intelligent fool can be very learned and cultivated; he may even sparkle in society, but his intelligence does not match his affectations. He comes up with ill-conceived and unwieldy plans, because, Musil tells us, he suffers from "insufficient harmony between the whims of his emotion and the scope of his intellect, which is too small to contain them." Musil contrasts this stupidity, or intelligent foolishness, with "honest" stupidity, which bears "the rosy cheeks of ordinary life." He often caricatures snobs who don't know why they admire something or someone, like Proust's salonniste Madame Verdurin, or the businessmen Arnheim and

General Stumm in Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*, or men with big plans, like the supposed author of Swift's "A Modest Proposal." The sophisticated fool has a form of moral defect that, unlike other forms of stupidity, consists not of an inability to bend means to an end, but of blindness as to the nature of ends. This elevated form of stupidity is a vice, and those who are affected by it are wholly responsible for it. It is here where the prevalent idea of stupidity as an intellectual defect hits a wall. Quite often it's said that stupid people are also mean and cruel; they ignore and often despise moral values. But often enough, they also look down on intellectual values.²

Folly and Bullshit

This is where intelligent stupidity—or more properly, folly, to use the language of classic literature (which rarely resorted to the term "stupidity"), comes into contact with what Harry Frankfurt has designated as "bullshit."³ Bullshit, according to his 1997 book *On Bullshit*, is a type of discourse that literally consists of saying absolutely anything, without worrying whether it's true or false. The typical form it takes is gossip, whether fashionable gossip or idle chatter, of the kind encountered most often in journalism and advertising. A bullshitter is someone who "speaks nonsense," which is why the French title of Frankfurt's book is *The Art of Speaking Nonsense*. But to bullshit is not to commit, or to speak, folly, absurdity, or stupidity. It is to systemically devalue not only the difference between true and false, but also truth itself. Frankfurt insists that the bullshitter is not a liar, because liars respect the norms of truth, and depend on them to carry off their lies. The bullshitter, on the other hand, just doesn't care. But he's anything but stupid, or a generator of stupidity. On the contrary, he's intelligent, but doesn't give a damn about the truth. That's why it's more appropriate to designate "bullshit" as hogwash.

The production of hogwash, as opposed to simple foolishness, is folly in the second degree. It takes into account the values of truth and knowledge, but neither acknowledges them nor practices them. That's why, rather than lies, hogwash is a form of deception that can readily be seen in the public arena, for instance, in politics. In the seventeenth century, hogwash was

represented by what was called the “*bel esprit*”—the wit—of whom Malebranche said: “The ignoramus and the *bel esprit* are equally shut off from the truth, the difference being that the ignoramus respects it, and the *bel esprit* despises it.” The fool or the simple creature (who may, like Félicité in the Flaubert story, possess a simple heart) respects the worth of wit, and even pretends to serve it, even if he does so badly or unsuccessfully. The complicated fool, like the producer of hogwash, looks down on it. Hogwash may be regarded as the supreme arena for stupidity. Balzac’s “Illustrious Gaudissart” in the *Comédie Humaine*, Honoré Daumier’s caricatures, and Melville’s *The Confidence-Man* incarnated it in fiction; Donald Trump incarnates it in real life.

A Fool Thinks Too Much

This classification of the forms of stupidity may appear rudimentary, but it has the advantage of emphasizing that stupidity is not, or is not only, an incapacity of understanding, an intellectual defect, or a deficit of judgment that puts an individual in a permanent or temporary state of inertia or lack of freedom. The same is true of the Greek term *moria* and the Roman term *stultitia*, which often have been translated as “folly,” since Erasmus wrote his ironic elegy. *Stultitia* has as much to do with folly as with stupidity. As the aphorist Chamfort said two centuries ago, “Three-fourths of folly is just stupidity.” For the ancients and the European greats, folly stood in opposition to wisdom and reason, but it was not the counterpart or the absolute opposite of reason. The fool loves to reason, and often reasons too much. As Chrysale says in Molière’s *The Learned Ladies*, “Reasoning banishes reason.” The fool is not merely a *minus habens*, a moron. He’s someone who goes too far, who exceeds the bounds of sense, and from there, of propriety in the realm of wit. He’s both irrelevant and impertinent (and hogwash is an impertinent form of discourse).

The concept of stupidity as a surfeit of reason was put forward by the great moralists of the French Enlightenment, from La Bruyère to Vauvenargues, as well as by master satirists like Swift and Voltaire. But with those two, this surfeit was always denounced in the name of the proper use of reason, which they held to be a law of nature, destined to correct

deceitful flights of fancy. The Romantics, on the other hand, exalted the power and worth of feeling, and rejected cold reason. Not only did they let themselves be beguiled by folly, they defined reason itself as stupidity. Kant held that reason, when it attempts to reach beyond experience, inevitably strays into illusion. Schopenhauer, then Nietzsche, both embraced the notion that reason was irrational by its very nature, and therefore—stupid. It is “reason itself that’s the fool,” as the French journalist and writer Georges Picard put it.⁴ The great nineteenth-century writers on stupidity, Flaubert first among them, would revisit this theme. Flaubert’s Homais, Bouvard, and Pécuchet—and through them the wider bourgeoisie—are extremely rational. But they take it too far. With them, will always ends up defeating reason, though not for any lack of the latter.

In his great book on stupidity, *Bréviaire de la Bêtise*, Alain Roger explored the theme of sufficient reason. The self-sufficient, arrogant fool believes that reason solves everything.⁵ Stupidity, in his judgment, embodies the basic principles of logic—the law of the excluded third, contradiction, and identity—while making them ridiculous. The fool would like all propositions to be true or false (“Do you love me or not?”), he cannot tolerate contradictions (“You can’t have a thing and its opposite at the same time”), and above all, he abounds in tautologies (“Business is business,” “A rose is a rose”). Flaubert and Bloy in particular focused on this defining characteristic of bourgeois stupidity, which revels in clichés and truisms (“Artists: all fakers”). Here the vanity of the fool reemerges, the self-satisfied tautology, meaningless because it is always true. People resort to tautologies when they have nothing relevant or meaningful to say except to recall a thing’s relation to itself: “A penny is a penny,” “A woman is a woman.” To come full circle, Georges Brassens nailed this tendency with the lyric: “When you’re dumb, you’re dumb.” Here, the production of tautologies comes close to hogwash, which, despite its emptiness, flaunts itself without shame, full of itself. It’s also the hallmark of a specific form of obstinate stupidity, in its essence authoritarian, which is best exemplified by military stupidity (as Graeme Allwright sings, “We were waist deep in the Big Muddy and the big fool said to push on”).

The Era of Mass Stupidity

Clichés are thoughts shared by everyone—those expressed by crowds, as opposed to the thoughts of the individual, which Romantics believe to be uniquely capable of fighting the depersonalized mass mind incarnated by reason and technology, in the name of art. But in the twentieth century, and still more so in the twenty-first, even art has become stupid and false, as in kitsch; a form of folly applied to beauty, a corruption of aesthetic judgment. But most of all, stupidity is ceasing to be characteristic of a particular type of individual, as it was in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and is truly becoming a collective, mass phenomenon. The production of hogwash, which already was endemic in the press, has lately become pandemic across all media, on the internet and on social networks, which broadcast it in such massive doses that hogwash has become a political force. Hogwash belongs to what we call the “post-truth” era, which should more properly be called the hogwash era: the production of a type of discourse and thought in which nobody tries anymore to find out if what’s being said is true; all that counts is the effect it produces. Hogwash is both stupid, because it’s out of control, and powerful, because it can be put in service of political strategies and propaganda.

If the origins of stupidity and folly lie in the excesses of reason, how can we trust reason to fight them? That’s the dilemma that all the great thinkers have confronted, from Nietzsche to Heidegger, from Sartre to Foucault, who accuse reason and the Enlightenment of producing mass culture, unreasoning technologies, and totalitarianism. They often have solved this dispute by championing irrationality, like the Romantics. But the cure for the disease of stupidity is not to abandon reason. It is to adopt a self-critical form of reason that is conscious of its own limitations.

TO BE HUMAN IS TO BE EASILY FOOLED



› Jean-François Marmion ‹

Psychologist and associate editor of Sciences Humaines

If you are unaware of *Homo economicus*, hurry to bump into him while he still exists. Until the turn of the century, he was the model of the autonomous individual, defined by the “expected utility” of his choices, that is, by acting in his own best interests, especially financially. Egotistical, rational, and consistent. The acme of neoclassical economics. It was simple. It was beautiful. It was not real.

Get Thee Behind Me, *Economicus*!

For a long time, psychologists themselves have been divided on the utility of this model. It’s doubtful that psychoanalysts, always inclined to hunt for buried drives and unconscious motivations—the dark side of things—were disposed to bring skepticism to a concept thought to be so clever and clear-sighted. But there were those, starting with cognitive scientists, who believed that human thought functioned like a computer, using algorithms to process information.

Some models from the 1980s (like M. D. S. Braine’s natural logic, or Patricia Cheng and Keith Holyoak’s theory on pragmatic schemas of reasoning) portrayed human beings as manipulators of formal rules or representations (as in Philip Johnson-Laird’s theory of mental models). Since the 1960s, other cognitive scientists had also been chipping away at *Homo economicus*, among them, Peter Wason—a pioneer in the psychology of reason—with his “selection tasks.”

In one of Wason’s selection tasks, four cards can be used to demonstrate the variables. Each one is marked by a letter on one side and a number on the other, for example D, F, 7, and 5. How does it work? “Which cards must you turn over to verify the following rule: If there is a D on the face of a card, there is a 7 on the back?”

However you tackle the problem, there can be only one correct response from a logical perspective: you must turn over the D and the 5. In other words, you must seek a way to disprove the rule, not to confirm it. Otherwise, you fall into “confirmation bias.” Wouldn’t you know!

Of course, 80 percent of us didn’t know . . . and had no intuition about it. We fooled ourselves without being able to avail ourselves of the excuse that we were distracted by emotion. There’s no harm in that, because, quite

simply, contrary to the theory that explains *Homo economicus*, we are neither logicians nor natural statisticians. *Homo economicus* suffered his most devastating blow in 2002, when the Israeli American psychologist Daniel Kahneman received the Nobel Prize in Economics. At the beginning of the 1970s, in work he conducted with his colleague Amos Tversky, who died in 1996, he brought to light the intuitive reasoning that people bring to their daily lives: heuristics. Heuristics resemble logic much as Monopoly money resembles real currency: they're rough and approximate. But they work well enough in everyday life. We can use them without doing much damage, because they spare us the labor of meticulous and conscientious reasoning that might be more precise but would exhaust and paralyze us.

After this Nobel was awarded, *Homo economicus*, now publicly repudiated, lost his luster, and the path was cleared for a new discipline: behavioral economics, which has become very popular, particularly in times of crisis, when traditional economic models don't apply. This time around, reasoning and decision making are being examined not in disembodied situations, but in realistic settings, in an experimental context. The results do not flatter us. Nothing but biases guides our choices! We're all short-term reasoners and decision makers. Tracking our flawed reasoning has become an Olympic sport in social and cognitive psychology, as well as in neuroscience, with ever more embarrassing consequences for the stature of human rational powers. For example, the social psychologist Solomon Asch has demonstrated that the impulse to conformity leads us to deny our own perceptions. If you're the only one in a group who recognizes that two lines are of the same length, you're likely to deceive yourself on purpose, so you can embrace everyone else's opinion in good faith.

In 2005, the researcher Gregory Berns, of Emory University in Atlanta, repeated Asch's experiment using MRI scans. What did he find? When the brain refuses to accept evidence, the neural area that comes into play isn't the specialized section that deals with cognitive conflicts, it's the part that controls spatial perception.

Other people's judgment transforms our perception of lines; something we formerly considered an aberration proves to be a truth that we can't override. The gist: an error is not merely a superficial opinion; it transforms our perception of reality. It blinds us. Or in any case, it clouds our vision. Got it?

The literature about our infernal biases and misguided heuristics abounds. Sometimes we're given dire warnings. "Stop fooling yourselves!"¹ declares the Swiss writer Rolf Dobelli, hoping to help us dodge the booby traps of our daily reasoning, especially the ones set by economists and journalists.

Fool Yourself and Heaven Will Help You

The journalist Kathryn Schulz takes an opposing position in *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error*.² You've made a mistake: so what? Mistakes can be creative and instructive: all you have to do is learn from them. Clearly, this debate is not of interest only to psychologists and economists. So, should we give up on being rational, make peace with our folly, and hail our weaknesses as good fortune? Maybe all three at once.

In his book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*,³ Daniel Kahneman (him again) states that we reason at two speeds.

Thinking fast, which the Nobel Prize laureate calls System 1, is the heuristics zone. This is automatic pilot. You think poorly but quickly, doing as much as you can with what's in front of you, on the spur of the moment, and then you move on to other things. You categorize the world in broad strokes, you make guesses, and you botch things. Often this works, but sometimes it doesn't. That's when thinking slow, System 2, comes in. Powerful, precise, and subtle, it's capable of flights of mental gymnastics. It's not to be taken lightly. It abhors sweeping generalizations. It focuses, it pauses, it proceeds at a slow pace. It has only one flaw: it's lazy. While the hyperactive System 1 steers the chaotic ship through the course of events, System 2 just floats along. If you hit the rapids, it will take the helm, but it will monopolize your attention, burning up great amounts of energy. There's a cost to quality! In short, thanks to System 2, when you want to reason, you can. A little. But you hardly ever want to.

Even then, you almost never come close to the infallibility of glacial, formal logic. Herbert Simon, who won the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1978, suggested that while we are definitely endowed with rationality, it's a "limited" rationality. And this is what has permitted us to survive as a species.

If our ancestors had assumed the pose of Rodin's *The Thinker* every time they had to decide whether to flee a predator or an enemy, humanity would have become extinct a long time ago. It was necessary for System 1, however flawed, to exist.

However often we muse on System 1 and deplore its failings, we still have the deluxe parallel System 2 to fall back on, which we sparingly deploy. Given that austere logic is not our natural element, we are furnished with multiple registers of imperfect reasoning adapted to our condition, which permit us to survive in a complex, unstable, and uncertain environment.

So yes, it's true: to err is human. Indeed, we probably owe a large part of our humanity to error.

LET JUSTICE DO ITS WORK (OF DIGESTION)



After a lunch break, or even a short recess, magistrates approve 65 percent of parole applications. Afterward, as time passes, the judges gradually become harsher and harsher, until they turn down practically everything, en bloc. After the next recess, they rise again to the threshold of 65 percent leniency. This was the finding of a 2011 analysis of nearly a thousand decisions made by eight Israeli magistrates. The proportion of yeas and nays depends on whether the magistrates are full or hungry.¹ J.-F. M.



We translate the elements of a problem into propositional logic, which is to say, into abstract formulations—independent of our experience and out of context—in this manner: If a , then b ; or $a = b$ (the case of *modus ponens*, in logic). And also: if a , then b ; then non- $b =$ non- a (*modus tollens*), etc.

CHENG AND HOLYOAK'S THEORY OF PRAGMATIC SCHEMAS OF REASONING

We make rational decisions based on conditional knowledge, acquired through experience, of the “if, then” variety. In such contexts, the logic goes: if this, then that—or not. For example, if a car is approaching quickly, then I won't cross the street.

JOHNSON-LAIRD'S THEORY OF MENTAL MODELS

We do not make rational decisions through simple logical rules, but through representations, which we illustrate with examples or counterexamples. *J.-F. M.*

CRITIQUE OF THE PURE REASONER

The mythic *Homo economicus* was supposed to practice pure logic. He reasoned through acts of deduction that were predicated on starting points—premises—presented as certain, in order to reach a reliable conclusion. Once they had established this, the theoreticians of *Homo economicus* completely neglected other types of reasoning practiced by human beings, like inductive reasoning, through which we draw general laws from partial observations—which is to say, in a state of uncertainty. This is what Jean-François Bonnefon

explains in his book *Le Raisonneur et Ses Modèles* [*The Reasoner and His Models*].¹ Bonnefon, director of research at the Toulouse School of Economics and the recipient of a bronze medal from the National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) in Paris, writes: “Deduction represents only an infinitesimal fraction of our reason, complicated by all sorts of parameters, such as our preferences, what we would like to see happen, and what we would like to be true. For a long time, we’ve studied how reason is affected by intangible facts, without trying to find out if these facts were desirable, or whom they served. We acted as if people always reason for the sheer pleasure of it, with no practical goal. Whereas, in fact, we do not reason only to achieve a particular goal, we also are capable of doing so while incorporating the presumed goals of others. When we reason about other people, we take into account that we are thinking about what they want.”

Even if we’d like to keep on reasoning through deduction, we can’t. Very simply, this is because we rarely can anchor our reflections on absolutely certain premises. “We knew that people were capable of coping with uncertainty, but we’d thought it was a marginal consideration,” Jean-François Bonnefon explains.

“Furthermore, more and more researchers suggest that the opposite is true, that the time we devote every day to deduction and to the processing of reliable information is secondary. The fundamental, true human capacity is for managing uncertainty; deduction represents only a small portion of our activity. If you’re capable of reasoning while taking uncertainty into consideration, you’re capable of doing it with certainty. He who can do more can do less. This is the source of theories that attempt to explain the utility of more rather than less.”

Unrealistic theories treat human beings like disembodied objects that take no interest in mistakes or in failures of reasoning. In an ideal world, hypotheses about human rationality would be as neatly laid out as a meticulously

landscaped French garden. In the real world, human reason is like the trees that hide the forest. J.-F. M.

COMMON BIASES (AND HEURISTICS)

There are dozens of ways to think, and we humans use all of them! Here are some of the biases (errors of reasoning) and heuristics (automatic and approximative deductions, not necessarily wrong) that have been identified by the scientific community.

HEURISTIC OF REPRESENTATIVENESS: THE CASE OF LINDA

A classic from team Kahneman and Tversky. Linda is thirty years old, single, bright, and engaging. Which is more probable? That she would be employed by a bank? That she would be a feminist? That she would be employed by a bank *and* be a feminist? Nearly all of us lean toward the third hypothesis, which seems most realistic, given what we think we know about bank employees and feminists. But that's illogical, because whatever Linda's attributes may be, from a statistical standpoint, "Linda is this" will always be more probable than "Linda is this, and also that."

HEURISTIC OF ANCHORING/ADJUSTMENT: A BAD MOORING IN THE FOG

Pick a number at random, then estimate how many member states are in the United Nations. The higher the number you picked, the higher the number of states you will enfold into the United Nations. (Yes, this experiment has been done.) When we're in doubt, we cling to any reference point, even one generated by chance, to make our assessments, even if it has nothing to do with the question that

preoccupies us. This is a mooring that, paradoxically, directs us to itself, not toward the truth.

HEURISTIC OF AVAILABILITY: THE LOUDEST VOICE IS RIGHT

We extrapolate from memories that have made the strongest mark in our imagination, or simply from our most recent memories. When a schizophrenic commits a murder, that information sticks in our minds, and even if we know nothing about schizophrenia, we conclude that all schizophrenics are dangerous. Nobody talks about trains that arrive on time, so therefore they're all late!

LOSS AVERSION: A BIRD IN THE HAND VERSUS TWO IN THE BUSH

The thought of losing a hundred dollars moves us twice as much as the thought of winning a hundred dollars. Loss aversion is at the heart of perspective theory, one of the theories elaborated by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky. That's why investors often wait too long and sell at a loss. Additionally, we're more easily persuaded by an argument like: "Don't let your buying power decline" than "Increase your buying power." "Work to earn more?" No, "Work to lose less!"

FRAMING BIAS: HALF EMPTY OR HALF FULL?

You're given the choice between two planes. The first has a 97 percent chance of landing safely, the second has a 3 percent chance of crashing. Which one do you board? Spontaneously, you would tend to choose the first plane even though the risks are equivalent for the two flights. This is how framing affects our judgment.

CONFIRMATION BIAS: BLINKERS OR NOTHING

It's cliché: we retain things that confirm our vision of the world, and we minimize, or reject, anything that might prove that our vision is

wrong. Examples: I'm conservative? I read *The Wall Street Journal*, of course. I'm liberal? *The Nation*. I believe in astrology? I exult over the three astrologers who predicted that a plane would crash in the United States in September 2001. I ignore the thousands of others who didn't foresee the September 11 attacks. And what if I really have no choice, if I'm forced to confront a scientific fact that proves me wrong? To keep it from sinking in, I'll insist that the science isn't definitive, that the right method hasn't been discovered to produce a correct conclusion on the subject that grips me. This is what the psychologist Geoffrey Munro calls the "excuse of scientific impotence."

HINDSIGHT BIAS: I WOULD HAVE MADE THAT BET!

"Were you surprised by the results of the congressional elections?" "Not at all!" responds the political analyst. "It couldn't have gone any other way!" And then he'll list in good faith all the facts or general tendencies that logically led to the current situation . . . which he had never previously stated. The implication is that fate has a user's manual; you'd just forgotten to decode it in time.

AUTHORITY BIAS: "THE WHITE COAT EFFECT"

One morning, an unknown man dressed in a Napoleon costume warned passersby that a UFO had just flown over their city. He offered them masks to shield them from potentially harmful extraterrestrial emanations. In the afternoon, he did the same thing, but this time, dressed in a white lab coat. In your opinion, in which case would passersby hesitate? In the presence of an expert, people become meek. The social psychologist Stanley Milgram famously demonstrated this phenomenon in 1960, in an experiment in which ordinary people consented to electrocute strangers in order to please a pseudoscientist.

CONVENIENCE BIAS: I WAS BORN, IT'S VOLTAIRE'S FAULT

When I succeed, it's because I'm good. When I fail, it's other people's fault, or a question of circumstance. This attitude should not be confused with basic attribution error, by which we hold other people responsible for their behavior, regardless of external factors. For example, we assume that a person who reads a speech by Fidel Castro because he is required to do so must actually agree with what he's reading (this experiment has been done).

THE ILLUSION OF CAUSALITY (OR ILLUSORY CORRELATION): STORKS AND BABIES

Just because two events are simultaneous doesn't mean that they're connected. If you observe a rise in the number of storks and the number of babies, there is no cause-and-effect link. Yet the illusion of causality gives rise to thorny debates. For instance, over the last twenty years, the marked increase of autism cases has coincided with the rise of the internet, therefore, the internet must cause autism. This offhand observation, made by the researcher Susan Greenfield, at Oxford University, has earned her no small share of sarcastic remarks.

THE HALO EFFECT: IN FOR A PENNY, IN FOR A POUND

You know, you have beautiful eyes . . . so it follows that you must be kind, intelligent, and honest—and also, you have no underarm odor. Absurd? Recognizing any quality in a person predisposes you to attribute many others to them. At school, it's easier for a more physically attractive pupil to get good grades, because he's assumed to be smarter and more conscientious. Yes, that's horrible. Especially if you're not good-looking. *J.-F. M.*

STUPIDITY AND COGNITIVE BIAS



› Ewa Drozda-Senkowska ‹

Professor of social psychology at the Université Paris Descartes

Like most authors who have written about stupidity, I begin with a confession. I accepted the invitation to write this article after an extremely animated discussion with friends about the proposed title, which bothered me. I thought the juxtaposition of “stupidity” and “cognitive bias” introduced the risk that readers might associate the two.

Two ideas formed distinctly in my mind.

The first was that “stupidity” is a term that qualifies an act or a word more pejoratively than “foolishness.” Given the power of this qualifier, its use should be firmly regulated (if we’re using it to describe other people), and self-regulated, too (when we’re applying it to ourselves). If I say I’ve done a stupid thing, in principle I have no intention of doing that thing again. I’m ashamed! The power of this word intrigued me. But since French is a foreign language for me, I didn’t detect the same vulgarity in the word “*connerie*” (stupidity) that I could tell attached to the word “*con*” (cunt). And in my field, though people are very particular about word choice, “*quelle connerie!*” is said a lot.

The second was my conviction that cognitive biases absolutely must not be described as stupid things. They designate different tendencies in reasoning and in receiving information, tied to our multiple violations of the rules of logic, probability theory, and so on. They’re highly functional shortcuts, or short circuits, that sometimes (but not always) lead us to make mistakes. Biases in receiving information don’t indicate a lack of intelligence. They reflect the extraordinary power of our habits of thought, formed through our actions, and they do not serve “pure” reflection. In that sense, they bear witness to our nearly chronic underuse of our aptitudes, knowledge, and skills. We are unaware of our biases in the moment, even if we know what they are; and we only recognize them after the fact. For those who have studied them, they reveal the defects of doubt, not an inability to doubt.

Stupidity and Predictive Judgment

Take the example of predictive judgments. Their importance has been proved. Without them, our existence would be very difficult, even

impossible. At the same time, in spite of this or because of it, we often formulate predictive judgments by disregarding relevant information in favor of information that, theoretically, is much less pertinent. To crown it all, we're unaware of our own ignorance; in other words, we deceive ourselves by believing we're right. At first glance, we're not far removed from stupidity.

Consider the task known as “lawyers and engineers.” Imagine you're told that psychologists have interviewed seventy engineers and thirty lawyers. Afterward, they wrote reports that summarized each of the one hundred interviews. Drawing one of these reports randomly, you read: “John is a thirty-nine-year-old man. He is actively involved in local politics. His favorite hobby is collecting rare books. He likes competition and debate, and he expresses himself very well.” The great majority of people would say there's a 90 percent chance that John is a lawyer, not an engineer. But the correct answer is 30 percent. Why? To estimate the probability that John is a lawyer, we need two types of information: one of them relates to the *a priori* probability of lawyers existing in the sample group; the other relates to the probability that the characteristics evoked in the report describe a lawyer. The first piece of information is provided to us: there are thirty lawyers in the sample group of one hundred interviewees, therefore the probability that John is a lawyer is equal to 30 percent. The second piece of information has not been provided. Theoretically, faced with this unknown, a person could adopt one of the two following positions:

1. Since this information has not been provided, it is not relevant.
2. A “constant” is involved, which is, the probability that the characteristics evoked by the report describe a lawyer is the same as the probability that they describe an engineer; so knowing this probability would change nothing.

Obviously, very few people would do that. And for good reason! John has all the characteristics of a lawyer; an engineer would be described differently. This conviction makes the “unknown” appear perfectly “known.” It's true that Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman intentionally wrote their description of John to reinforce the impression that he must be a

lawyer. The text resorts to a common stereotype of lawyers, as a professional category. This should not keep us from questioning the ease with which most of us fall into the trap of privileging the “individualizing” information in the description at the expense of the information we have about the *a priori* probability. Without going into details, it seems quite clear that our conviction of the correctness of our stereotype of a lawyer counts for a lot. If, without questioning it, we compare the stereotype’s content with John’s characteristics, we’ll see immediately that he has the “typical” characteristics of lawyers: that he’s “representative” of this category (birds of a feather . . .). Thus, it becomes almost certain that he must be a lawyer, not an engineer, even if lawyers represent a minority in the sample group. In technical terms, we would say that resorting to the heuristic of representativeness is the origin of a bias that leads here to the neglect of information on *a priori* probability, and the privileging of individualizing information (description). Like other heuristics, the heuristic of representativeness is an efficient mental shortcut. It authorizes us to make an assessment, certainly false in theory, which is acceptable because it’s shared by a great number of people. Resorting to this heuristic, which we unknowingly put into effect, allows us to simplify the problems we need to resolve and to remove the uncertainty that surrounds them. At the same time, as we have just seen, this gain comes at a cost.

Stupidity and Hypothetico-Deductive Reasoning

Does this example of predictive judgment bias illustrate stupidity, in the sense of intellectual inadequacy? I don’t think so, though I’m convinced it is one of many manifestations of an inherent flaw in the questioning process that leads us to seek confirmation of our thoughts instead of challenging them. To better understand this propensity, let’s tackle Peter Wason’s task “2, 4, 6.” It seems quite unremarkable and incredibly easy . . . up until the moment when you discover that you got it wrong! This illustrates another well-known propensity, encapsulated by the expression: “Nothing’s so easy that it can’t be made hard.”

Imagine you’re asked to deduce the rule that produces the following series of numbers: 2-4-6. To test whether the rule you’ve come up with is

correct, you are asked to propose alternate three-number sequences. Each time you do so, you'll be told whether your proposal is compatible with the rule or not, and if the rule you chose is in fact the rule that was applied. More likely than not, like most people, you'll first come up with the idea that it must be a series of "even numbers increasing in intervals of two." So, you'll propose the sequence 8-10-12, in accordance with your theory. You'll be told that the series you proposed is compatible with the rule that was used, but that the rule that was used was not the one you chose. Then you'll propose another trio of numbers, for example, 8-42-56, telling yourself that the rule must simply involve "rising even numbers." You'll be told the same thing as before. After the third or fourth try, you'll suggest, for example, the series 7-36-673, thinking it must have to do with "numbers increasing in value," period. This time, you'll be told that your example is compatible with the rule, and that the rule that was applied is indeed the one you chose.

At last you got the right answer! But you didn't go about it the fastest way. Few people choose it. It consists not of confirming your idea, but of challenging it. To accomplish this, it would have been enough to propose the series 3-5-7, to test the hypothesis of "rising even numbers." But it's hard to make ourselves challenge our ideas rather than confirm them, particularly in this task. To propose a series of numbers that contradicts the idea you already have in mind seems absurd, even perverse. Doing so would force you to put your idea in doubt. If, from the outset, we were capable of doubting our ideas, we would be less convinced of the correctness of our stereotype about lawyers and would find it easy to imagine that an engineer might also take an interest in local politics, express himself well, and collect books.

Contrary to the "lawyers and engineers" task, the "2-4-6" task carries little information. Thus, it requires us to draw on everything we do know, from the fact that even numbers are involved to the fact that the numbers are rising. Easy to memorize, those three numbers indelibly imprint themselves in our minds, present and available at all times. The heuristic of availability means that a small amount of information overwhelms the rest, leading us into the trap of confirmation bias.

While both of these examples illustrate our tendency to seek confirmation of our preexisting ideas, the "2-4-6" task also exposes our tendency to formulate hypotheses that are specific, rather than general. The

latter often seems too simple and/or obvious to us to merit mention. To immediately say it must have to do with rising numbers, even if we think that's true, would sound stupid, not to say idiotic. This tendency to seek out complicated answers makes us excellent targets for jokes. For instance: "Why does a fireman wear red suspenders? To hold his pants up." Distracted by thoughts of civil service, we realize too late that a fireman, like anyone else, needs suspenders just to hold up his pants. This strikes us as a great joke, and fine proof of foolishness . . . we break out laughing, realizing we've been caught in a "dummy trap."

"Bullshit": A Healthy Term

I side with those who say that ignorance is not stupidity. Ignorance is a strong engine of knowledge, provided that you know you're ignorant, and that you know what you don't know. But we are unaware of most of the biases that affect our reception of information, and of the propensities that sway our reasoning. The problem, and it's a serious one, is that even after these biases are exposed, they continue to work. All the more so in situations that are not conducive to doubt. Whereas stupidity, true stupidity, is the hallmark of a frightening intellectual complacency that leaves absolutely no room for doubt. As Harry Frankfurt explains in his book *On Bullshit*, this form of stupidity is worse than lies, because people who talk bullshit are uninterested in the truth. To fight bullshit, we have to denounce it, and to call it out for what it is. Therefore, there's no harm in using the term "bullshit" when you detect it in yourself. If it reflects genuine shame at a lapse in reasoning, it's a sign of conscientiousness, and therefore a beginning to self-regulation. And there's no harm in using it on others, either. Deploying the term in a joking tone, as an ironic provocation, can serve as a warning, a pointed invitation to recognize a flaw in order to correct it.

THINKING, FAST AND SLOW



A Conversation with
› Daniel Kahneman ‹

*Winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics and emeritus professor of
psychology at Princeton University*

Q. You write that human beings have two ways of reacting to information: a fast way that you call System 1, and a slow way that you call System 2. How are they different?

A. The two systems are complementary. When someone asks us what the capital of England is, a word automatically comes to mind with no effort or intention, thanks to System 1. System 1 produces interpretations of the world, of desires, of impressions, that become beliefs—which are decisions that are approved by System 2. System 2 is more complex. It controls thought and behavior. Unlike System 1, System 2 doesn't have direct, automatic access to the memory. It's much too slow. And if it's slow, that's because in general it follows a deliberate train of thought. For example, to follow the rules that allow us to solve a complicated multiplication problem. It requires effort, which gives us the impression that we are the authors of our actions: "I'm the one who's acting, I'm the one who's thinking." We subjectively identify with System 2: we think our beliefs are determined by arguments and by proofs, even though that does not reflect our mental life.

Q. Could it be said that System 1 simplifies reality in order to simplify our lives?

A. I don't know if it's doing it *in order* to simplify our lives, but it certainly does simplify reality, in that it produces cognitive biases. That said, System 2 can also make mistakes: if I believe certain things that are false, or if I'm incapable of understanding the theory of relativity, that's due to the weaknesses of System 2. System 1, as I understand it, has to do with emotions, because they're produced automatically, without intention, and reflect pure subjectivity. System 2 accepts them or doesn't. But be careful—while System 1 is emotion, it's also a lot more than that: it's connected to the interpretation of life, to perception, most of our actions. And System 2 does much more than reason; it also fulfills the function of control, which is no less important.

Q. In what circumstances does System 2 need to override System 1?

A. When you find yourself with no solution when you're confronting a problem, or when you're in conflict between two contradictory impulses; also, if you're in the process of violating rules of logic or behavior; or when you're surprised. Then you've got to concentrate, to produce a certain mental effort. But there's nothing abrupt about it; it's a continual back-and-forth, thanks to certain areas of the brain that specialize in this conflict.

Q. What areas of the brain are connected to the two systems?

A. I don't think System 2 corresponds to any specific area, even though it does have a strong connection to the prefrontal lobe. But I wouldn't like to discuss things I know too little about.

Q. At this very moment, you're using your System 2 to answer my questions with precision, but you're using your System 1 when you answer questions quickly on the subjects you're most familiar with. Does that sound right?

A. My System 1 produces answers quickly, and my System 2 verifies them. At the moment, it's working very hard to monitor my French!

Q. To understand this better, how would it affect our daily life if we lived only with System 1, or only with System 2?

A. If we only lived with System 1, we would be much more impulsive, we would say everything that comes into our minds, like children. Think of the state of drunkenness, for example, in which System 2 is weakened. But social life wouldn't be compromised: animals sometimes have a very advanced social life, and I don't think they have a System 2. And if, on the contrary, we only lived with System 2, our daily life would look like nothing at all! We would be inferior computers.

Q. When we dream, are we entirely in System 1?

A. Frankly, I don't know. I don't understand dreams. Of course, in one sense, we would be in System 1, because we dream without intention. But on the other hand, you can dream that you're reasoning!

Q. What about artistic inspiration, or intuition?

A. That comes from System 1, but it's fed by intentions. System 2 is entirely capable of intentionally searching the memory, which sometimes produces inspiration and intuition in an autonomous manner when we're not even looking for them—as when the mathematician Henri Poincaré suddenly solved a problem as he climbed from one step to the next while boarding a bus.

Q. You say that System 1 is always searching for meaning in our experiences; do we have an aversion to chance?

A. To uncertainty, in any case. To tell the truth, people don't really acknowledge the existence of chance. We're continually in the process of creating stories, interpretations of what surrounds us, which is largely the work of System 1. System 2, on occasion, makes this conscious, and adopts it.

Q. Can psychopathologies be provoked by an imbalance between the two systems, if we rely too much on System 1 or System 2?

A. Certainly. If someone chronically criticizes himself to the point that he becomes paralyzed, he's stuck in System 2, which System 1 can't hold in check. System 1 also can produce pathologies of its own, like obsession. It includes everything that we do quickly because we've done it a lot. It's the system that lets us drive a car, that chooses our words when we think, and that therefore determines the image we have ourselves, which is an integral part of memory, of the stories we tell ourselves. It isn't System 2 that imposes that on us.

Q. What psychotherapeutic techniques might work on System 1 and System 2?

A. I have the impression that cognitive therapy is entirely oriented toward reeducating System 1, while reining in certain behaviors of System 2. But I don't know enough about that to give you precise details.

Q. **Your work on heuristics has shown that our representations of *Homo economicus* are largely false. Yet democracy itself was founded on the idea that a citizen is capable of rationally weighing the pros and cons before casting a vote. Is it System 1 or System 2 that underlies our political convictions?**

A. It's mostly System 1. Our political beliefs are not determined by arguments. We believe them because we believe in certain people whom we love and trust. It's chiefly emotion that controls political life. But I'm not sure that the fiction of the rational human is all that central to democracy. A democracy doesn't need perfect rationality to function; it's enough for people to vote for what generally, and with no guarantee, serves their interests. Where democracies have trouble is when they deal with abstract, distant threats. If the climate does in fact change, that's going to be very difficult to solve through democracy. System 1 does not respond to distant threats. You can't mobilize public action without a lot of emotion, and you can't stir up emotion when threats aren't concrete. You'd need to find a way to engage System 2 instead: only System 2 can recognize a devastating threat, a point of no return, before you can see much evidence of it.

Q. **In your book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, you raise the ideas of the “nudge,” a kind of libertarian paternalism that actively helps people make good decisions. Would this be a viable and sufficient means of getting the same results we might see if we mobilized System 2?**

A. It's viable and important in cases where it can be used to protect people from themselves, and from stupid things they've done, without reducing their freedom. But for a lot of problems, it wouldn't be sufficient. If climate change is real, it's hard to see how a “nudge” could implement the necessary social and economic changes. It's System 1 that needs to

step in: the point is to facilitate the best decision-making for an individual without forcing the question, because System 1 doesn't care about the distant future. You can't count on rational behavior. When you have to plan for retirement when you're twenty-five, you don't have the impression that it will ever happen to you personally.

Q. You were awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics, though you are a psychologist. Would you support the creation of a Nobel Prize in Psychology, to bring more recognition to the discipline?

A. No, not really. It seems to me that when it comes to influencing the political and social spheres, psychologists should have more weight than economists . . . and that's already the case. The Sarkozy "commission on happiness," for example, or again, "nudge theory," have already gone on the books as psychological factors that are able to counteract some economic limitations. Also, I have the impression that the Nobel Prize doesn't add much to human happiness. The suffering of those who wait for one in vain is more important than the joy of those who get one.

Q. What goals should psychology set itself today?

A. I don't think we ought to set goals for science. It would be a futile exercise, because we have no idea what will happen. All we can say is that, for the next twenty years at least, psychology will be dominated by the study of the brain, because that's what interests today's students the most, and thus, tomorrow's professors. It's not up for discussion, it's a fact. This research is very expensive, and it attracts the majority of available funding, which doesn't always make my psychologist colleagues happy—some of them complain bitterly about it. Nevertheless, it's the most exciting thing that's happening in psychology. Trends are generally guided by technology: not only don't we know where cerebral imaging will lead us, we know even less what the technology of the future will bring. But this is what will guide psychology. There's no doubt of that.

THE NUDGE



In French, they call it the “elbow jab.” “Finger jab” comes closer. The nudge, also known as libertarian paternalism, is an idea put forth by Richard Thaler, a professor of economics at the University of Chicago and a 2017 Nobel Laureate in economics, and Cass Sunstein, professor of law at Harvard University and former adviser to President Barack Obama, as head of the Office of Information and Regulatory Administration. This approach advocates the creation of environments that encourage citizens to adopt positive behaviors, while granting them the freedom of refusal. A few examples: instituting pension plans for employees (they can choose not to take part, but few do); or presetting photocopiers so they print two-sided copies to save paper (the setting can be adjusted but nobody bothers); or painting alternating steps of public staircases black and white, so people move up and down them faster (they could drag their feet, but in actual practice, they speed up). *J.-F. M.*

KAHNEMAN AND TVERSKY: A BEAUTIFUL FRIENDSHIP

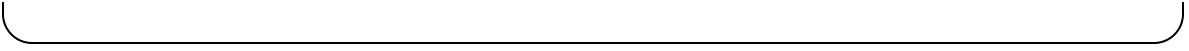


It’s not by chance that Daniel Kahneman dedicated *Thinking, Fast and Slow* to Amos Tversky, whose life’s work his book recapitulates. From the introduction all the way to the end of

the book, the former offers incessant homage to the latter. It was on a “lucky day in 1969” that the inseparable duo first met. Daniel Kahneman, then thirty-five, a professor of psychology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, invited his colleague, three years younger, to speak at a seminar. “He was brilliant, voluble and charismatic,” Kahneman writes. “He was also blessed with a perfect memory for jokes and an exceptional ability to use them to make a point. There was never a dull moment when Amos was around.” Both of them confessed that, in spite of their constant work with statistics, they were unable to predict a large portion of the results of their experiments. Consulting with senior statisticians, they learned that their colleagues had the same experience.

Almost thirty years of joint work on questions of judgment and decision-making would follow, exceeding the bounds of the field of psychology. Both men left Israel in 1978 to teach in the United States, at different universities. Some of the high points of their collaboration include an influential article published in *Science* magazine in 1974 that presented heuristics; and “prospect theory,” which they proposed in 1979 to explain why “loss aversion” led economic actors to apply bias to their transactions. In 1980, the economist Richard Thaler was inspired by their work to lay the foundation of behavioral economics, which emphasizes the human factor in economic decision-making and outcomes. In his bestselling 2008 book *Nudge*, cowritten with Cass Sunstein, Thaler recommended the study of Humans, fallible in their decisions, over the study of disembodied agents he called Econs.

Daniel Kahneman received the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2002 for his work. It was an award he would have shared with his friend and collaborator Amos Tversky, had Tversky not died in 1996, at the age of fifty-nine. “Until geography made it too difficult to go on,” Kahneman later wrote, “Amos and I enjoyed the extraordinary good fortune of a shared mind that was superior to our individual minds and of a relationship that made our work fun as well as productive.” *J.-F. M.*



ON STUPIDITY IN THE BRAIN



› Pierre Lemarquis ‹

Neurologist and essayist

When Jean-François Marmion asked me if one day I might be interested in writing an article on the place that stupidity occupies in the brain, I was, I swear, extremely enthusiastic. I immediately accepted, without really understanding why. At first, I misunderstood, and thought he meant for me to discuss, for instance, early James Bond movies, and *The Name of the Rose*. Once I had a better grasp of the desired subject, there were the lavish honoraria to consider, and the honor of being considered important by a prestigious editor. And then, there was also a challenge to meet. After adopting Mark Twain's motto: "They did not know it was impossible, so they did it," I suddenly found myself thinking of Michel Audiard's line from the cult 1960s crime comedy film, *Les Tontons Flingueurs*: "Idiots dare everything! That's how you know who they are." Quickly I grew demoralized, as I discovered that no neuroscience research laboratory worthy of the name seemed to have explored this phenomenon, which plays such a paramount, central role in daily life. I would have to innovate. Soon, I decided that my initial enthusiasm had to have meant something. Surely it constituted a crucial ethological indicator of my zeal for the quest for truth! Beyond that, a few memories of neuroscience and a little salutary reading might furnish the groundwork. Finally, a deplorable image came to me, of a painting so disturbing that even the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who kept the original in his bathroom, covered it with a sliding surrealist panel. It was a reproduction of a famous painting by Courbet, which shows the trunk of a nude woman, legs passively splayed in the foreground, revealing her sex organs, her *con*—a painting that is called, as you may remember, *The Origin of the World*. Lacan, as he unveiled this work to prestigious visitors to his home—from Claude Lévi-Strauss to Picasso to Marguerite Duras—would say understatedly, "And now I will show you something truly extraordinary," then stealthily observe their fascination.

We are all born premature, because of the physiological limitations of the female pelvis. We really ought to remain in the warmth of the womb for at least an extra fifteen months before being cast into the world. The early stress we endure in infancy probably marks us for life, even if we've forgotten about it.

The human brain evolved too quickly, and as a result suffers various internal wars and conflicts of interest that may explain our frequent difficulties in making decisions, and our tendency to make bad ones.

Apollo and Dionysus

In theory, the brain's functioning is simple. In a way, it resembles Titian's painting *An Allegory of Prudence*. In it, you see three heads of men at different stages of life. The painter represents the old man; he's accompanied by his son and by his adopted grandson. An inscription above them reads, in Latin, "Informed by the past, the present acts with prudence so his actions will not blight the future." Our brain acts like a machine that foresees the future, whose goal is to keep us alive while adapting to circumstances—a proof of its flexibility. Its posterior section contains and decodes information that is conveyed by the senses. The brain contrasts this information with the memories it has stored, then ponders, with the help of its handsome frontal lobe, the best way to handle it. The frontal lobe is the prow of our neural ship; it permits us to move forward, and its large size distinguishes us from animals and from our ancestors with the sloping foreheads. It directs us toward the best actions to take to assure our futures, through what we call "executive functions."

This is the part of the brain that is dedicated to Apollo, the most rational, wise, and measured part; pure intellect. But life would be pretty boring if the frontal lobe always dictated our behavior; a computer could replace this venerable segment. The logician Alan Turing, who was interested in probability and dreamed of creating an artificial brain, paved the way for the development of artificial intelligence. But Dionysus is always lurking, inhabiting ancient, deep, entrenched cerebral zones; the circuits of pleasure and reward, the humid and hormonal brain that makes us want to live; the wild horse whose goals don't always match those of the horseman who's trying to tame him but is easily thrown. Mice and men both have died, frenetically trying to pleasure themselves because of these addictive circuits without which life would have no meaning. We will give no examples, and no publicity, to any famous hotel chain in particular; but a number of people whose exceptional intellectual capacities are not in question have

succumbed to their impulses, ruining promising careers in a brief instant of stolen pleasure, whether for sex or for money, while behaving like fools.

Margaret Thatcher and Che Guevara

Another complication undermines the meager capacities of our brain: its duplicity. It finds itself, in effect, bound to two hemispheres, which, though connected, are false twins, agreeing on nothing. The left is right-wing, conservative, calculating. Monopolizing the power of speech, it explores only half the world, the right side, of course. And if its alter ego, the right hemisphere, gives up the ghost, it shows its true nature; ignoring everything in its left visual field, bumping into doors, eating only what's on the right side of the plate, drawing only on the right half of a piece of paper, and thereby confirming the narrowness of its vision. Bereft of dreams or poetry, this worker bee does not understand metaphors, it takes a rational approach to everything. Beholding a group of stars, it sorts them into constellations; it seeks patterns, codes, and martingales in random phenomena, attaching meaning to them for reassurance, wanting to explain them in the hope of controlling them, so it can assert its own hegemony, up to the point of making human sacrifices to content a Great Watchmaker. But its greatest crime is to constantly rein in the other hemisphere, its half brother, the right side: the revolutionary, the poet, the leftist, the grasshopper; who knows all the songs, puts a face on spoken words, and has a holistic vision of the world, which it appreciates in all its fullness. Despite the multifaceted qualities of the right hemisphere, it is incapable of keeping a budget or putting two words together. Thatcher versus Che? This is our government—populated with extremists who are supposed to harmoniously complement each other, but who instead play tug-of-war and struggle to come up with any clearly defined decision.

Idiots Are Toxic and We Must Be Protected from Them

Thus, all of us are fools when it comes to power. But some run more risks than others. The frontal lobe, which polices our brain and attempts to suppress conflicts, is only fully operational in adulthood, giving the

younger ones among us plenty of time to externalize their impulses and weaknesses and to act like little assholes. Cerebral sclerosis lies in wait for idle folk who don't pursue an active cultural or social life, predisposing them, if they escape Alzheimer's, to become old fools, even if, as the singer Georges Brassens would have it, "Age has nothing to do with it."¹

Stupidity does not discriminate based on intelligence: it's as prevalent among Nobel Laureates and other members of the Academy as among anyone you might bump into at a bar. In the excellent 2017 film *Godard Mon Amour*, by Michel Hazanavicius, we watch the transformation of the likable young "Wolfgang Amadeus" Godard into a pretentious, uptight asshole. The scene takes place in May 1968 in a villa on the Côte d'Azur, where the originator of the Nouvelle Vague has come to create a disruption at the Cannes Film Festival. This Defender of the People, this would-be revolutionary, criticizes his girlfriend for her bourgeois tourist suntan, and explains to his bewildered friends his radical vision of a streamlined cinema that would have no screenplay, star, or artifice of any kind. After one of his friends disloyally adds, "and no audience," the genius comes up against the common sense of the villa's gardener (whom he hadn't greeted), who tells him candidly that he likes to go to the movies on Sunday just for fun, to marvel and to distract himself.

In a luminous work, which he wrote in one night, under a pseudonym, the Italian economist Carlo Maria Cipolla explains *The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity*. With supporting diagrams, he demonstrates the extreme danger of stupidity: every contact you have with an idiot speeds you both to a shared doom! An interaction between two intelligent people is productive for both parties. A thief may rob you, but he's less dangerous than a fool, because a fool takes you down with him in his downward spiral; he chops off the branch where you're sitting beside him.

It's essential to recognize idiots in time to avoid disaster. But that operation is extremely perilous. In an attempt to ward off the consequences of folly, the sociologist Christian Morel gives several pointers in his work on dodging absurd decision-making. For instance: form a group of experts who respect each other, rather than a group that must submit to a boss's decisions; avoid hierarchies or rotating pecking orders; allow devil's advocates to encourage contradiction and questioning that stimulate crucial inquiry and restrict conformity; give things time to develop: in short, in one

way or another, foster a democratic environment in which nobody (or less than 50 percent of those present) need doubt the decision making of their representatives.

But first of all . . . how can you be sure what kind of person you are, yourself? “Whether or not you’re a fool, there’s always someone who takes you for one,” warns the singer Pierre Perret. The simple act of asking yourself this question is a positive sign; it proves that you’re capable of introspection and self-criticism, indicating highly developed cognitive capacity. The less you know, the more you are sure of, the psychiatrist and ethologist Boris Cyrulnik has observed. Reciprocity is also relevant: the more you know, the more doubts you have. The more memories you have stockpiled, the greater the store of information the brain can draw on to guide you to act prudently and competently. And if you look hard, as the Perret song goes, “You’re reassured whatever you do / That there’s always a greater fool than you.”

On the Necessity of Fools: In Praise of Stupidity

There’s certainly a solution to this problem. On the question: “Where in the brain is stupidity located?” the answer is: “In the brain of whoever calls another person an idiot.” Stupidity is manifestly necessary in the evolutionary plan, otherwise this burden would have disappeared long ago. But that has not happened: as general opinion attests, idiots seethe and swarm among us, reproducing faster than rabbits. How do they dodge natural selection, being so poorly equipped? The evidence must be accepted: idiots, despite their dangerousness, are absolutely necessary to human survival. Jeer at them as you may, they are the mortar that holds our society together.

The brain is a social organism: to call someone an idiot is to point a finger and put a label on them. It demonstrates your own ability to detect this defect, which isn’t always easy to spot at first sight, as we have shown, and which you yourself do not possess. To call someone else stupid is to call attention to your own perceptiveness, which is always flattering to the ego, placing yourself above the designated victim. As a rule, few people

will contradict you, which allows you to confirm your ascendance on the lofty ladder occupied by those who share your point of view. They spare themselves mental effort by mirroring you. They will mock the sacrificial victim along with you, laughing heartily. You will be confirmed as the leader of a superior assemblage that knows how to draw a clear line between idiots and everyone else. Your expertise will spread quickly into other domains. You will be listened to, and your advice will be followed; better still, you will be obeyed! The poor idiots you've singled out will have no choice but to flee, or to just stand by and take it. They will be forced to submit, to accept ridicule to fulfill their role as scapegoats. Will they dare to sing under their breath the song by Georges Brassens that goes: "The plural is useless to mankind; whenever / More than four are gathered, you'll find a band of fools." Will they console themselves by sticking pins into photographs of you and your alter egos on the wall, risking denunciation and threats from the very people who stigmatized them? A king who turns megalomaniac will try to hold on to his crown, expand his powers, and reign without giving power to those who placed him on the throne. He exploits them legitimately because they were stupid enough to prop him up. And still—so says Brassens—there's hardly any chance he'll be dethroned.

There's a modern update of the Courbet painting called *After the Creation*, which depicts the scene after the sexual act: a new life has just been engendered through the intermediary of a *con*. The canvas recalls Michelangelo's fresco *The Creation of Adam* on the Sistine Chapel's ceiling. God has made man in his own image and points to him with his index finger; but Adam makes the same gesture, indicating (or inventing?) his creator in parallel fashion. Michelangelo endowed God with the kind of brain that could lead the first man to point at him. Is Adam trying to answer Jean-François Marmion's question? Are the Creator and his Creation both calling each other fools? Albert Camus wrote mercilessly of this in *The Myth of Sisyphus*: either we are not free, and God the all-powerful is responsible for evil, or we are free and responsible, but God is not all-powerful. It's up to you to draw your own conclusions as to the human estate!

And here's what explains my enthusiasm at the prospect of this contribution, as well as the glee of my entourage and everyone else I talked to about it. In the absence of lofty scientific studies, it was their laughter

(though laughter was forbidden by the venerable Jorge de Burgos, the librarian of *The Name of the Rose*) that gave me the key to the origin of the world, though they didn't know it. I thank them from the bottom of my heart. Band of fools . . .!

INTENTIONAL IDIOCY



› Yves-Alexandre Thalmann ‹

Doctor of natural science and professor of psychology at the Collège Saint-Michel de Fribourg

diocy, stupidity, foolishness . . . there's no shortage of terms when it comes to denigrating an individual or his actions. These pejorative and often insulting words are part of everyday speech, so much so that their definition appears unequivocal to us: stupidity means a lack of intelligence. As for knowing precisely what intelligence is, that question is more delicate, and is the subject of passionate and virulent debates, even if intuitively we think we know what it means. Just the same, all of us can think of people of notable intelligence who have committed extremely stupid acts. How is this possible? What if stupidity isn't a lack of intelligence, but a particular manner of expressing it?

As a starting point, it seems judicious to me to distinguish between two terms that are often wrongly used synonymously. Certain acts produce disagreements and negative effects both on their authors and on those around them with no net advantage for either. In such cases, you ask yourself why the person who committed them went to the trouble! If, through lack of reflection, maturity, or judgment, he didn't have the sense to anticipate the consequences of his behavior, then it must come down to foolishness, in the manner of children who dare forbidden acts as they explore the world, unaware of their potential hazards.

Anything else must be a case of people committing these types of actions on purpose. How can we know that it's on purpose? For one thing, they'll acknowledge afterward that they shouldn't have done it, and that they knew very well what they were getting themselves into. For another, if you ask them to analyze similar behavior by someone else, they will conclude: "That's stupid, he shouldn't have done it!" This means that stupidity is not due to a lack of reflection or to a failure to anticipate outcomes.

More troubling still, stupid acts are committed by people of established intelligence. Some may have taken cognitive tests that show they have a high IQ; some may be hailed as brilliant innovators behind a spectacularly successful enterprise (Steve Jobs, for example); others may have earned wide recognition for their intellectual prowess (Albert Einstein), or be recipients of prestigious diplomas. All the same, intelligent people are not immune to incredibly stupid actions that have catastrophic consequences. Consider former president Bill Clinton, who, even while he was under investigation, continued his "inappropriate relationship" with his intern Monica Lewinsky, which would cause him to be impeached by the House

of Representatives (though the Senate gave him a pass, allowing him to complete his second term). This shows that you can be intelligent, even very intelligent, and still act stupidly on occasion.¹ Here's one way to summarize this asymmetry: intelligence describes people, whereas stupidity relates to specific actions.

Algorithmic Intelligence Versus Rationality

Could it be that intelligence has not been defined exhaustively enough? Keith Stanovich, emeritus professor of psychology at the University of Toronto, has done significant work on this subject. He distinguishes between several levels of intelligence (not to be confused with the forms of intelligence described by Howard Gardner, the developmental psychologist and emeritus professor of cognition and education at Harvard: verbal, logico-mathematical, kinesthetic, personal, etc.).

Stanovich identifies what he calls “algorithmic intelligence,” which pertains to comprehension and to the logical combination of ideas.² These are the very abilities that are measured by intelligence tests currently in use, like the famous Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale (WAIS) and the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC), which produce the Intelligence Quotient (IQ). Despite the criticisms often leveled on these tools and the results they provide, it must be admitted that they fulfill their mission well: they can inform us of students' ability to perform in academic programs and help explain the difficulties certain students have with their instruction.³ Algorithmic intelligence is measured precisely; the tests are said to have excellent psychometric properties. And that's for a reason: the test questions all come with right answers, so the test takers' results can be compared to an answer key. This is why a number can be assigned to quantify their performance. But in real life, and outside the classroom, the situation is different. There's rarely a right answer to the dilemmas we encounter. Should you accept a promotion to a job in a foreign country? Is it better to get married than to stay single? Would you be happier if you bought a Honda or a BMW? No Excel spreadsheet, however thoroughly detailed, can provide the “right answer” to such questions.

This is why Professor Stanovich identified another level of intelligence, which he calls “rationality.” Rationality relates to the capacity to make decisions that help us achieve our objectives and to adopt beliefs that take reality into account. With his collaborators, he devised a test intended to measure this kind of thinking. It’s not a question of comprehension in this case, but of intentionality. That’s because understanding a situation does not necessarily lead to actions that reflect awareness of it: just think of smokers who know the risks attached to cigarettes but continue to smoke all the same. Evaluating intelligence this way, on multiple levels, sheds light on the paradox mentioned earlier: intelligent people, which is to say, those endowed with an IQ above the norm, can do stupid things and knowingly engage in actions that offer them no benefit, even actions that present an elevated risk of damaging consequences.

A second interesting aspect of Professor Stanovich’s approach relates to individuals of High Intellectual Potential (HIP). The HIP phenomenon has benefited in recent years from abundant publications that have spread the idea, prompting people to place themselves in this particular category. And yet, HIP is no guarantee of superior success in life, when it meets obstacles in the social and professional sphere to which it can’t adapt. The concept of rationality offers an elegant interpretation: high potential relates only to algorithmic intelligence, and is wholly incapable of predicting the decisions best attuned to current realities. You may drive a car that has a more powerful engine than other people’s, but that says nothing about how good a driver you are, or your journey’s destination.

So, without contradiction, it is possible to accept that an individual might be intelligent, yet simultaneously be capable of committing stupid acts. This raises a new question: what could be the motivation of acting stupidly? Many would put the blame on a lack of emotional control. From this perspective, emotions are thought to overwhelm the individual, momentarily clouding his judgment. It’s a seductive theory, certainly, but it doesn’t take into account cases in which the stupid act is conducted deliberately, without the pretext of strong emotion. For example, consider the case of two pupils who break into their high school one night and set off two fire extinguishers. The act is stupid, and when the young people who did it are apprehended the next day, they admit it: there was no benefit at all, the consequences were severe; and therefore, their behavior was clearly

not rational. Idleness and boredom were mentioned, but no other emotions: there wasn't even the motive of getting revenge on a professor, or trying to get school closed the next day.

Immunity Bias, Impunity Bias, and Optimism Bias

Another tack that may be more useful to follow than emotions in understanding stupid decisions is cognitive bias. This field of study is well documented today in cognitive psychology. Indeed, it's responsible for the first-ever Nobel Prize to go to a psychologist, Daniel Kahneman, in 2002. A cognitive bias is an error of reasoning that is systematically produced: like optical illusions, which fool you every time even if you know the trick. Consider causality bias, which leads us to see a causality link where there is no correlation. For instance, if I notice that my cat jumped up on my lap and started purring when I was feeling anxious, I deduce that my cat "sensed" my state of mind and was responding to it. It's because the feline sensed my interior state from a distance that he came up to comfort me with his presence (but do I remember the times when my pet jumped on my lap when I felt perfectly fine?).

One bias that affects stupid actions is connected with optimism.⁴ It sometimes happens that we are exaggeratedly optimistic about ourselves. We tend to think we drive better than most people, and that we have a smaller risk of getting sick, or of getting divorced, than statistics indicate. We live as if we were outside the common run, different from other people. As the American psychologist Daniel Todd Gilbert ironically observes, "If you're like most people, you don't know that you're like most people." When the two pupils break into their high school to mess with the fire extinguishers, they're convinced that they won't get caught. And yet, they would lucidly advise anyone else against attempting this project, given its risks.

This feeling of immunity, conferred by optimism bias, is reinforced by a feeling of impunity, which itself is the result of numerous life experiences that pass without incident. If you think about it, we often break the rules without paying a price for it. How many of us have exceeded the speed limit, or been late to work, or made little white lies? Doubtless the great

majority! Because of these instances of unpunished transgressions, the brain—logically—determines that there's very little risk, or even no risk, of getting caught in a stupid act that has damaging consequences.

The feelings of immunity and impunity are at the heart of the stupid decisions we make in daily life. How many of us manage to lead healthy lives, eating moderately (nothing too sweet, nothing too fatty or salty, and at least five servings of fruits and vegetables a day), and getting enough exercise? If you think this doesn't apply to you, then you've fallen into optimism bias: you don't do all that you could, but you like to think that you, *you*, won't get sick like other people. Moreover, you don't perceive for one second any of the potential negative consequences of the nonoptimal aspects of your lifestyle. With full knowledge, you deceive yourself about your own condition.

Cognitive biases are indissociable functions of intelligence: they are what permits us to economize our efforts and to make quick decisions in emergency situations. It's also been demonstrated that the most intelligent people, the ones with a higher IQ—don't do any better than anyone else on tests of the different biases. Intelligence doesn't protect us from bias, or from stupid decisions.

Stupidity or Creativity

That said, are we doomed to endure a partially biased psychological process that prompts us to make stupid decisions? Let's not forget another characteristic of stupid actions: their transgressive side. If the two aforementioned pupils had broken into their high school and decided to sweep the corridors, nobody would have described their project as stupid. Inappropriate, no doubt, but not stupid. This is because a constructive goal would have been detected. But setting off the fire extinguishers is another story: there's no constructive justification for that act, other than that it's deliciously transgressive. The pupils know they're doing something they're absolutely not supposed to do, which gives them a little thrill in the moment.

Doing what you're not supposed to do is often a driver of stupidity . . . but also of creativity. It's precisely in leaving the beaten path, in exploring

avenues others haven't considered, that you discover new things. It must be acknowledged that many stupid acts, sadly, are creative and original. Besides, often, when we struggle to make sense of the actions and decisions taken by the most creative minds, they don't seem far removed from what is commonly known as folly. It may be that stupidity, as examined in this essay, may be the source of many discoveries and inventions that have helped to make our world more comfortable. No doubt the propensity to transgression, supported by an optimism that favors risk-taking, has contributed to progress and discovery. By this logic, stupidity and creativity are two faces of the same coin, whose common factor is divergent thinking.

That means that stupidity is much subtler than it seems. It can't be reduced to a lack of intelligence, any more than intelligence itself—IQ—can arm us against temptation.

WHEN VERY SMART PEOPLE BELIEVE VERY DUMB THINGS



› Brigitte Axelrad ‹

Honorary professor of philosophy and psychology

All the efforts in education that democratic societies have approved seem to have forgotten one essential aspect of knowledge: the critical mind, which, if exercised without method, leads easily to gullibility. Doubt has heuristic virtues, it's true, but it can also lead to cognitive nihilism rather than mental autonomy.

—GÉRALD BRONNER, *LA DÉMOCRATIE DES CRÉDULES*

[*THE DEMOCRACY OF THE GULLIBLE*]¹

People whose intelligence seems evident sometimes provoke astonishment by embracing, in all seriousness, ideas that lack any foundation or that adhere to farfetched theories.

It's true that there's no universal definition of intelligence. The reason for this is probably that the word evokes different abilities. History provides numerous examples of individuals who were universally considered intelligent in various fields, from science and technology to the arts or philosophy.

Relying on a definition of intelligence as a “capacity for reasoning, planning, problem solving, abstract thinking, understanding complex ideas, learning quickly, and learning from experience,” a meta-analysis of sixty-three studies² concluded that intelligent people are less inclined to faith (in a religious sense) than others.

It seems logical therefore to conclude that people endowed with superior intelligence have a greater chance at defending themselves against beliefs.

To define intelligences of a very high order, it's useful to consider the stunning capacity some people have exhibited to leave behind the broken paths and dominant models of their own eras, and to innovate, rather than to content themselves with the prevailing assumptions of their times. Galileo, Darwin, Einstein, and also Kant and Descartes, were capable of thinking differently than others in their epoch. They cast into doubt majority opinion and simplistic explanations. Intelligence in their case was accompanied by critical thinking, the capacity to intellectually “resist” the dominant discussion, which was a kind of indoctrination, and all forms of dogmatism more generally.

However, an article by Heather A. Butler, an adjunct professor in the department of psychology at California State University, explores this destabilizing phenomenon: smart people are capable of doing and saying foolish things, and believing in inanities. She writes, “Though often confused with intelligence, critical thinking is not intelligence. Critical thinking is a collection of cognitive skills that allow us to think rationally in a goal-orientated fashion, and a disposition to use those skills when appropriate. Critical thinkers are . . . flexible thinkers who require evidence to support their beliefs and [who] recognize fallacious attempts to persuade them. Critical thinking means overcoming all kinds of cognitive biases (for instance, hindsight bias or confirmation bias).”³

This makes it easier to understand why even very intelligent people sometimes believe bizarre things. The sociologist G erald Bronner, recently interviewed by Thomas C. Durand in the documentary *Les Lois de l'Attraction Mentale* [*The Laws of Mental Attraction*],⁴ said that he was a millenarian early in life. "I know that you can believe in crazy things without being crazy," he said. He added that it was a "series of coincidences," a "series of tiny things," that led him to question this belief. But not everyone gets that chance.

Jimmy Carter and His Letter to Extraterrestrials

In 1976, during his presidential campaign, Jimmy Carter declared, "If I become president, I'll make every piece of information this country has about UFO sightings available to the public and the scientists." He added this surprising sentence, a fine example of confirmation bias: "I am certain that UFOs exist because I have seen one."

After winning the election, acting on his convictions, President Jimmy Carter sent a letter to extraterrestrials in the Voyager 1 space probe, on September 5, 1977. After introducing the probe and the Earth, President Carter addressed them in this manner: "This is a present from a small, distant world, a token of our sounds, our science, our images, our music, our thoughts, and our feelings. We are attempting to survive our time so we may live into yours. We hope someday, having solved the problems we face, to join a community of galactic civilizations. This record represents our hope and our determination, and our goodwill in a vast and awesome universe."

The fact that Jimmy Carter, author of many books of political literature and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002, would have had the na vet  to send messages to extraterrestrials that would not arrive for forty thousand years, and that in any case we would know nothing about, since the probe will stop transmitting information after 2025, boggles the mind.

But Carter is not the only one to have sent messages to extraterrestrials. On November 19, 2017, Science Post announced that a team of astronomers from SETI (Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence) had sent a radio message containing information about the planets of our solar system, the

structure of DNA, a drawing of a human being, and other basic information about the Earth and its inhabitants in the direction of a neighboring solar system—one of the closest ones known to contain a potentially habitable planet, near enough that we could receive a response in less than twenty-five years, a much more reasonable delay, it may be admitted, even if it's not tomorrow.

Still more astonishing, scientists like the physicist Stephen Hawking and the astronomer Dan Werthimer, SETI researcher at the University of California, Berkeley, alerted the authorities to the possible repercussions of communication with extraterrestrials, as a “civilization capable of receiving and understanding these messages would certainly be much older and more advanced than ours, technologically speaking.” Dan Werthimer noted, “It's like shouting in a forest before you know if there are tigers, lions, bears or other dangerous animals there.”

This is extremely unsettling. . . .

On another note, very intelligent people can be blinded by their beliefs to the point that they renounce their critical thinking, sacrificing their happiness and even their lives.

Steve Jobs, a Brilliant Visionary Blinded by His Beliefs

Nicknamed iGod, the god of high tech, Steve Jobs often evoked “magical thinking,” the idea that he could bend the world to his will. It bore him fruit as he brought his awesome ideas into existence, but it proved powerless against cancer.

In the opinion of his biographers Daniel Ichbiah and Walter Isaacson, and in light of all the creations he originated, Steve Jobs was very intelligent and even brilliant. Daniel Ichbiah, a French journalist and author of *Les Quatre Vies de Steve Jobs: Biographie de Steve Jobs* [*The Four Lives of Steve Jobs: A Biography of Steve Jobs*], describes him thus: “Tormented, perfectionist, visited by genius and endowed with an inherent sense of beauty, Jobs was capable of big dreams and had the talent to make others share them. . . . He was not a typical CEO but an authentic artist perpetually in search of the Grail, an aesthete animated by one desire: to change the world.”

Walter Isaacson, past editor of *Time* magazine, past president of CNN, and author of biographies of Albert Einstein, Henry Kissinger, and Benjamin Franklin, emphasizes in his biography of Steve Jobs the short sentence that loomed large in Apple's "Think Different" publicity campaign: "The people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones who do."

Steve Jobs's biological father was Syrian, his mother was American. As an unmarried student, his mother had her son adopted at birth by the Jobs couple on the condition that they make him go to college. They were very humble people. They promised. As he grew up, Jobs was attracted by India and by Buddhism. After a hippie adolescence then a long stay in India with a friend, he returned home and went to college, but quit after three months. He audited a calligraphy course, which appealed to his aesthetic sense, then spent a summer in an apple orchard, where he lived off nothing but apples. A little later, he cofounded Apple with his friend Steve Wozniak. By the age of twenty-three he was a millionaire; at forty, a billionaire. He surrounded himself with geniuses, and knew how to get the best from them, drawing out their talents through his charisma. He came up with the brilliant ideas of Apple I, Apple II, Pixar, the iMac, the iPod, iTunes, the iPhone, the iPad, to name a few. But his life was studded with setbacks that he always moved past, going still further. Except for the last one, pancreatic cancer.

After detecting a tumor in his pancreas in October 2003, doctors wept with emotion when they discovered that the tumor was operable. But Steve Jobs refused surgery. Buddhist and vegetarian, he was skeptical about medicine and believed firmly in alternative therapies, each more far-fetched than the next. He consulted healers, naturopaths, and acupuncturists, swallowed herbal capsules, drank fruit juice, and conducted long fasts. In 2004, new tests showed how little effect the dandelion salad had on the cancer cells: the tumor had spread beyond the pancreas. He accepted the operation then, but by then it was too late. In April 2009 he had a liver transplant at Methodist Transplant Institute in Memphis, Tennessee. He continued working at Apple until his death in October 2011, at the age of fifty-six.

His biographers and friends have speculated about the contradictions of his personality. A brilliant inventor who could move mountains, he was also incapable of ridding himself of claptrap notions that hastened his demise.

Could the obsessive idea of being abandoned by his biological parents have created a void that he filled with esoteric inquiry? At the age of seven he was devastated when a little girl to whom he'd confided that he was adopted said to him, "So your parents didn't love you?" His adoptive parents comforted him with the sensitivity they always showed. No doubt, the hippie counterculture environment of the Bay Area in the 1970s also fed his impulse to look elsewhere for inspiration.

"Galileo Was Wrong: The Church Was Right"

Sometimes irrational beliefs are only dangerous to those who hold them, but that's not always the case. Through influence, suggestion, and proselytizing, some people use all their intelligence to persuade susceptible souls to believe what they profess, even when they don't believe it themselves. In the documentary *The Laws of Mental Attraction* cited earlier, the French biophysicist Henri Broch said, "A quarter of Europeans believe that the Earth is at the center of the universe and that everything revolves around it."

Ten years ago, on November 6, 2010, a supposedly scientific congress titled "Galileo Was Wrong: The Church Was Right" was held at the Hilton Garden Inn in South Bend, Indiana, less than a hundred miles from Chicago. Ten panelists were presented as "experts." They tried to prove that the sun revolved around the Earth, according to the geocentric system, even though science since Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, and Newton has proved that the Earth and other planets revolve around the sun, according to the heliocentric system. The subtitle was promising; it was to be the "first" annual Catholic conference on geocentrism. Dr. Robert Sungenis opened the conference with a speech entitled "Geocentrism: They Know It, but They're Hiding It," taking up a recurrent strain—conspiracy theory. Other speakers, like Dr. Robert J. Bennett and Dr. John Salza, announced similarly staggering themes: "Scientific Proof: The Earth Is at the Center of the Universe," "Introduction to the Mechanics of Geocentrism," and "Scientific Experiments Show the Earth Is Stationary at the Center of the Universe." Their qualifications were fuzzy: Robert J. Bennett, for example, co-organizer of the conference, declared himself a Doctor of General

Relativity. Robert Sungenis was president of something called Catholic Apologetics International and the author of many books and articles on theology, science, culture, and politics. He had taught physics and mathematics for many years in various institutions. He preached that physicists like Albert Einstein, Ernst Mach, Edwin Hubble, Fred Hoyle, “and many others” had proved that, as it says in the Bible, the sun and all the planets revolve around the Earth, which is fixed in space, immobile and immutable. He nourished the hope that people would give Scripture its rightful place and understand that science wasn’t what it was cracked up to be.

Yet every new scientific discovery brings new proof that geocentrism does not correspond to reality. Exponents of geocentrism have nothing to back them up but the Bible. To every scientific argument they respond: “It says in the Bible that . . .” Attacking Galileo tarnishes the image of one of the founders of modern science, who conducted one of the first proofs of Copernicus’s heliocentrism, and it also scrubs away what some consider to be the blot caused by the Catholic Church’s apology in 1992 for the condemnation of Galileo.

There’s been plenty of water under the bridge since Galileo. Copernican science had to take on Scripture and the belief in God’s Revealed Truth, and to wage war on the irrational. Scientists were persecuted. Today some reductionists and crackpots are trying to manipulate minds so they can pass along their hazy theories: the battle of obscurantism against the truth continues.

Can Anything Defeat Obscurantism?

While it’s unlikely that anyone can increase their intelligence, with proper application of method it is possible to learn how to develop your critical thinking.

Not all beliefs are stupid, absurd, or dangerous. Certain beliefs are constructive, like belief in oneself and in one’s capacities, in self-worth, in life, and in one another.

The risk of our being so influenced by dangerous beliefs that we lose our reason comes from the need to find meaning in life, whatever the cost.

When other people transmit an explanation that corresponds to our vision of the world, or that removes our need to search for it ourselves, it can be easy to adopt it.

But what makes irrational beliefs so powerful is their tendency to mesh with our intuitive expectations.

From the beginning of time, many people have believed bizarre things, and many people have struggled to fight against those beliefs. This creates an equilibrium that, over time, doesn't really change. In this way, you can fight for reason with the understanding that you're simply participating in a balancing act.

As intelligent, cultured, and critical as a person may be, no human being is entirely free from some absurd belief, essentially because it's so difficult to accept the role of chance. Looking to destiny, fate, conspiracy, plots, and good or bad intentions to explain luck is a universal bias. "Lightning doesn't strike twice," "Where there's smoke, there's fire," and "Good things come to those who wait" are all expressions that demonstrate our need for causality and meaning. The greatest scientists could not avoid it. That's why Einstein wrote in his letters about the illness of his wife, Mileva, and their son: "Well-deserved punishment for my having taken the most important step of my life so rashly. I begot children with a physically and morally inferior person."⁵

Einstein's mother had tried to dissuade him from marrying Mileva, who had a limp, predicting that his children would be affected. You might have expected more broad-mindedness from the inventor of the theory of relativity! But as two of his biographers, Roger Highfield and Paul Carter, have said, Einstein "was a man whose combination of intellectual vision and emotional myopia left behind him a series of damaged lives."

At root, perhaps what lies in our power is not to make fewer people believe bizarre or crazy things, but to make sure there are not more people who fall prey to them. It's very rare that anyone can succeed in changing the opinions of those who are already convinced of them. The risk is rather that by challenging them, you reinforce their beliefs.

WHY WE FIND MEANING IN COINCIDENCES



A Conversation with
› Nicolas Gauvrit ‹

Psychologist and mathematician, professor at l'ESPE Lille-Nord-de-France, institutional member of the university laboratory Cognitions Humaine et Artificielle (CHArt)

Q. Certain coincidences seem so stupefying that we refuse to attribute them to chance, and look for meaning in them. But you put this down to a faulty perception of context.

A. Our vision is localized, fixed in time and space. If you look at it from a global perspective, coincidences aren't that shocking. And furthermore, for the most part, we don't ask the right questions. Take the paradox of birthdays: in a group of twenty-five people, what's the likelihood that two of them have the same birth date? In answering the question, we're tempted to rely on a heuristic, a simplified form of reasoning, and ask ourselves what the probability is that, among twenty-five people, one would share our own birthday.

The result is pretty weak, because we reduce the problem to only one possible date, our own birth date. The probability that one person in twenty-five would have the same birth date as me is only 6.3 percent. And yet, the chance that two people in a group of twenty-five would have the same birthday is one in two. But that's not at all the same question.

Q. You give the example of a woman, Violet Jessop, who survived three shipwrecks, including the *Titanic*. That may seem extraordinary, but at the end of the day, it isn't, not at all.

A. The problem derives from the fact that we have insufficient information, and we fill in the gaps with default elements that seem probable and implicit. When we hear without any further details that someone has survived the wreck of the *Titanic* and two other shipwrecks, we imagine that the other two wrecks were comparable to the *Titanic*, which isn't at all the case, since one of them had very few victims, and the other had none at all. Moreover, you assume that there's nothing particularly unique about Violet Jessop. But she worked for the companies of all three of those ships.

Q. You also say that, in attempts to “decode” the events of September 11, the number 11 pops up a lot, which produces the temptation to

see conspiracy or the hand of fate. But you see nothing extraordinary in it.

A. This applies to all numerology and fetish numbers. The number 19, for example, appears hundreds of times in the Koran, and the number 7 in the Bible—or in any case, multiples of it—which is hardly astonishing, statistically speaking.

You can also find predictions in word form, in the Bible for instance—a supposedly secret code. A few years ago, in his book *The Bible Code*, the journalist Michael Drosnin used a variety of reading grids to reveal all sorts of predictions, including the end of the world. In reality, the number of possible grids and computer analyses you could apply to the text is so enormous that you could find absolutely anything. Drosnin even issued a challenge: see if you can find as many predictions in *Moby-Dick* as in the Bible. Well . . . it had already been done!

Besides, in the Bible, applying the same technique, people have also found passages that say “God doesn’t exist,” and “Hate Jesus.” As with anything else, you can find what you want.

Q. Including in your own book?[1](#)

A. Definitely! In Pascal’s *Pensées*, I found a prediction of thousands of deaths from AIDS. Sébastien Pommier, a computer scientist, found the words “chicken and french fries” in the genome of beer yeast, when he alphabetically encoded it. Which was what he’d had for lunch. . . .

If you apply one reading grid chosen at random, the probability of finding “chicken and French fries” is very low, but if you multiply that by a very large number of different grids, it’s another thing entirely.

Q. You’ve calculated that, over the last twenty years, seventy-two thousand premonitory dreams might have genuinely predicted the death of someone the following week but would have gone unnoticed.

A. Yes, that’s just an estimate, but it’s one more illustration of the conjunction of weak probability with a large sampling. Henri Broch

made a similar calculation for a television program on mystery, during which a medium asked the television audience to turn on the lights in their homes, so he could make lightbulbs shatter all across France. People phoned in by the dozens, aghast, to affirm that a lightbulb really had burst in their homes. Incredible! But given that the program lasted an hour, and supposing that every viewer had four or five lightbulbs, it was predictable that a few hundred would burn out during the program, given the average life span of a lightbulb. The probability was very weak for each lamp, but elevated for hundreds of thousands of them.

Q. He might just as well have pretended to cause births and deaths!

A. Yes, but people know that things like that happen often. People don't normally talk about lightbulbs exploding. The same applies to premonitory dreams. I've had quite a few myself, violent ones, which seemed real, but luckily, turned out not to be. Otherwise, I'd have two friends less at the very least. . . .

Q. Why is it that not one single prediction of astrologists or clairvoyants ever comes true, that there's never a coincidence?

A. Oh, but predictions regularly come true. Elizabeth Teissier had foreseen that something would happen in September 2001. Not an attack, and not on the eleventh, but still . . . In general, their predictions are more foreseeable—earthquakes, accidents. But not September 11, which was truly unexpected. Elizabeth Teissier, to justify her predictions, often declares that she foresaw airplane accidents. For fun, someone started using the computer to generate random predictions, and that turned out to be more effective, a bit, than Elizabeth Teissier. This remains a problem with anniversaries: if you make a list of dates on which accidents will occur, it's not improbable that you'll end up with one or two coincidences.

Q. You attack certain psychological approaches, like psychogenealogy² and synchronicity.

A. Psychogenealogy, essentially, is based on coincidences between the dates of significant events in our own lives and events that happened to our ancestors. In essence, it's a slightly more complicated variation on the birthday paradox, because this time we're looking for coincidences between two distinct lists. But once you start constructing an enriched, expanded genealogical tree, it's not rare to find yourself with hundreds of dates, which heightens the probability of a coincidence. Furthermore, in practice, people don't really have exact dates. In the worst case, when people really find *nothing*, they find a way to make up a connection. One twenty-four-year-old patient had a great uncle who died at thirty, while traveling. A psychologist came up with a connection, telling the man that he was in a dynamic to kick off at around thirty. How funny. And yes, I'm also regularly asked about the concept of synchronicity.³ Jung wanted to elaborate a theory on it, with the help of mathematicians and a physicist, but it never came to anything.

Q. **Nevertheless, people can't stop themselves from assigning meaning to coincidences. I suppose you yourself might be tempted, in spite of everything.**

A. Absolutely! An event with a weak probability seems much more astonishing to us when it happens to us than when it happens to other people. Recently I was testing children on their perception of luck, by throwing a die behind a barrier, and asking them to guess eight times in a row what number would come up. I wanted to analyze the sequences of predictions they produced. Out of seventy children, one succeeded four times in a row. At the end of these attempts, I told myself: "This is terrible, if this can happen, I must be wrong, premonition does exist!" I had to reason with myself: one out of seventy, that can be explained by chance. It's like optical illusions. You fall for them in the moment, but you can reason your way out of them.

There's a phenomenon called the "Clustering Illusion," related to "excessive expectation of randomness." That is to say, you expect chance to reflect the ideas you have of it. To be more specific, you expect that dates chosen at random will not be ordered in any special

grouping but will be uniformly dispersed. In reality, when you choose twelve dates at random, two will fall in the same month, or even three. This excessive expectation of randomness can lead us to make mistakes, but it's not irrational.

Q. Does that mean there's a tendency to believe that chance itself must obey certain rules?

A. Actually, it's true that when you take into consideration both time—because you don't wait for the random dates to occur—and space, you imagine the selected events as if spread out across a surface, far apart from each other. The aerial bombardments of London during the Second World War serve as a good historic example. The German aviators flew so high over the clouds that they couldn't see where the bombs were going, so they fell totally randomly. But when the British government looked at the map of the impacts, they could see that the bombs were concentrated in certain points that corresponded to no obvious military objective. They deduced that the Germans had bad maps. In reality, a statistical analysis showed that the targets weren't really chosen, they were randomly dispersed.

Q. Paradoxically, you explain that there's no doubt we owe the survival of our species to these cognitive illusions: it's better to see too many coincidences than too few.

A. Evolutionary psychologists suggest that we've been conditioned to detect them. In an era when it could be a question of life or death, it was better to overinterpret coincidences and run away as soon as the leaves started rustling—which might indicate a predator—than to underestimate their importance and make no deductions.

In any case, the scientific method consists of looking for coincidences and correlations and interpreting them through some other means than chance. This isn't irrational, but it's a risky method, because it doesn't always produce reliable conclusions. For example, one *a priori* experiment, which was correctly conducted, proved the existence of a "Mozart effect," by which people became smarter when they listened to

Mozart. But when they tried to replicate it, it didn't work. You've got to assume that there was a false positive, which is something that must happen a lot. Illusions like these are the flaw in the rational method.

Q. Finally, where does our resistance to chance come from? Does it have to do with some pure cognitive incapacity, or does it arise out of fear?

A. I don't think we're afraid of it, but in general, we like to have an explanation: that's why we invented science. Nevertheless, I don't really have an answer.

Interview by Jean-François Marmion.

STUPIDITY AS LOGICAL DELIRIUM



› Boris Cyrulnik ‹

Neuropsychiatrist and director of studies at the University of Toulon

Nothing is more common or more serious than stupidity. Of all living creatures, we human beings are certainly the most gifted at it, given that we live in a world of representations, some of which, despite their coherence and their internal logic, reveal themselves to be totally detached from reality. We call these representations “fantasies” when they pertain to a psychotic, but for you and me, it usually comes down to simple stupidity. It’s very easy to find thousands of examples of it in all spheres of human intelligence.

Take the biological realm. If I claim that the psychopharmacological effect of taking two doses of vitamin B₆ is exactly equivalent to taking one dose of vitamin B₁₂, mathematical logic will allow me to lull you into believing that this makes perfect sense. But adapted to another realm, this logic can be stupid. To demonstrate this, I performed a small calculation inspired by the psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich. The expectation of the longevity of the sex life of a couple is about fifty years, sometimes more. At the rate of two sexual encounters per week, the typical frequency in our culture, this means five thousand to six thousand sexual encounters overall. Yet in France, which gets the gold medal for birth rate in Europe, women give birth, on average, to 1.9 children. Schematically, this would mean one child per three thousand sexual encounters. Statistically, therefore, it’s highly improbable that sexual intercourse causes pregnancy! It’s unanswerable. (Let us note in passing that by this mathematical reckoning, it would take 2,399,200,000,000 acts of intercourse to obtain a population of 7.5 billion humans.)

The Perilous Leaps of “Psycholacanalists”

And what do shrinks have to say about this? It’s profitable here to consider the brief history of the competition between the celebrated psychoanalysts Jacques Lacan and Sigmund Freud. Lacan’s jealousy was the spur to a fundamental theoretical divergence that would produce “psycholacanalysis,” which is to say, a form of psychoanalysis heavily influenced by Lacan’s thinking and wordplay—venerated today by his admirers, who repeat his theories without a word of critique or discussion. It’s worth noting, for

example, that a Jewish patient once said to Lacan: “Every morning, I’m woken by anxiety. It’s been this way ever since the war; it’s the exact same time when the Gestapo knocked at the door.” Lacan extracted himself from his armchair and his theories to perform a practical action. Stroking the woman’s cheek, he spoke the words, “*Geste à peau, geste à peau,*” which in French means “a gesture with the skin”; and, more importantly, is a homonym of “Gestapo.” The patient’s reaction? “This is absolutely marvelous!” Whatever works. . . .

It’s also worth noting that Lacan’s work on the “mirror stage” of psychological development was inspired by animal ethology, a fact that he frankly admitted. He was also one of the first people who would have read a publication like this one—no matter what today’s psycholacanalists say, who hate me because I emphasize this connection, which can be confirmed in the blink of an eye. As far back as 1946, in his book *The First Year of Life* (which had a preface by Anna Freud), the American psychoanalyst René Spitz made twenty-eight references to animal ethology. I conclude from this that, without even having read their own seminal texts, psycholacanalists attack me in the name of an idea of reality they have invented, not in the name of reality itself. This is the very definition of logical delirium.

At a conference in the 1980s, I dreamed up a hoax to illustrate what Freud called “condensation” and “displacement” in obsessional neurosis. I invented the case of a certain Otto Krank, who suffered from hysterical paralysis in both ears. He couldn’t move them the way his classmates could. He went to consult a psychoanalyst or a psycholacanalist, for whom the signifier was low-hanging fruit, because it had to do with a real-life situation. All that was needed, it was understood, was to change the signifier to alter the real-world effect. The psychoanalyst advised Otto to make an anagram of his first name, by writing it backward. On the following day, Otto felt much better. This cure followed the same reasoning as the “*geste à peau*”: displacement, condensation, then a perilous leap.

A Few Words on the Profession

But let’s be fair: stupidity can also strike just as hard on the opposite side, among therapists who embrace the scientific process. The classifications of

the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* of the American Psychiatric Association, or of the World Health Organization's *Classification Internationale des Maladies (CIM)*, are informed by articles that have gone through peer reviews—in which I on occasion have been invited to take part. The name of the author of the research is hidden, though you often can guess who wrote the article, based on the style and the subject. Incidentally, it's altogether possible that the members of a peer review committee may include the author's brother-in-law; a friend who owes him a lot of money, or whom he's published twice, who therefore owes him a boost up the ladder; or even a nonagenarian who keeps saying the same phrase over and over (“mirror stage, mirror stage, mirror stage . . .”). In the end, this is how you build your career: by repeatedly publishing the same article, tweaking the title or altering a sentence or two, all the way up until retirement. I'm exaggerating a little, of course, but once, my friend Paul Ekman, a major pioneer of the psychology of emotions, submitted an article to a genuinely anonymous peer review, and had the article rejected by a journal that had already published it two years before. Stupidity also applies to committees that judge their friends!

It's part of the whole system, whether you're a biologist, a mathematician, a statistician, a psychoanalyst, a psycholacanian, or a clinician. It's part of the fabric of everyday life. We deserve the Nobel Prize for our indulgence! Better yet, we should get plaques in our honor on the walls of corner cafés. And yet, let us give some credit to the scientific process. It at least has the virtue of making the case for doubt, for verification, and for the acceptance of the fact that our truths are ephemeral. This must mark some kind of progress in stupidity. But if you want a scientific career, you absolutely have to prove that you're right . . . which brings us back to logical delirium. Two options are open to you: quality of career, or quality of life. If you choose the first option, you'll wage war on doubt to shore up the primacy of certainty, reinforcing both stupidity and your career prospects in the process. In this case you'll sign publications, “blah-blah-blah,” to make yourself well liked, inserting the approved terms and citations. If you choose the second option, you'll flout the rules and come under attack. After a period of discomfort, you might be joined by other people to form a new faction, which, in turn, will generate its own blah-blah-blah. To think for yourself, therefore, is to doom yourself to

thinking for yourself before you know if you'll be joined quickly (or not) by a band of like-minded pals to form a new band of fools. Friendly fools. With a little bit of luck, you'll have fun being idiots together. In that way, our bond with stupidity can shape our careers.

In any case, after this article appears, I suspect my own career will take a dive!

THE LANGUAGE OF STUPIDITY



› Patrick Moreau ‹

*Professor of literature at Collège Ahuntsic in Montreal, editor in chief of
Argument*

What do fools say? They themselves don't know, that's their cover. The word of a fool, without being entirely free of meaning, does not strive for exactitude. It's an empty rattle, intended to banish silence. The fool . . . attaches himself to platitudes like a drunk trapeze artist to his safety rope. He holds on tight to the handrail of stock phrases, and never lets go.

—GEORGES PICARD, *DE LA CONNERIE* [*ON STUPIDITY*][1](#)

Sometimes we do stupid things, but much more often we say them. Most of the time, they are transmitted through language. Is it possible that the lectures we dismiss as idiotic—when all they’re doing is relaying a momentary lapse in intelligence—simply represent one of the multiple possible manifestations of stupidity? Is there not a specific form of stupidity, tied to language, that is the natural domain of thoughtless statements? This hypothesis approaches the Newspeak of Orwell’s *1984*, which the author nicknamed “duckspeak,” and which found its ideal expression “without involving the higher brain centers at all.”²

At first glance, it may seem strange to associate everyday linguistic clumsiness with Newspeak, the canonical model for political cant of every kind. But the two forms are connected by their very nature: they both are defined by the inadequate and unconscious use of language. Stupid words, or stupid statements, as in Orwell’s Newspeak, are unable to adequately assess reality. The same is true of the thoughts of those who pronounce them. Even if one of these emerges in the political and ideological arena, while the other arises spontaneously, Newspeak and everyday linguistic clumsiness have this in common: they both represent perversions of the normal and legitimate use of language and words.

Moreover, you can make the hypothesis that these two associated phenomena, initially distinct, are currently drawing nearer to each other, because of at least two concomitant factors. For one, ideologies (feminism, differentialism, antispeciesism, gender theory, etc.) engaged in intense “conceptual lobbying”³ are coming into increasing conflict with common sense. For another, a particularly brutal form of stupidity has erupted in the public sphere, thanks to the internet and to social networks that furnish it with a formidable echo chamber.

There’s no better example of the current rapprochement between stupidity and Newspeak than the message that was published on Facebook in March 2018 by a militant vegan after a terror attack in the French town of Trèbes in which a butcher was killed:

“So, huh—you’re shocked that a murderer would get killed by a terrorist? Not me. I’ve got zero compassion for him, there’s even some justice in it.”

Here we find a concentration of everything most characteristic of contemporary Newspeak, transformed into sheer stupidity.

A Shift in the Frame of Reference: When Words Come Apart

What most shocks common sense in this message is, of course, the characterization of the butcher as a “murderer.” This term seems simultaneously improper, hyperbolic, insulting, and in the end, stupid. It’s of the same order as the word “fags,” which a sports commentator recently used off-mike to describe players on a German football team who had insulted a French club.

The stupid things people say are, primarily, a kind of false front, often tinged with exaggeration. The words they use correspond neither to their habitual meaning nor to the referent they’re supposed to designate. However, it’s different from lying, because the people who say stupid things do not really intend to deceive their audience. They’re just venting. Certainly, without the slightest concern for truth; but also without the least pretense of being taken seriously; that is, to be taken at their word. This last point might seem, at first glance, to distinguish between the stupidity of those who use Newspeak from the stupidity of a person for whom, on the contrary, every word matters because it expresses a strong belief. Let’s look at what’s going on here.

In calling the butcher who was the victim of a terrorist a “murderer,” the vegan militant is surely not aware of saying something stupid. Quite the contrary. She uses this term in perfect consciousness that it departs from its ordinary meaning. Through it, she fiercely asserts a lexical readjustment that, in her judgment, renders the language more truthful, and better able to reflect reality. Killing animals, in her eyes, is objectively murder; and therefore, to describe a killer of animals as a murderer is to use the right word, even if the validity of this is not obvious to everyone. Taking a similar approach, you could for example allege that, in the time of slavery, the murder of a slave was not regarded as homicide, either! Seen this way, the apparently outrageous use of the word “murderer” in the butcher incident would merely anticipate a meaning that later would be unanimously accorded. This hypothesis is plausible: in its transformation of

the old language, particularly in the meaning of its words, Newspeak in many cases can look like progress. But is that the case here?

Obviously not. First of all, there is the simple fact that, in our day, butchers do not kill animals—that's done in slaughterhouses. Their job is to carve their carcasses into steaks, filets, and so on. Therefore, the descriptor “murderer” lacks exactness, and constitutes a lexical impropriety.

Here we touch on a point that brings the language of ideology and the language of stupidity into close communion: the shift in frame of reference that makes words come unscrewed, if we may put it that way, from their relation to reality,⁴ even if we can't quite categorize these improper uses of language as lies. The idiot sports commentator on French TV doesn't really believe that the foes of his favorite team are all homosexual. As for the high-minded militant, it never occurred to her that the butcher she denounced had in all likelihood never slain a single creature. In this sort of discourse, words do not refer to themselves, they become “their own referents.” They transmit a kind of delusion, like a fetish whose significance exceeds its true nature.⁵

The Inconsistency of the Signified: Is a Murderer Always a Murderer?

However, this recourse to the referential function of language is not enough to resolve the debate about proper usage of vocabulary; that is, to distinguish the wheat from the chaff, right words from wrong ones. It's necessary to pin down the definitions of the words in question to examine what they signify, because the words serve less to describe the world around us than to help us analyze it and give it meaning with the help of concepts that we can identify.

We could point out to the woman who used the word “murderer” that if the act of killing an animal constituted murder, then the cat who catches and kills a mouse would have to be described as a murderer, as would the whale who exterminates krill, or the cheetah who, for its dinner, disembowels an antelope. Correct word usage demands that the signified possess a stable definition that can be used to designate different referents if they share the same qualities. If, therefore, killing an animal is criminal when a human

being does it, it logically follows that the same act is just as criminal if another animal does it. One way or another, our defender of animal rights ought to applaud the idea of the extinction of all carnivores, through the providential “justice” she invokes at the end of a message whose consequences she had not necessarily thought through. Her heedless, unreflective language embodies the principal shared features of Newspeak and stupidity, each as liable as the other to prompt people to spout thoughtless blunders and make occasional gaffes. But that’s not all.

Blinkered Words, Humpty Dumpty Style

In a way, words that free themselves from their referents and proper meanings escape the ordinary confines of language. But a word is always a problematic entity: its meaning is open, and can be the object of negotiation between two interlocutors,⁶ each of whom attempts in turn to assert (with greater or lesser persuasiveness) its relation to the referent or its conceptual coherence, affirming or denying that it is the right word on a case-by-case basis.

From this point of view, language is a dialectical reality as well as a dialogical one, and only an individual as tyrannical as Humpty Dumpty, in *Through the Looking-Glass*, can declare, in “rather a scornful tone” to boot, that “When I use a word . . . it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.” That’s exactly what idiots and ideologues do. Their words, arbitrarily defined and with no relation to anything but themselves, are not open to the least discussion. This is the ultimate perversion of language, because language belongs to everyone.

Since the idiot, like the ideologue, is unaware of the diversity of reality or of the multiplicity of points of view,⁷ his words have blinkers on them. They signify “neither more nor less” than what he or she who uses them imperiously decides, with no more regard for other speakers than for the tradition reflected in the dictionary. If this person (who, let us recall, prides herself on having “zero compassion”) decides that the word “murderer” is the best way to define the butcher’s trade, well, that’s what this word, which has become self-referential because of the inconsistency of its definition,

will signify. But such words are no longer truly words; they have become one-way signals whose meaning no longer lends itself to interpretation.

Paradoxically, because they permit no discussion, these signal words become inarguable when they are dictatorially imposed in conversation. They therefore can only be unquestioningly accepted, or challenged . . . which brings its own risks and dangers.

Slogans: The Battle Cries of the Herd⁸

These signal words constitute slogans in an etymological sense (the word “slogan” comes from the Gaelic, designating the battle cry that rallied members of the same clan). They are not used so much to say something that could generally be better expressed another way, as to dignify the group they identify with, formally or informally. (Conversely, those who don’t use these terms, or worse, who reject them, exclude themselves from the group in question, making themselves irredeemable enemies of the speaker.) Deriding the German rivals to a French football team as “fags” is a way of affirming one’s support of the French team as a patriot, as a man proud of his heterosexuality, etc. In the same manner, the message the militant posted on Facebook simultaneously denotes a desire for complicity, through the familiar tone she takes as she addresses her virtual audience (“So, huh—”), and a desire for distinction, demonstrated by the appeal she makes to iconoclasts by announcing her opposition to majority opinion and consensus (“you’re shocked? . . . Not me.”).

This apparent critical spirit, this provocativeness—which never departs from what the group she identifies with would approve—is common both to the idiot and to the ideologue. Despite their simplistic rhetoric—or rather, because of it—both groups draw on a know-it-all’s sense of superiority. Such feelings account for a large part of linguistic stupidity, as well as for the startling, unshakable success of demagogues. The latter, like the former, frequently resort to sweeping generalizations that are peremptory, assured . . . and for that reason, reassuring. One of the most powerful antidotes to the delirium of ideology is doubt, the intellectual check to stupidity.

The Loss of Common Sense

The current ideological foment, fostered by, among other factors, algorithms and social networks that spawn niche cultures and bring together members of diverse groups, facilitates the spread of jargon that bears increasingly less resemblance to ordinary speech. At the same time, social networks dissolve the boundaries of these groups, giving rise to confusion about what is private or semiprivate and what can be made public; in other words, what can and cannot be publicly said.

After the activist's post (which was shocking to most people) was denounced by other internauts who did not share her vocabulary or her *a priori* ideology, the young woman's first reaction was to protest that "this post was only addressed to [her] friends," and then to appeal to "L214," the animal rights association she identified with. Unfortunately for her, the association soon sent out a communiqué dissociating itself from her statement.

As for the disgraceful remark of our sports commentator; without the ill will of a third party, it would never have been made public, and therefore would not have given rise to the scandal it produced.

These two anecdotes reveal a crisis in public discourse, mined on every side by two forms of linguistic abuse that, while different, are united in one essential thing, the loss of common sense. We are dealing on one side with conceptual idiocy that often has its origins in the humanities, but remains more or less abstruse and shocking to most people (rape culture, gender issues, state racism, etc.); on the other side, with a provocative vulgarity that invades the public sphere unintentionally (as in the case of our sports commentator), or intentionally (as manifested, for example, in the tweets of President Trump or the Vaffanculo Days ["Fuck You" Days] organized in Italy by the populist Five Star Movement party).

The thinking public struggles to juggle these two forms of abuse to protect common sense, without which no consensus in words or discourse is even minimally possible. Public debate is reduced to a clash of slogans, whose opponents don't debunk them, but simply reject them, denouncing them as senseless. Given that field studies on the subject of stupidity, like the one conducted by René Zazzo cited earlier, have shown that everyone is

always a fool in somebody else's estimation, you can guess the sterility of such ideological confrontations.

Stupidity being contagious, the worst thing about this state of affairs is that all of us lose out when common sense disappears. Magistrates punished the militant vegan for her apology for terrorism; while web surfers expressed outrage at the sportscaster's obvious (in their opinion) homophobia. It's worth asking if taking those two troublemakers literally (whose excessive language did not merit it) did not itself demonstrate a remarkable lack of open-mindedness, by taking seriously something that should have been recognized for what it was: simple stupidity.

EMOTIONS DON'T (ALWAYS) MAKE US STUPID



A Conversation with
› Antonio Damasio ‹

Professor of neurology and psychology and director of the Brain and Creativity Institute at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles

Q. Conventional wisdom holds that emotions make us stupid. Is it stupid to think that?

A. That belief is too general to do justice to the complexity of the problem. First, there's a great variety of emotions. Some of them make us incredibly intelligent when they are appropriate to the situation; and others can make us act completely stupidly or dangerously. So we have to distinguish negative emotions like anger, fear, or contempt, for example, from positive emotions, like joy or compassion, which make us better, help us cooperate, and make us act more intelligently. Of course, every emotion can have a downside: if you're too compassionate or too nice, you can be taken advantage of without any benefit to yourself. We can't put all emotions in the same bag. And let's not forget that it's the situation that determines whether our behavior will prove intelligent or stupid.

Emotions and feelings don't arise in isolation: reason is required to judge our actions. This is important from an evolutionary perspective, because in the beginning, our species felt emotions, but our ancestors weren't aware of that. It's only later on that feelings came on the scene; which is to say, a capacity for reflection on our emotions. All of this is capped by reason, based on relevant knowledge and understanding of a given situation. Intelligence in human beings is the capacity to negotiate between emotional reactions on one hand, and between knowledge and reason on the other. The problem isn't emotion alone, or reason alone. Reason alone is a little dry: it can be appropriate in certain situations in our social lives, but not in all of them, far from it.

Q. You've shown that when patients are cut off from their emotions because of a cerebral lesion, it's very difficult for them to make good decisions. This would seem to mean that in normal situations, reason and emotion are not opposed.

A. Exactly. There, too, it's a question of negotiation. It's not possible for a human being to operate at full capacity with reason alone, or with the emotions alone. Both are necessary. In a way, reason evolved from emotions that stay in the background, involving us in a situation or

leaving us out of it. The idea that you should only rely on emotions, or only rely on reason, to lead your life . . . now that would be truly idiotic!

Q. Why is it that very intelligent, highly educated people can believe in extremely stupid, even dangerous, things?

A. We must accept the fact that the immense complexity of the human being provides us with an enormous amount of knowledge, but also with an incredibly broad range of possible reactions. And while psychology and neuroscience are developing general models of human functioning, we shouldn't deduce from this that all of us function the same way. That would be a very big mistake, and a very great danger. Certainly, we're all human, and we all deserve respect, freedom, and kindness. Just the same, we're all extremely different; each of us has our own repertoire of behavior, our own intellectual life, our emotional style, our temperament.

Some of us are very funny and energetic, and wake in the morning singing, while others prefer to sleep in. We need to recognize this almost infinite variety. Also, we don't live alone, but among other humans, amid the culture that has inspired our development. By virtue of this variety, it's altogether possible to believe idiotic things even when we know that they're false in scientific and statistical terms. We're all so different that even speaking of Western culture is debatable. Really, we live in microcultures. French culture, American culture, even that's too general. Of course, you can easily recognize some traits as typically French or American, but they're little more than stereotypes: you also have to reckon with the subdivisions that apply to our social groups, traditions, and behavior norms. That sounds complicated, but the reality is simply that we can't be reduced to stereotypes. In any case, we shouldn't be.

Q. Your last book, *The Strange Order of Things*, examines the biological roots of culture. Do you think that today, in our global culture, we're living in a golden age of stupidity?

A. Hard to say! In my opinion, yes and no. We don't know everything nowadays, but we know much more than we ever did before. The accumulation of scientific knowledge about biology, for example, on climate, physics, and human diseases like cancer, has never attained this peak before. We've made immense progress. That said, because of the way that information comes to us, especially through digital communication and social networks, we're also living in an age in which we can easily be fooled, and allow ourselves to be influenced by errors or lies. Once again, this means that the answer can't be binary. It depends on who you are and where you are. In hindsight, we know far more now than we did ten years ago, that's inarguable; but we're still subject to streams of disinformation that are being deliberately issued. It's completely contradictory. This age is the best and the worst age for stupidity, rolled into one.

Q. Are the advances in neuroscience sometimes stupid or dangerous?

A. Whatever the case, they interest us very much: we want to know what we're like: how our brain, our mind, and our biology work—which explains why neuroscience is so popular. When a discipline is this fashionable it runs the risk of being abused by bad practitioners. Obviously, there's both good and bad science, but it's not a question of stupidity. And I don't think that neuroscience on the whole is any worse than physics, climatology, or the other sciences.

Interview by Jean-François Marmion.

STUPIDITY AND NARCISSISM¹



› Jean Cottraux ‹

*Honorary psychiatrist of the hospitals and founding member of the
Academy of Cognitive Therapy of Philadelphia*

Two intellectuals, sitting on their duffs, won't get as far as a brute who walks.

—MICHEL AUDIARD, *TAXI FOR TOBROUK* [*UN TAXI POUR TOBROUK*]

It's hard to define stupidity, and often difficult to perceive it in ourselves and others. Nevertheless, the eminent cognitive psychologist René Zazzo has done research on this subject. Zazzo was a brilliant man who specialized in the study of intelligence, and of self-image, which has considerable bearing on intelligence. He did not hesitate to publish the results of this study, which sparked controversy in academia, his own milieu.

The study involved a hundred doctors, psychiatrists, and psychologists at a big Parisian hospital, and also included twenty members of the Parisian psychiatric community. He gave them a list of 120 names, including their own, asking them which names deserved to be labeled "stupid." Zazzo also put his own name on the list. He doesn't mention his score. . . .

A short list of five names tagged by more than 85 percent of those participating emerged, but only one name was tagged by all of the voters. It was a big boss, a good clinician, whose IQ was at least 120, but who had no sense of humor. He was quite erudite, but he had difficulties connecting with others, little empathy, and a lack of sensitivity that led him to hurt and humiliate people without being aware of it. His logical intelligence was perfect, but he made gaffes because he didn't take others into consideration. In effect, he was trapped in his own narcissistic bubble.

According to this study, therefore, a fool is someone who, lacking emotional intelligence, is blind to his own faults, and who abuses others because of his egocentrism. This description comes close to explaining the narcissistic personality disorder, which I will describe here through its intersection with work, romantic relationships, and social networks.

The Narcissistic Personality Disorder

This disorder is characterized by a general tendency to fantasies and grandiose behavior, accompanied by the need for admiration and a lack of empathy.² According to studies, it affects anywhere from 0.8 percent to 6 percent of the general population³ and is increasingly common in the young generations born after the rise of the internet.^{4,5}

A well-conducted study has shown that there are three principal types of narcissistic personality disorder.⁶

1. The malignant and grandiose narcissistic personality is manipulative, exploitative, tyrannically deceitful, hostile, aggressive, and without empathy. His grandiosity does not derive from a need to make up for some deficit, but from his sense of entitlement. The central disorder of this type of person, therefore, is their permanent overestimation of themselves. The malignant narcissist resembles the antisocial personality, except for the fact that he's neither impulsive nor risk taking nor irresponsible. He's often adaptable and knows how to retreat when challenged. This makes him even more dangerous to his chosen victims.
2. The unstable narcissistic personality is fragile, depressive, anxious, critical, and envious, has excessively high goals, and can be perfectionist. He masks his feelings of inferiority with grandiosity, which surfaces when he feels threatened.
3. The high-functioning narcissistic personality is grandiose, competitive, exhibitionistic, seductive, and charismatic, on a perpetual quest for power. But on the positive side, he's energetic, intelligent, skilled at relationships, and oriented to self-actualization. This is the narcissism of a number of great directors, artists, and scientists.

These three major disorders should be distinguished from banal contemporary cultural narcissism, which has its origins in the consumer culture that arose in the 1960s, exacerbated by recent developments in technologies of mass communication that have landed us all in the culture of narcissism for three generations.⁷

Narcissistic Stupidity in the Working World

There's no question that it's in the workplace that stupidity reveals itself most abundantly, through a conversation, an offhand remark, a gesture, or a glance that indicates: "I'm looking through you."

There can be satisfaction in playing dumb to get social rewards, letting those who want to dominate you feel smart. Playing dumb is a way to rise

up the professional ladder, through the strategy of embracing a humble status and inflating the egos of the powerful people on whose favor you depend. The point is not to get so caught up in the game that you get taken for a total imbecile. As Balzac wrote in *The Vicar of Tours*, “Sir, one is only embarrassed when one embarrasses others.”

I remember that at the beginning of my career, one of my bosses told me, “I always wanted to work with idiots, but now, working with you, I realize I was mistaken.” I smilingly accepted this homage paid by the vice of a sage to the virtue of a novice who’d known how to play the fool to get a job. But over time, through the vagaries of life’s path, I’ve no doubt ended up, sometimes, entering the ranks of the idiots. . . .

Apart from these instances of stupidity, it’s possible to identify two principal types of structural idiots.

The first is the vast fraternity of “glorious bastards.” This inflated and ever-swelling horde presents an ego in a perpetual state of enlargement. You find a lot of them in business, and they flourish in government offices and university hospitals. In general, they’re harmless, on condition that you know how to flatter them to get what you want. Their form of narcissism is characterized by banality, shallowness, and shortcomings that can easily be remedied by adept subordinates.

The second category is much more toxic. This is the “asshole” who delights in the subjection and suffering of others and uses his career to indulge his passion for humiliation. This is a malignant narcissistic personality disorder, which sometimes presents the “Dark Triad” of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy.⁸ A meta-analytic study⁹ has shown that it can wreak havoc in the workplace.

A whole book devoted to this personality disorder deserves attentive reading. In spite of its humorous title, it’s completely serious. It’s a work by the American psychologist Robert Sutton, published in 2007: *The No Asshole Rule*. The fundamental rule, “No assholes onboard,” goes as follows: before you hire anyone in a business, a government office, or a university, you must first make sure, however brilliant the candidate appears in his résumé, that he is not an asshole.

One way to find out, apart from considering his reputation and any direct contact you may have had with him, is to evaluate his behavior by asking him to fill out a questionnaire, in the hope that he’ll fill it out sincerely.

Anyone who attentively reads this questionnaire will recognize that it's intended to evaluate the conduct and the habitual thought patterns of the narcissistic personality. Here are the first six questions:

Indicate whether each of the following statements is true (T) or false (F).[10](#)

A. WHAT ARE YOUR GUT REACTIONS TO PEOPLE?

1. You feel surrounded by incompetent idiots—and you can't help letting them know the truth every now and then.
2. You were a nice person until you started working with the current bunch of creeps.
3. You don't trust the people around you, and they don't trust you.
4. You see your coworkers as competitors.
5. You believe that one of the best ways to "climb the ladder" is to push other people down or out of the way.
6. You secretly enjoy watching other people suffer and squirm.

It is assholes like these (that is, the people who would mark the above statements "true") who tear the workplace apart without compunction. It's in this category that sexual harassers (and other workplace bullies) are found. When faced with such people, the only victory is flight . . . or a legal action that exposes their perversity, with proof.

They rarely seek therapy, except in the case of setbacks or threats to their careers. In general, when they see a therapist, it's to ask for help to get back on track so they can repeat the same behaviors. Often, they ask their therapists to teach them techniques to manipulate others more effectively.

Narcissism, Stupidity, and Repetitive Behavior Patterns

Psychologists rarely see people with narcissistic personality disorders, but they frequently see their victims, who are trapped by their behavior patterns. One typical scenario is a trap from which a person struggles to escape without success, a process that repeats itself on numerous occasions throughout his life. The individual does the same thing over and over again, hoping for different results.

This is how it is for women or men who marry (and remarry) narcissistic partners. They're often depressives, unconfident and anxious about themselves, who think they can't love anybody but this exceptionally brilliant person, whom they guiltily believe they are incapable of satisfying in any way.

What do you do with a scenario like this, in which both the narcissistic person and his victim are intelligent people, but act in a way that, from the outside, appears completely stupid? Often it requires the aid of a cognitive psychotherapist who can modify the unhelpful schemas of the victims so they can learn to act like a healthy adult faced with a tyrannical child.

Confronted with a high-functioning narcissist, a healthy adult can accept the role of protector or foil and find personal worth through their joint success. The narcissist is the engine of the couple. Knowing how to profit from the benefits, he assumes the pose of the eternal seducer or seductress. The narcissist has found a flattering, ever-available mirror that allows his or her creativity to bloom. The couple can face problems when frustrations arise, or when one partner hooks his or her wagon to another star.

Confronted with a malignant narcissist, the healthy adult will face the heavy task of establishing limits that are uniquely hard to set in place because there's no remorse or sense of guilt. As a rule, the couple separates. This separation sometimes occurs amid violence and emotional turbulence. Often, a person caught in this situation is advised to leave without providing any contact information, to avoid violence or emotional blackmail.

Confronted with an unstable narcissist, the healthy adult will need to establish the same limits that would be applied to an angry and impulsive child, to empathize with the vulnerable child who hides behind the arrogant exterior. Here, too, the healthy adult can tire of the role of the good parent/patient counselor, always expected to heal every wound.

Narcissism, Stupidity, and Social Networks

The relationship between social networks and the narcissistic personality has been the subject of scientific research in recent years: here are some notable studies.

Christopher Carpenter evaluated the narcissism of 292 subjects who displayed self-promotional behavior.¹¹ This study showed that the “exhibitionism” score of the narcissistic personality is linked to self-promotional behavior, whereas scores for the psychological traits of “entitlement” and “manipulation” predict antisocial internet behaviors like exaggeratedly critical commentary, aggressive responses to negative comments (intended to maintain their social image), or inappropriate expressions of anger. Put another way, it is malignant narcissistic personalities who insult others the most on the internet.

J. A. Lee and Yongjun Sung evaluated the relationship between degrees of narcissism and self-promotional behavior on social networks where selfies are posted.¹² The most narcissistic people who took selfies attached great importance to the “Likes” people gave them, and paid more attention to other people’s selfies. However, they did not give any more “Likes” to other people’s selfies than people with lower narcissism scores did. In other words, narcissistic people like having their self-esteem reinforced by others, but aren’t much inclined to return the favor.

Silvia Casale and her collaborators gathered a sample group of 535 students before comparing nonnarcissists with people who presented signs of vulnerable narcissism or grandiose narcissism. Only the vulnerable narcissists, those with narcissistic hypersensitivity, exhibited problems with internet use and a preference for online forms of interaction. Grandiose narcissists did not differ from nonnarcissist subjects in this regard. That is to say: the more a person exhibited vulnerable narcissism, the more likely he was to develop problematic internet habits.¹³

Harassment on Facebook has become a common phenomenon. According to one statistic,¹⁴ 40 percent of internet users suffer harassment, but the eighteen- to twenty-year-old age group receives the most attacks, with a rate of 70 percent. Twenty-six percent of the young women in this group have endured the attentions of obsessive followers (stalkers) online.

One study¹⁵ has shown a connection between “trolling” and the dark ties that link narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and sadism.

The Cult of the Fake

On September 17, 2016, an announcement was made of an attack on a church in the Parisian district of Les Halles in which hostages were taken. An investigation established that this was a telephone prank by an adolescent boy who was already under surveillance for similar stunts. The fake attack had mobilized the police, to the detriment of true emergencies. The intended goal was achieved with cynicism and serene sadism: to cause buzz. If other people were worried or upset, “that’s their problem.” The essential thing was to mobilize the police, so he could brag to journalists about it afterward. The suffering of others didn’t count.

In this last case, the short-term reinforcement of the ego risks being replaced with long-term punitive consequences. But that hardly matters; the point was to escape from the hell of anonymity, and to exist at last as someone in the media spotlight.

THE BIGGEST MEDIA MANIPULATORS: THE MEDIA ITSELF



A Conversation with
› Ryan Holiday ‹

*Bestselling author, media strategist, and former marketing director of
American Apparel*

Q. According to your book *Trust Me, I'm Lying: Confessions of a Media Manipulator*, one of your basic, paradoxical rules is that to manipulate the big news sites, you first have to target the tiny ones.

A. Basically, it's a snowball effect, you aim at the little blogs, whose extreme, imprecise, and controversial "news" will be picked up by the bigger ones, and you take it from there. In the United States, practically 100 percent of journalists use blogs to get their facts; but the goal of the majority of those sites isn't to instill confidence in the reader and last a hundred years like *The New York Times*, it's to go viral as soon as possible, no matter how. They have to generate traffic and ad revenue at all costs to survive. There certainly are other ways to use the internet to create fake news, like falsifying Wikipedia entries or paying influencers to tweet what you need, for example. I've done that a lot.

Q. You write that, to lure readers, a headline has to boil down to a question that would be a lie if it didn't have a question mark. You'd want it to be memorable without its punctuation, in any case.

A. If you see a provocative question in a headline, the response is always "No." Otherwise, they wouldn't have put it in the headline. Writers deliberately deceive the public because they know they have to attract them, independently of the quality of the article. If the readers were paying to read they'd be furious and ask for their money back. But when the article is free, what are they going to do about it? You can't cancel a click. So, the question is: what can you do to get the maximum number of clicks to reassure advertisers and increase the site's market value?

Q. What, in your opinion, is the most unbelievable manipulation the internet has made possible?

A. The most striking thing isn't one event in particular, or even conspiracy theories about the Kennedy assassination or 9/11, it's how it works every single day, with millions of little manipulations and small, permanent, untraceable lies. People trust the facts that unqualified

writers dispense, and nobody's surprised when someone like me beats the media at their own game. What's astonishing, however, is that the media does almost nothing to prevent this from happening, and nobody is shocked by that! If, for instance, some guy makes a hundred thousand dollars by stirring up a phony buzz storm on the web, a lot of people will tend to think: "Well played!" They're almost happy for him. And the major media knowingly participate in this.

Q. Maybe people let themselves be manipulated as long as they're having a good time and don't feel humiliated by the process?

A. The public certainly has a taste for the sensational. At heart, really, they're perfectly fine with being tricked. Unless the manipulation is political in nature. But what's interesting is that some of the government's most reprehensible acts are met with media silence.

Q. In the film *Wag the Dog*, Robert De Niro and Dustin Hoffman invent a war between America and Albania that's nothing but a media smokescreen. Listening to you, there's nothing improbable about that. . . .

A. That's exactly what the United States did with Iraq in 2003! Dick Cheney leaked information to a *New York Times* journalist, then denied it on television. That way, the vice president was able to draw attention to fake news. Everyone was talking about it, especially in the editorials—game over! If I myself can make up a story from scratch for a publicity campaign, why wouldn't a politician invent a story about a rival, or one government invent a story about another?

Q. So it's like a self-fulfilling prophecy, the stories invented by the media become true?

A. Yes, and what's really scary is the number of important decisions that are based on incorrect or manipulated facts. If a phony story goes out about problems at Apple, Apple's stock will fall because people will believe it. The fake world influences the real world. And that—that's

terrible. Despite all the media coverage, for example, we have no idea what's really going on between the United States and North Korea. An event fascinates us for two weeks, then we forget all about it and move on to other things; we might remember the major headlines, but the nature of the event, its real consequences and the conclusions we should draw from it, escape us. Nobody can agree on the subject, even though everyone talked about it.

Q. What keeps you from using these techniques for a noble cause?

A. Well, you could ask yourself how you could show people more positive things. But the world is so complicated, with so many problems, that I'm not sure it's more useful to stress the positive than the negative. That won't help us find solutions. Anyway, an online article doesn't have to present something true or false, positive or negative, it just has to prompt people to click on a link or watch a video.

Q. So things can only get worse?

A. I would have liked to end my book with solutions, but I don't think they exist. But you have to see both the positive and the negative in that, too: the situation will get worse for those who continue to consult only bad sites, but it will always be possible to find high-quality articles on the major paid sites, like *The New York Times*. So, some people's eyes will be opened.

Q. Finally, your argument is fairly philosophical: we tell ourselves stories about the world that sometimes become true. But where is truth; and also, who's safeguarding it?

A. Nobody, I'm afraid! I wrote this book precisely because I had a unique perspective on the media, and I wanted to sound the alarm and turn the page. At the start, I was just a poor sap sitting at my keyboard; but once you've seen that the emperor has no clothes, and seen how the system works, you want to make your own mark. I got to that point so quickly

that I was able to wake up one day and tell myself that this was not what I wanted to do with my life.

Q. So, should we see you as a savior or a crook?

A. When the book came out, a lot of people said to me, “What have you done!” To which I responded, “And you, what are you doing about the problem?” Who’s trying to warn the public? Me, at least, I tried to do that with my book. It’s a bestseller that’s been translated into several languages, and the public appreciates it. But the media? Not at all! I should have expected that they would hate the message, and therefore shoot the messenger. But they prefer not to talk about it at all, or to pretend there’s not a problem. When I revealed what was going on, they responded, “So what? Where’s the harm in spreading false stories?” The harm is that they transform rumors or self-promotional campaigns into news. The biggest media manipulators of the media—it’s the media itself!

Q. Plenty of media organizations do serious work!

A. Yes, but how can they offset the sensationalism and the exaggeration of unscrupulous media sources that have multiplied in the last ten years, that put profit and loss ahead of reality? To catch people’s attention, serious news has to beat out all the other kinds, and it also has to be chosen over a porn site that can be accessed with one click on a smartphone. There are even algorithms now that can write articles, taking the place of journalists.

Q. What can I do to make your article generate the maximum amount of buzz without violating my ethics?

A. You need a title that leans toward the extreme, that makes web surfers want to click to get to the bottom of it, and a shocking photo. The text should be brief, because people won’t have time to read the whole thing. Summarize everything in a few points, no long sentences or paragraphs.

Don't be afraid of making the readers angry, or of sickening them with sentimentality.

Q. So, even for a high-quality text, you need vulgar packaging.

A. Exactly. People who write for the web wake up every morning without giving any thought to considerations of morality or quality, all they think about is the number of clicks.

Interview by Jean-François Marmion.

MANIPULATION ON THE INTERNET: THE ART IN ITS INFANCY



Here are two of the many techniques Ryan Holiday used to create an event out of nothing.

Pass yourself off as an expert. Easy! Register with a site like *Help a Reporter Out (HARO)*, which specializes in putting journalists in touch with specialists in a wide range of fields, sparing reporters the labor of doing their own research. Many American journalists use the site. For several months, Ryan Holiday, registered under his real name, passed himself off as, among other things, a collector of vinyl records (to *The New York Times*), an incurable insomniac (to ABC News), and the victim of a bacteriological attack (to the twenty-four-hour news channel MSNBC). Not one journalist verified his statements or took the trouble to look at what Google revealed about him, which openly describes him as a media manipulator. When he let the cat out of the bag, he attracted the attention of seventy-

five media outlets and generated more than 1.5 million web clicks.

Create a fake scandal. In Los Angeles, to announce the release of a comic film by his great friend Tucker Max (author of *I Hope They Serve Beer in Hell*), Ryan Holiday put up film posters, then stuck stickers on them that said “Tucker Max Deserves to Have his Dick Caught in a Steel Jaw Trap.” He then sent photos to various local blogs under a pseudonym, congratulating himself on the hostile reaction they provoked. While doing this, he also reached out to LGBT university associations and feminist groups to court condemnation for Tucker Max. In less than two weeks, the controversy spread to the Fox News website, to *The Washington Post*, and the *Chicago Tribune*. Result: huge publicity for the film, and a rise to #1 in sales for the book that inspired it.

“Hoaxes succeed for a very simple reason,” Ryan Holiday explains. “When they turn out to be true, it’s news. If they’re not true, journalists can write articles to revisit the situation, which gives them two clips for the same story. They busy themselves writing explanations about the pseudoinformation that they themselves made popular, and so it continues.”

For another of Tucker Max’s books, Ryan Holiday offered a gift of \$500,000 to Planned Parenthood in Dallas. In exchange, one clinic would have to bear the name “Tucker Max.” The gift was refused. And here’s where the scandal came in. In apparent response to the clinic spitting on a \$500,000 gift, the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation withdrew its funding. Then changed its mind. PETA let it be known that it would accept Tucker Max’s gift to care for animals. In the end, two hundred media outlets covered the controversy, generating more than 3 million page views and extending the new Tucker Max book’s stay on *The New York Times* bestseller list. (It entered the list at #2.) Initial investment: \$0.00. “Our objective was very clearly to troll the media and provoke reactions and debate so we wouldn’t have to pay for a publicity campaign,” Ryan Holiday blithely concedes. *J.-F. M.*

THE SAME OLD SONG



For some media groups, the lures they use to entice the reader are pretty much the same as they were a hundred years ago, or even fifty. All's fair when it comes to inciting someone to buy a newspaper, or to multiply clicks on an article to impress advertisers or eventual buyers of the site. But according to Ryan Holiday, the tactics are getting more manipulative, and this trend is accelerating these days. Judge for yourselves with these—actual—attention-grabbing headlines.



YESTERDAY'S HEADLINES FROM 1898 TO 1903, IN THE PRINT MEDIA:

- War Will Be Declared in Fifteen Minutes
- An Orgy of Older Men, Callow Youths, Gamblers, Ruffians, and Painted Women
- Group Bender—Ceaseless Fisticuffs—A Carnival of Vice
- Old Man Shoots Himself Because He Couldn't Sell His Ear
- Woman Dies in Hospital of Fear of an Owl
- Bulldog Tries to Kill Young Girl He Hates
- Cat Terrifies Tenants in Middle of the Night

TODAY'S HEADLINES, ON NEWS SITES:

- Lady Gaga Nude Talks Cocaine and Celibacy

- Hugh Hefner: “I’m Not a Sex Slave Rapist in a Palace of Poop.”
- The Nine Best Videos of Babies Farting and/or Laughing with Kittens
- How the Justin Bieber Syphilis Rumor Got Started
- VIDEO: Puff Daddy Offers to Expose Himself to Chelsea Handler
- Little Girl Slaps Mom With Piece of Pizza, Saves Life
- Penguin Poops on the Kentucky Senate Floor *J.-F. M.*

STUPID AND EVIL SOCIAL NETWORKS



› François Jost ‹

*Emeritus professor of information science and communication at Sorbonne
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Social networks do not represent an absolute new beginning, a radical rupture with the past. In my recent book— *La Méchanceté en Actes à l'Ère Numérique* [*Evil Deeds in the Digital Age*]¹—I bring to light what I call “transcendental conditions of evil,” echoing Kant; that is, showing the possible conditions of its expression on Web 2.0.²

Society of the Spectacle, Society of Judgment

The first condition flows from the concept of the spectacle as described by the Marxist theorist Guy Debord in his 1967 book *Society of the Spectacle*. Experience is transformed into the visible; or, if you like, human life is reduced to appearances. This drives the situationist to this definition: “Spectacle is not an ensemble of images, but a social relationship among people, mediated by images” (Thesis 4).³ There is no need to change any part of this formulation to apply it to Facebook, where photos construct the personality of the web surfer and his links with his “friends.” It is the image that is at the center of all social mediation. As for Twitter, studies have shown that the presence of an image in the message strongly increases the number of retweets.⁴

The second condition is the extension of the realm of judgment. In 1980, Michel Foucault already had made this observation: “It’s crazy how much people like to judge. They judge everywhere, all the time. No doubt it’s one of the simplest tasks humanity has been given.”⁵ The proliferation of web forums and video-sharing websites and the opportunity to leave commentary have given a maximal breadth to this love of making judgments. All the more so because of the possibility of posting anonymously, through a pseudonym, which permits the web surfer every excess without exposing him to significant risks. Who has the luxury of hunting down the author of an insult who’s hiding behind an IP address?

If neither individualism nor egocentrism is new—television also gave them plentiful opportunities to express themselves in the years 1980–1990—Web 2.0 has allowed them to hypertrophy, giving anyone and everyone the possibility of making the world revolve around themselves. Facebook Live, which permits anyone to become a member of the news media by

filming the world as he sees it through his smartphone, is only one of the most recent symptoms. When each individual can be the center and origin of everything, it's not easy to distinguish oneself. This is the reason for all the strategies web surfers enlist to stand out from the crowd and become famous.

The creation of spectacle, the extension of judgment on anything and everything, the need to be famous to exist . . . What direct effect do these three components of social networks have not on evil, but on stupidity? While they surely won't exhaust the subject, they can serve as a compass to orient myself in this field whose circumference is nowhere and whose center is everywhere.

Reality? A Simple Picture . . .

The creation of sharing sites like YouTube has given everyone the possibility of being a "channel" on which they are not only free to assemble the clips they like, they're permitted to publish their own videos. This potentiality has led to a rise in what might be called self-spectacle. Among these are a vast series of "challenge" segments whose goal is to prove to others that you're capable of accomplishing some act or other. One of the first challenges was Neknominations, which consisted of filming oneself draining a large quantity of alcohol and, through a social network like Facebook, daring three others to do the same in the following twenty-four hours. "*À l'eau ou au resto*" ("Hit the water or buy me dinner,") caught on next, in France, and as its name suggests, consisted of daring friends to jump into cold water or else pay for a meal, following the same nominating procedure. In the United States, the "Cold Water Challenge" and the "Ice Bucket Challenge" were similar; the penalty for failing to complete the dare was to make a donation to charity. It goes without saying that many brave souls hurled themselves into the water: no fewer than 19,600 videos appear on YouTube. And of course, the escapade was responsible for many mishaps—falls, slips—but also some serious accidents. One young man drowned in Brittany after diving into a river with his bicycle attached to his leg; another died in the Pas de Calais, the victim of a skull fracture and

cervical lesions. In spite of this, many participants nominated their wives, their brothers, or their sisters.

While you may say without great risk of contradiction that it's stupid to die and put your loved ones in danger for the sake of winning a dare, it must be noted that this stunt shares characteristics I addressed earlier, descending in a direct line from "telereality." The first of these, clearly, is the mediatization of the act of self-spectacle, without which the dare would lose much of its interest. Essentially, what counts for the person who performs this deed is being seen. It's as if the famous formula of the Irish philosopher George Berkeley, "*Esse est percipi*" ("To be is to be perceived"), was the motto of the individual in the digital era. The second trait, which is the foundation of telereality, is the radical separation between the actor and the spectator: one suffers, the other watches. The more the former screams and swears, the happier the latter. This illustrates the famous "sadism of the spectator," whose roots Lucretius anticipated in *De Rerum Natura*: "It is sweet, when winds roil the waters of the vast sea, to observe from land the distress of others, not because it is a pleasure that others should suffer, but because it is sweet to see what evils we have escaped."

Reality becomes an image that has no more consistency than a television blooper or a video gag. Nobody will be surprised that the most-watched challenge video is of a young woman who slips and brutally bashes her shins on the pontoon where she lands: 302,164 people watched the segment, 17,000 "Liked" it, and only 182 gave it a thumbs-down. Cruel remarks were made in 377 comments, emphasizing the fact that she had declared before jumping that "Women are brave enough to jump into the water."⁶ Here's a little taste of the comments, to give you a sense of the tone.⁷

Sheshounet, one year ago

Your shins committed suicide because they were so sick of supporting your idiocy.

B14091990, three years ago

The modern French woman in all her splendor: Ridiculous!

Crystal, one year ago

Women are good at being jumped, but not at jumping

MonsieurPoptart, three years ago

Hysterical fat fool.

Sjdhsjd23, three years ago

Those feminists are always so clever!

Faydeurshaigu, one year ago

Um, personally I'm a woman, and jumping into the water isn't a "masculine" act for me. Her challenge only disproves her theory :')

AWSMcube, one year ago

Just . . . She is . . . what's the word . . . STUPID. VERY STUPID.

Cyril Benoit, two years ago

Basically, she just wanted to gloat on camera. Mediocre motivations lead to mediocre results.

Kevin Prudhomme, two years ago

Sh-t that fall must have hurt her :)

As you can see from this small sampling, which it would be pointless to enlarge, the challenge, like the woman who performed it, was judged stupid by web users who themselves displayed pure malice or sexism, often both at the same time; who had a pronounced taste for insult; and lastly, who took issue with female equality. The spectacle a person creates brings pleasure to spectators in direct proportion to the amount of stupidity they find in it, and the opportunity it affords them to express their disgust (at the actions of one woman, at women in general, or at feminism overall), and to be simultaneously stupid . . . and nasty.

An Endogenous Definition of Stupidity

Another example can be found in the comments left on a program I analyzed in *Evil Deeds*: "A Nearly Perfect Dinner." The principle of this program is as follows: people successively invite each other to dinner at one another's houses and are asked to judge the savoir faire of their hosts and the quality of their entertaining according to several criteria, including the cooking and the festivity of the table. In one episode, a guest becomes outraged when he learns that the host has used preserved cherries in syrup in a fruit salad. The conversation escalates until, finally, the mistress of the house, Sandra, throws a glass of water in his face. This scene, posted on YouTube on January 17, 2015, was watched 3,678,805 times by March 20, 2018, receiving comments from sixteen thousand web users.⁸

I was unable to analyze all the thousands of comments. However, reading the first seven hundred teaches us enough about what stupidity means among the web surfers who have been addressing this segment for years.

For many, the fact of using preserved cherries in a “gourmet” meal, as one web user defined it, was an “objective” proof of stupidity:

Game of Thrones, two years ago

She [the hostess] is objectively a fool. Even I, preparing a simple dessert at home, would never think of eating canned fruit, that's a total insult to the palate. The guy makes an observation, and the only thing she can think of doing is to insult him and throw water in his face—and the stupid idiot is proud of it? Seriously, is there no selection process for contestants on this program? Do you choose them randomly, or what?

This comment was “Liked” by 161 participants in the conversation, and disliked by nobody, which leads us to conclude that it expresses a shared sentiment. At the same time, most of the posts have less to do with Sandra's behavior than with her physical appearance. Here are some very representative examples:

frederic572, five months ago

Put her in a pig mask, naked, on all fours, and it would be perfection

Tib Ln, six months ago

Fuck, what a giant piece of shit

Jessica Martin, seven months ago

The woman is a gigantic cougar slug

john do, seven months ago

I've rarely seen such an ugly fat trout, , ,

Lolilol, one year ago

She reminds me of the slug I killed this morning :D Sorry, that's my quick take!

ByWeapz, eight months ago (edited)

Sandra, 19 years old: double chin, REVOLTING makeup, ugly, stupid, no respect, fat, direct insults. People like that should be burned alive 2:00 “I busted my ass all day long,” EXCUSE ME you didn't even move your ass to go buy fruit and you busted your ass, but shit, put me in the place of the guy and I would have slugged the fat bitch. On the other hand, I totally respect the guy who kept his calm all night with the other slut. “I'm just telling you you're going to get hurt” with her big belly, she couldn't even stand up what is she gonna do the old bag?

It's hard to imagine that so much violence could be prompted not by a person's actions but by their physical appearance. The multiplication of degrading comments turns Sandra into a scapegoat, evoking what René Girard calls the "universal traits of victim selection," chief among them "illness, madness, genetic deformities, accidental mutilations and infirmity in general." The savagery of some of the comments—"People like that should be burned alive"—shows how quickly verbal condemnation can turn into incitement to hatred and murder, which is no longer symbolic, but actual.

For a few isolated participants, this reduction of intelligence to physical appearance was itself the definition of stupidity:

M.A.D, one year ago

Why bother to try to teach people who aren't even using their brains You are so pathetic, and by the way, in spite of what you think, I'm not "an old bag" ^^ You know a person can be in the physical "norm" and defend people who aren't, instead of mocking them. That's called intelligence, a word that you probably hear a lot, preceded by "you have no . . ." On that note I will stop wasting my time, mwah!

lili beyer, one year ago

M.A.D a little late but I totally agree with you the comments are so vile I feel sorry for people like that who only are capable of judging weight not behavior poor people so stupid in their nastiness.

Séveras rogue, one year ago

M.A.D frankly you are absolutely right normally comments speak to what happened at the dinner and not about other things especially not about a person's weight the men and women who posted comments about weight are truly people of low intelligence.

Even if it's expressed in their idiom, which is not mine, these isolated commenters perfectly capture the stupidity of the social media era: the formulation of judgments that cannot be appealed that reduce life to appearances, which install as the norm of communication "a social relationship among people, mediated by images," as Guy Debord put it.

I have yet to address one of the components that I highlighted in characterizing social networks: the need to be famous in order to exist. While this incentive can be seen in embryonic form in the "challenge spectacle" that leads people to jump into icy water, it's not uncommon to find it lurking at the heart of all social media presence. How do you make yourself stand out from the horde of web surfers? That's the question that

those who aspire to notoriety must answer. One solution is always to perform a spectacular act. We've seen that some people won't hesitate to put their closest associates into danger to fulfill a dare. Some YouTubers go even further. Like the young American parents who filmed a video to make themselves famous: the woman fired a gun at her husband's chest, which was protected by a dictionary that was supposed to stop the bullet. "Pedro and I are probably going to record one of the most dangerous videos that's ever been filmed," the future shooter announced. Once what was bound to happen happened, she was sentenced to six months in prison for killing her companion. The pinnacle of stupidity, as conventional wisdom defines it, had been reached. But it's safe to bet that other summits will be scaled.

The three components of internet stupidity that I've elaborated in this article have many applications beyond the ones I've illustrated. While their interest lies in supplying an essentially endogenous definition of our research area, since they arise from within the terrain that engenders them, one question remains: who are these people who display this stupidity? Profiles of web users tend to be quite spotty; it's nearly impossible to know who they are, what their social background is, how old they are, and sometimes, what their sex is. It's difficult in such conditions to determine what specific form of stupidity we're confronted with, given that stupidity, like pleasure, varies with age. The only thing that can be inferred from the examples I've analyzed is that the spelling they exhibit seems to belong to young people whose level of education is not terribly high. Might I go so far as to venture that this suggests adolescent stupidity? Consider it done.

ANIMATED WISDOM



It's better to focus our intelligence on stupidity than to waste it on intelligent things.

—*Motto of the French cartoon characters the "Shadoks"*

For a long time, I began the courses I teach about television with this cartoon motto. It perfectly encapsulates the challenge of media analysis: first, to produce a reflection on a subject that intellectuals (who pretend to discuss stupidity without having any personal experience of it) despise; second, to prove that the apparent banality of a subject doesn't keep it from affecting the discourse that arises around it. All the same, before turning this maxim into a mantra, one refinement must be made. To admit that television, taken globally, amounts to a reservoir of stupidity is to justify those who call it a wasteland, and at the same time, to open a field of study that is far too extensive—what de Gaulle might have called too “vast” a program. If all the programs are stupid, then you can speak of any of them, no matter which: the concept of stupidity becomes so attenuated that it no longer has any application. Therefore, let's accept the cartoon maxim not as a general truth, but as an encouragement to fuller understanding.

This motto spurs us to start off with one of the primary contrasts between forms of stupidity. Just as the philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch distinguishes between “being evil” and “committing evil acts,”¹ we must distinguish between the stupidity that characterizes a stupid person and the act of saying stupid things. If everyone were to agree on a basic definition of evil, which would be, in essence, something that acts “to defile, to sully, to destroy”²—that would not pertain to the essential nature of stupidity. The definition would only pertain to its usage in communication. The average speaker knows when he is saying, or has said, something stupid.

This is the case of the president of the French political party Les Républicains, Laurent Wauquiez, who publicly admits that everything he professes on television is “bullshit.”³ The inverse situation is more common: usually it's the interlocutor, the reader, or the listener who concludes, privately or publicly, that what the other person is saying is bullshit.

On that last point: it's just as possible for stupidity to describe an action (as in “the stupidity of war” in the Jacques

Prévert poem “Barbara”) as an “inept word” (from the Petit Robert cultural dictionary). While the first—as an action—is judged either in reference to a deontological principle, or by the contradictions it evokes, or by its consequences; the second—associated with the phrase “to talk nonsense,” that is, to spout stupidity, rests on a certain idea of knowledge and truth, as in this definition advanced by the philosopher Harry Frankfurt: “Bullshit is unavoidable whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what he is talking about.” *F. J.*

THE INTERNET: THE DEATH OF INTELLIGENCE?



A Conversation with
› Howard Gardner ‹

Professor of cognition and education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, theoretician of multiple intelligences

Q. What are the “three virtues” that you suggest are threatened by the internet?

A. In 1999, I came out with a book called *The Disciplined Mind*. In it I argued that the principal objective of education, apart from literacy, was to provide tools, particularly in the scientific disciplines, to permit us to distinguish what is true from what is not; to judge what is beautiful in art, nature, and other spheres, and to be able to justify our preferences; that is, to guide our judgments and actions in moral and ethical domains. When I wrote that book, I was a little naïve: I thought these traditional virtues were not problematic. I soon discovered I was wrong. And in the following decade, I rethought my reasoning, in terms of both philosophical analyses (postmodernism, relativism) and technological advances (the advent of the new digital media).

Q. In *Truth, Beauty, and Goodness Reframed: Educating for the Virtues in the Age of Truthiness and Twitter*, you describe the internet as a “general chaos” that creates “confusion” in a “near total absence of reflection.”¹ Does the problem reside in the quality or in the quantity of information that’s now available to us?

A. In both. We know that individuals who are burdened or overwhelmed by too much information, by too many choices, get paralyzed and have trouble making judicious decisions. This is aggravated when a large part of the information is of dubious quality—which is certainly the case in many blogs, on social media and websites, etc. However, the conclusions I draw about truth in my book are not depressing. Indeed, we live at a time when it’s more possible than ever before to understand exactly what is happening—if we’re willing to take the time to make an informed judgment.

Take a recent example. In April 2013 a major terrorist bombing took place at the end of the Boston Marathon. With each passing day, we have learned more about what happened and why, thanks to the traces the two brothers who committed the bombing left on Facebook, Twitter, and other social media. This would have been inconceivable before the digital media age. Of course, there are still those who believe that the

two brothers didn't commit the crime. But these deniers are a closed circuit, just like the people who continue to claim that in reality Barack Obama is a Muslim and was born in Africa.

Q. The multiplicity of more or less reliable points of view on the internet promotes excessive relativism, which is something you criticize. But doesn't it also encourage systematic doubt, which is a valuable contribution to science?

A. Yes, I agree that the internet calls into question the notion of one single, authoritative truth. When I was young there were very few broadcast media outlets, and when they all told the same story, we assumed they were telling the truth. Today we're more skeptical—consider, for example, the realization that there never were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, although the “mainstream media” had insisted there were, to convince us of it. So, yes, doubt has its merits.

But it is not good when doubt leads to widespread skepticism. And as I said earlier, if we're willing to be diligent, we're more likely than ever before to find out the truth—whether it has to do with history, politics, or science. For example, scientific frauds are regularly exposed now, which would have been more difficult to detect in the predigital era.

Q. You are well-known for your theory of multiple intelligences; do you think the internet has affected any one of them in particular, for good or for ill? And do you think the internet could create the vector for a new type of intelligence, not multiple but collective?

A. As a general rule, I think the new digital media is marvelous for multiple intelligences. Today there are apps, games, and educational programs that can draw on an array of intelligences that work together in innovative and powerful ways. I see no downside to this pluralistic vision of intelligence. However, intelligence is the reflection of the human brain, and of course, the human brain changes very slowly, over thousands of years, not in reaction to technologies that have existed for only a few years or decades. I do not subscribe to the idea of “digital intelligence.” Still, there's no question that new technologies imply a

different “ratio of intelligences,” as Marshall McLuhan would have put it. But we don’t get the same “interpersonal information” online that we get when we’re conversing or interacting with someone face-to-face, for example.

There have always been groups that weighed in on debates and controversies. The “Greek chorus” goes back thousands of years. But I would like to insist on the fact that groups can demonstrate collective intelligence as well as collective stupidity. As we learned a century ago from critics like Georges Sorel and Elias Canetti, crowds can be destructive as well as constructive. Also, we now know that businesses and institutions can manipulate online ratings and rankings—so it’s not only “the public” expressing itself, but people who have been paid to endorse certain views and experiences. It’s interesting and instructive to know the number of “Likes”; but personally I’m more interested in the QUALITY of a judgment and the WISDOM of the individual who’s making it. Quantity is not the same as quality!

Q. When you complain that the virtues of truth, beauty, and goodness are being excessively questioned, is your primary concern that their qualities are being diluted, or that their authority as ideals is disappearing?

A. I have no patience for authority that’s simply asserted. I don’t care how many degrees you have or how old you are. But I care a lot about your knowledge, your judgment, about whether you’ve thought before you’ve advanced your point of view, and whether you’re willing to admit you’re wrong when you’re met with counterarguments. It reminds me of the old joke, “On the internet, no one knows you’re a dog.” If we can substitute earned or proved authority for asserted authority, then I’m a total fan of authority.

Q. You explain that it’s indispensable to keep on learning throughout our lives. But why would that lead to a consensus on truth, beauty, and goodness, rather than a profusion of personal, relative takes?

A. That's an interesting question. As you would say in French, "*Ça dépend*"—it depends. In some arenas, more knowledge might lead to less certainty. My own knowledge of human personality has certainly grown more complex over the years. In other arenas, more knowledge leads to more certainty. When I judge the quality of my students' work in a subject I know well, I'm much surer of my judgments. We pay a lot more attention to meteorologists today than we did fifty years ago. In other arenas, greater knowledge leads to greater certainty. So it's important to consider which sphere you are judging, and on what basis. In my book, I make the exact argument that you've just put forth when I write on beauty. There's no reason that our judgments on beauty should remain fixed, nor that they should necessarily coincide with other people's. *De gustibus non est disputandum*.² But when it comes to the other virtues, the situation is different. If there's no certain consensus on what's true, what's false, and what's uncertain, and no consensus within a culture and among different cultures on what's moral or ethical and what isn't, we cannot have a society that will endure.

In fact, in practice, nearly everyone acts as if they believe that greater consensus on truth and morality is possible. It's only philosophers and authors in the human sciences who, for various reasons, want to explode those concepts. But they still expect their children to tell the truth, and to behave one way, not another.

Interview by Jean-François Marmion.

STUPIDITY AND POST-TRUTH



› Sebastian Dieguez ‹

*Neuropsychologist and researcher at the Laboratory for Cognitive and
Neurological Sciences at the University of Fribourg*

Are we drowning in stupidity, now more than ever? When you look at certain contemporary developments, you can legitimately ask the question. These days, seemingly educated people, who are entirely capable of informing themselves (if they wanted to), reject scientific recommendations on vaccination and climate, spout far-fetched conspiracy theories, vote happily for morons and support stupid initiatives, become outraged over meaningless nonsense, incessantly embrace frivolous whims, and some even decide that, as far as they're concerned, the Earth is flat no matter what people say. Against a background of diplomatic tension, terrorism, and unending wars; the methodical destruction of the environment; and an economy that only benefits a handful of individuals who give no signs of being particularly clever, our era seems entirely dedicated to the triumph of stupidity.¹ Participating in the shipwreck, minds that consider themselves enlightened offer pat explanations: it's society's fault, the Americans' fault, the fault of pesticides, of carbs, of gluten, of endocrine disruptors, of the Left, of the Right, of the elites, of common folk, of foreigners and their defective genes, of lazy professors and ideological pedagogues, of tablets, screens, and radio waves that erode the brain. . . .

But what if, at heart, all of this was nothing but *bullshit*?

Bullshit and Post-Truth

It's not that stupidity doesn't exist or that the state of affairs isn't alarming. I propose, rather, that what seems to be a global decline in intelligence would be better understood if it were interpreted as a global rise in bullshit.² In reality, stupidity is not—or is not only—the opposite of intelligence. You can be very intelligent and very stupid: all it takes to convince yourself of this is to put any intellectual in a political post, or to urge an expert to talk about a subject he knows nothing about. What will be produced in such cases is called *bullshit*.

According to the celebrated analysis of the philosopher Harry G. Frankfurt,³ the essence of bullshit is its indifference to the truth. Unlike the liar who must always keep one eye on the truth in order to properly distort it or conceal it, the bullshitter just doesn't give a damn.

He blurts out everything that comes into his head the moment it pleases him, without the least concern for the veracity or falseness of what he asserts. He joyfully spouts nonsense, and in so doing avails himself of multiple strategies: evading the issue, obfuscation, changing the subject, deception, long-windedness, affected solemnity, political cant, empty talk, utter hypocrisy. . . . The particular strategy or context hardly matters. The bullshitter, according to Frankfurt, seeks only to “get away with it” scot-free by acting like he’s said something when he’s said nothing at all, in the sense that he has transmitted no relevant information. Bullshit, therefore, is a form of epistemic camouflage: it passes itself off for a contribution to discussion, while in fact obstructing its progress. In sum, it’s the opposite of the discursive process.

Why would anyone tolerate an intellectual parasite like that? The liar, once he’s unmasked, generally finds himself rebuked, despised, and scorned; but the bullshitter seems to enjoy total impunity. Frankfurt left this question open, “as an exercise for the reader,” but certain psychological mind-sets, in combination with particular sociocultural factors, permit us to explain this curious phenomenon. On one hand, we are excessively indulgent of bullshit. When someone says something nonsensical, our first reflex is to try to find meaning in his words, to infer something pertinent that could apply to the given situation, and to apply an interpretation that satisfies this need. In this way, those who fall for bullshit often do a lot of the bullshitter’s work for him. On the other hand, bullshit also benefits from certain cultural dynamics: if poise, self-confidence, authenticity, and sincerity are valued, the simple fact of saying something clear and specific, even if it’s bullshit, not only will pass unnoticed, but can prosper. Frankfurt concluded his analysis with these words: “Sincerity itself is bullshit.” To speak “from the heart,” to express yourself “with fire and passion,” to “speak your mind,” talk “man-to-man,” be “forthright” and “trustworthy”—these constructions, these contemporary values, are much more prized than rigor, prudence, precision, and exactness; and to some extent can even replace them.

With “sincere and authentic” speakers and “indulgent” audiences—whose respective roles can easily and regularly be swapped, shoring up and spreading the prevailing dynamic with every exchange—conditions have conspired to create a critical mass of bullshit in public discourse. If this

analysis is correct, it seems we have an explanation for the advent of “post-truth,” which the *Oxford English Dictionary* made its “Word of the Year” in 2016, defining it as an adjective “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”⁴

The immediate corollary of this definition is that whoever does not share our opinion is, de facto, wrong; is trying to manipulate us; is profoundly immoral; and does not respect our beliefs, which are our truth. This produces a polarization of debate in which each person seeks to defend and impose his own point of view while discrediting the other’s, drawing attention to his own integrity, his determination, and his moral virtue as visibly as possible, even within his own “camp.” Naturally, through this infernal process, the truth and the facts—the real state of things, whatever that may be—become totally subsidiary concepts, frankly even suspect.

An impartial observer, watching such dynamics at work, would have no choice but to ask himself if all of this, at heart, was not a little stupid. Bullshit, post-truth, alternative facts, fake news, and other conspiracy theories: are they not all simply new names we are giving to folly?

Principles of Contemporary Stupidity

As it happens, the French translation of Frankfurt’s “bullshit” (as a noun) is “*connerie*.” The translation of the verb “to bullshit” is “*l’art de dire des conneries*” (“the art of talking bullshit”). Unfortunately, the French term “*connerie*” suffers from an ambiguity that does not do justice to the notion of bullshit, in the philosophical sense now intended. Without going too deeply into semantic considerations, *connerie* may refer simultaneously, depending on context, to lying, stupidity, hypocrisy, ignorance, and ineptitude. The realm is therefore too vast to hope to gain from it a fine understanding of the complex problems at stake in the post-truth world. On the other hand, the term “*connerie*” has the advantage of drawing attention to the role of stupidity in our current relation with the question of truth. For our purposes here, we may regard the terms “stupidity,” “dumbness,” “folly,” “imbecility,” and “*connerie*” as largely equivalent; but as stated above, one must take care to distinguish them from a simple lack of

intelligence. It would seem that a certain degree of intelligence is required to produce the type of stupidity that characterizes post-truth. Making things up and defending and propagating nonsense demands considerable cognitive resources, as well as mental gymnastics that take a heavy toll on cerebral energy.

You can therefore be very intelligent, have a vast sum of knowledge at your disposal, fight fiercely against error and falsehood (other people's, naturally), while remaining very stupid. Why? Because an individual is capable of acting without any precise goal; without exactly knowing what the value of the truth and knowledge are; without truly understanding what it means to know something; without knowing how to use his knowledge wisely; without considering the norms and methods that would ideally foster truth; without worrying about the reasons that might assure that these norms and methods are correct; and without knowing how to correctly transmit his own knowledge, or even knowing why he should bother to transmit it correctly.⁵ This type of cretin illustrates what Robert Musil calls "intelligent stupidity," which Kant considered a deficiency of judgment—a deficiency that in his opinion, unfortunately, was incurable. Structurally, this form of intelligent stupidity can have no other outcome than producing bullshit, because the conception of truth and knowledge that motivates it is inherently defective.

Seen one way, it's as if post-truth consisted of mining and exploiting human intelligence with the express goal of making it produce and accept the most effective forms of stupidity. In the following section, I propose three factors distinct to contemporary stupidity that, taken together, may help explain the emergence of bullshit on a massive scale, ultimately stabilizing the generalized system of imbecility that we call post-truth. To speed the process, we will designate these factors by the terms narcissism, self-delusion, and pretentiousness, which will allow us to anticipate how their interactions may mutually reinforce each other. I will then offer a few words on the resulting ethical consequences of stupidity, before concluding, alas too briefly, on the likely evolution of post-truth, and ways we can confront it.

The Passion for the Same Thing

In his penetrating analysis of stupidity, Alain Roger comes to the conclusion that it is not a question of a deficit of rationality, but on the contrary, of an excess of logic.⁶ Stupidity has a passion for tautological parallelism: “a penny is a penny”; “you’ve got to admit, religion is religion”; “I’m no dumber than anyone else.” This is stupidity laid bare, with its grotesque principle of identification, “A = A”; which establishes nothing beyond what already has been said and thought. This is sufficiency in its pure state, in sum: I say what I think and I think what I say, for the sole reason that I say it and I think it. And if I don’t agree with something, that proves that it’s wrong, or that it has nothing to do with me. The only thing that registers is what “speaks to me,” which reflects my preexisting tastes and inclinations. To put any of them in question is de facto an offense, because only an enemy would not agree with me.

“It’s my opinion, and I’m sharing it,” the ridiculous rallying cry of stupidity, would be almost funny, were it not for the fact that the term “share” today has acquired a literal and disheartening connotation, now that stupidity is “shared” and “followed” online more easily and quickly than ever before.

With tautological stupidity, reason is caught in a trap, and becomes nothing but repetition and self-satisfaction, a triumphant subjectivity that produces clichés, received ideas, and commonplaces. Let’s take it further: a tautological statement based on the premise “A = A” may certainly be empty of all substance, but it has the property of becoming instantaneously performative. For example, the statement: “Whatever you say, an X will always be an X” (with X standing for whatever social group you despise) is profoundly stupid, and rests on no evidence, but nevertheless, “That’s the way it is,” and “That’s that.” “We listen to our customers” is another example of abysmal stupidity that works in the register of bullshit in an almost pure state, but which is not ineffective. A phrase like this one produces the illusion that the business in question does in fact listen to its customers, that it takes their well-being very seriously, and that it endeavors to ensure that they are entirely satisfied. It’s enough, literally, simply to say it, and the bullshit becomes effective because of its assertive character alone. In actual fact, of course, nothing is being done, but that’s precisely the goal of bullshit.⁷

Stupidity, therefore, is a constant reduction of everything to the same thing and to oneself,⁸ which explains its permanent recourse to personal examples or testimony, to “home turf,” to “experience,” to “feeling.” Authenticity, subjectivity, and sincerity not only are taken as sufficient, they allow the cretin to swell with pride and satisfaction: he thinks he knows what he’s talking about, while in reality, his single-minded, solitary belief system prompts every word he speaks. He’s unable to conceive that any external pressure on his single-minded conviction might eventually guide him, correct him, or—we can dream—make him change his opinion. It’s not that a fool is incapable of supporting his case if he needs to, but that to do so, he relies on confirmation bias, that magnetic force that allows him to reinforce his opinions in every circumstance by helping him find facts that bolster his case, while neglecting or carefully reinterpreting any that contradict him.⁹

Stupidity, intellectual laziness, complacency, and narcissism seem to work together, converging in the triumph of intuition. My opinion and my reaction are right; because they are mine. Someone who does not sufficiently demonstrate “sincerity,” “authenticity,” poise, and conviction is discredited right out of the gate. He may well respect the truth, care about accuracy, and take a rigorous approach, but you just can’t trust someone who doesn’t seem like he’s talking “from the bottom of his heart,” preferring to laboriously lay out facts and consider their logical progression. This attitude, of course, is one of the sources of populism, explaining why people will happily support and elect a patented liar the moment they decide he’s “one of us”; always this stupid principle of identification at work, on a global scale.¹⁰

Once again, these mechanisms of stupidity have little to do with intelligence.¹¹ It’s entirely conceivable that people are becoming collectively dumber and dumber without the general level of intelligence dropping one iota. On the contrary, intelligence is readily called upon to support this stupid system through the establishment of a personal epistemology¹² that amounts to nothing more or less than the belief, carefully managed, that knowledge is a question of intuition that something is true, and that you know it’s true the second you’ve decreed that it is because you’re “personally convinced” of it—all the better if it reflects a “value” that defines you.

How Dumb I Am!

All the same, stupidity would not be stupidity if it were able to recognize itself as such. Alas, the imbecile, due to the fact that he's an imbecile, doesn't have the mental resources that would permit him to perceive his own imbecility. This epistemological blind spot yields the tragic limitation: stupidity is wise enough to know its own best interest, and to protect itself from assaults of rationality.

Entrapped as he is in his principle of identity, the idiot is deprived *de facto* of the capacity of seeing things another way, that is, from the point of view of an individual not himself, or an individual who knows more than he does.¹³ This is what psychologists call the Dunning-Kruger Effect, named for the authors who documented it.¹⁴ An incompetent person may perform disastrously in a given area, but left to his own devices, will not perceive his own uselessness and will overestimate his performance. Expertise in any sphere is accompanied by a thorough, detailed knowledge of what that expertise comprises, gained through sustained effort, under the painful yoke of assiduous labor and constant reassessment. The true expert is aware of being an expert and knows his subject well; he's also aware of what he doesn't know and what he still has to learn: he knows his limitations. Research shows that truly competent people slightly underestimate their abilities. A fool, on the other hand, does not have even an inkling of an idea of what it would take for him to be less stupid. He doesn't even know that he is stupid, because, obviously, you don't have to know anything to be stupid. It would be nice to say that that's *his* problem, but in reality, this problem generally becomes other people's problem, because the idiot, not knowing he's an idiot, is in no way bothered by his stupidity, and does not hesitate to inflict it on his entourage and beyond.

Therefore, it's not (uniquely) out of sheer perversity that we adopt an epistemology calibrated on subjectivity, intuition, "authenticity," and "sincerity." This is also a reliable way to avoid ever being in the wrong and to conceal one's own stupidity from oneself. Stupidly mired in his impermeable ego, immune to the slightest discovery that might alter his stupidity, the imbecile quickly becomes incapable of detecting, recognizing, and identifying his own stupidity. Even worse, he uses all his intelligence

not to assess the quality of new information or to question the validity of his beliefs, but to determine whether new information aligns with his earlier preferences and to reject anything that doesn't suit him. Stupidity works tirelessly to defend itself, and to no other end.

This pernicious singularity of stupidity has consequences. As we've seen, not only is stupidity invisible to itself, as the fool is incapable of recognizing that he's a fool and overestimates his abilities, but this propensity constantly leads him to denigrate true intelligence (which he would be hard-pressed to recognize), reinforcing his stupidity. A person who possesses valid beliefs and correct information has only one thing to say: the truth. The imbecile, in contrast, is possessed of an infinite quantity of nonsense, since there's more than one way to be wrong. There could never be enough time for those who have reliable means of access to the truth to correct all the stupidities unleashed by cretins who feel entitled to give their opinions on everything and anything, and who have the economic means and the gumption to do so. This is what is called the "bullshit asymmetry principle":¹⁵ bullshit can be produced on a grand scale by anyone at all, at next to no cost, while those who are both able and determined to debunk bullshit are few, and must expend great efforts in combating it.

Stupidity in Disguise

Stupidity is characterized by forms of narcissism and self-delusion that mutually reinforce each other, fostering the spread of stupidity throughout the population. It's helped along by the cockiness of the overconfident cretin, who brushes off all displays of prudence or intellectual rigor in an environment where it's widely accepted that knowledge is chiefly a question of intuition and "sincerity." In sum, the person who speaks the loudest and with the most "conviction" and "passion" comes across as the one who has the most to say and gets the most attention.

However, competition in this area is steep; even imbeciles have to find a way to stand out from other imbeciles. And this is where the most troubling feature of stupidity emerges: it attempts to pass itself off as intelligence. Convinced of his wisdom, the idiot airs his idiocies as if they were pearls of

wisdom, groundbreaking observations of incredible depth, the fruit of intense reflection, and clearly expects to be taken extremely seriously. One ingredient of his tool kit is false logic: rather than actually reasoning to come to a conclusion, he works backward, first stating the conclusion, then cobbling together the “reasoning” that infallibly proves it. As Flaubert said, “Stupidity lies in wanting to draw conclusions.” True; yet as Flaubert’s characters Bouvard and Pécuchet demonstrated, stupidity also arises when you (wrongly) suppose that you’ve come to a conclusion by proper means.¹⁶ Strangely, this happens quite a lot, allowing the worst impostor to mistake himself for a minor genius, a giant of philosophy, or a leading light of neuroscience.

Just as pseudoscience enjoys donning the trappings of science, even though it despises it; just as fake news presents itself as real, verified news while reviling mainstream media; and just as conspiracy theories try to pass themselves off as rigorous, conscientious investigations into the truth without making the slightest effort to draw on facts, stupidity can only survive and prosper by taking on the appearance of its greatest enemies: reason, knowledge, and truth.¹⁷ This requires a certain talent for mimicry, which is to say that the “reasoning” exhibited by the fool must resemble a legitimate exercise of thought, and above all (and this is the goal) must allow him to preserve and broadcast his idea of himself as a person of irreproachable morality, as a provocateur who’s not afraid of speaking his mind, as an intellectual who cannot be questioned, or as all three at the same time. Shown for what it is, this behavior is nothing but pretense and arrogance.

Stupidity, therefore, operates through mimetic parasitism: it exploits the virtues associated with the quest for authentic products of human reason through pseudorationality.¹⁸ This requires a certain kind of intelligence, as Robert Musil observed, making stupidity “less a deficiency of intelligence than an abdication of it, in regard to the tasks it pretends to accomplish” and “a disharmony between the biases of feeling and a mentality that is incapable of moderating them.”¹⁹ When you have nothing interesting to say, unfortunately the possibility remains of imitating the superficial appearance of something that *would* be interesting to say. And if this practice becomes the norm in a given society, you can effectively speak of “post-truth.”

Stupid and Evil (and Connected)

Post-truth is nourished by two individual factors whose beliefs and behavior are largely motivated by a relationship with knowledge that rests on intuition and feeling, a form of stupidity characterized by self-delusion. This means it cannot be challenged, while it strains to resemble a rational, frank, and pertinent concern for truth. From this very broad point of view, it becomes clear that bullshit, fake news, conspiracy theories, and “alternative facts,” along with the unintentional “sharing” of them, are contemporary, exacerbated manifestations of good old eternal folly. It’s not a big surprise: anyone can see—except, of course, for fools—that post-truth definitely enfolds a prodigious pack of lies.

It remains for us to examine a few of its manifestations and consequences. We have seen that stupidity implies a usurpation of the intellectual domain, but this would not be terribly serious if stupidity did not also extend into the domain of ethics. “The fool,” according to the philosopher Pascal Engel, “is guilty of not respecting the truth.” His deficit of intellectual virtues translates into a moral vice. Worse still, the man who considers himself a “wit,” the bullshitter par excellence, who pretends to respect the values of intelligence and seems to concern himself with the truth and with making sense, in reality only mimics these qualities to gain access to a sphere where he can pass himself off as an intellectual, or just shine a little in society with very little effort. A person who is not a bullshitter, but just isn’t all that bright, if you want to put it that way, may well respect the truth and the sort of intelligence that produces it. The bullshitter, the snob, the conceited twit, and the fool have contempt for such simple souls and exploit them, not out of any concern for the truth in itself, but out of self-regard. The variety of annoying bullshitters is infinite: there’s the blowhard who acts like he’s expressing new and interesting thoughts or divulging a radical, prodigiously audacious idea; the hypocrite who acts virtuously only so he can tell everyone about it; and, a corollary, the self-righteous moron who expresses moral outrage with the sole purpose of broadcasting his outrage, a very common phenomenon lately, known as “moral grandstanding.”²⁰

The fool immediately responds to a given assertion or event by feeling and displaying his disapproval, his rejection, his outrage and his anger . . . simply because he has decided that this is what he needs to do, and that it will be useful for him. He will share his reaction with the largest number of people possible, to help him define himself as an individual. This attitude triggers a mechanism of self-polarization, because keeping track of all the possible causes and motives for indignation requires vigilance at all times, producing an escalation of outrage that is aimed at heightening his profile in the competitive arena of stupidity.

Apart from the specific types of annoyance that each brand of bullshitter inflicts on his targets, it must be marked that the overall effect of bullshit, fake news, “alternative facts,” and the post-truth world that contains them does not consist, properly speaking, of inciting false beliefs. That was the result, intentional or not, of old-style rumors and propaganda. Today, it has more to do with completely destabilizing our relationship with the truth and eroding faith in the democratic project. To believe in nothing, to not even imagine the possibility that knowledge could be obtained that would come close to establishing a common basis for truth, is probably more pernicious than simply believing in false things, which at least stand the chance of being corrected one day.

All of this amounts to staggering stupidity, which offers almost no grounds for optimism. And yet, we must note that the very existence of post-truth supposes a backdrop of truth, a context in which truth might thrive, if only in the attempt to imitate it. The counterfeit can only cause damage up to a point; beyond a certain threshold, if there’s practically nothing but counterfeit money in circulation, it’s no longer of any use to anyone. The question that now confronts us is how far stupidity can go, and to what extent it can proliferate through technological platforms that seem to have been conceived to exploit, increase, and broadcast it as far and as fast as possible.

Will this be enough to encourage the younger generations to develop their critical thinking, or to train them to decode information, knowing that the problems they’ll face down the line are not the same ones they’re facing today? Stupidity, as we’ve seen, has already adapted to mimic “critical thinking,” and even seeks solutions to some of the problems that it itself has created, without, of course, regarding itself as the cause. Is it possible for

the epistemological authorities of science, the press, and justice to join this battle by, for instance, proposing greater data transparency, clearer communication, assiduous fact-checking, and laws that discourage and restrict manipulative and malevolent peddlers of misinformation? Probably; but keep in mind that the post-truth world will make mincemeat of each of these initiatives, immediately recycling them through its benighted system that generates erosion of confidence, generalized suspicion, and indifference to facts.

There is still a third option, which would be to beat bullshit at its own game (along with the stupidity that underlies it) by exploring fakery and folly in creative ways. This is the work of satire and fiction, since, after all, a post-truth world implies a post-fiction world. Not to care about truth is not to care if truth is fiction. Perhaps all we need to do to become a little less stupid is to reclaim our taste for the ingenuity of the human mind and to show more intellectual modesty by using our brains to work on behalf of intelligence, not stupidity.

THE METAMORPHOSES OF NATIONALIST FOLLY



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Societies need myths. The philosopher Ernst Cassirer attributed the absurdity and contradictions of these imaginary constructions to the “primitive stupidity” of the human being. He rallied around the hypotheses of anthropologists, Bronislaw Malinowski in particular, who interpreted these beliefs as attempts to answer the unsolvable mystery of death. He also saw myths as the expression of collective desires, and did not think societies could get rid of them. He was worried about this: “It’s probable that the most important and unnerving aspect of modern political thought is the apparition of a new power: the power of mythical thinking,” he wrote in 1945, toward the end of his life, in the United States.¹ Nationalism was part of this mythical thinking, especially since it had undergone disastrous metamorphoses with the emergence of fascist regimes.

In many aspects, this ideology resembles those narratives imbued with magic that the ancient Greeks absorbed in stories “that nursemaids told to distract or frighten children.”²

Democracy: From Reason to the Passions

The democratic ideal, the inheritance of the Enlightenment, assumed the progress of reason. By this theory, the superstitions and dross of animism would disappear, thanks to improvements in education and the advance of science. Citizens would learn from experience. Deliberations over their circumstances would be based on empirical propositions, paving the way to a choice of the best political options. To this end, they would elect enlightened leaders. Their knowledge and their material conditions would improve, and they would find themselves furnished with the means of securing their freedom and directing the course of their history.

This conviction has proved to be illusory, in part. Societies need some element of the sacred. Reason has proved to be a weak remedy for curbing conflicts of interest, arbitrating between different values, and moderating the power dynamics that constitute the drama of political life. Individuals apply their reason to public life, but also bring everything that animates their psychological reality: their fantasies, their desires, their unconscious impulses, and even their instincts. The influence of ideologies is as bound

up with the historic ends they seek as with the emotions they summon and the excesses of violence they justify.

The imperative of national sovereignty, too, was originally imposed as a rational project, tied to citizens' aspirations to autonomy, dignity, and equality. Yet this ideal was particularly charged from an emotional standpoint: it came into being amid a framework of sacred ceremonies analogous to those of religious cults. In this context, several examples may be mentioned: during the French Revolution, the Convention organized a "Feast of Reason" on November 10, 1793, on the square in front of Notre Dame; and during the eruption of fascism in the twentieth century, Mussolini and Hitler organized massive rallies devoted to the cult of those leaders. With the advance of democracy toward the end of the twentieth century, politics became everybody's business, the great theater of individual and collective passions, of intellectuals, political militants, and the masses who invaded the public space with their material demands, their desires, and their fantasies.

The individuals committed to a society's cultural imagination, be it ethnic, religious, or national, may experience all kinds of emotions; but above all, they construct a sense of identity. In embracing nationalist convictions, they appropriate an edifying collective ideal. This inclination is not a problem in itself, but the narcissism that animates it can become a source of pernicious illusions. It enfolds the idea that their nation is heir to a great history, promised an exceptional destiny. This demand for superiority goes hand in hand with the denigration of everything foreign. This is all the more aggressive because it is always affirmed by groups, more or less structured, like crowds, armies, or political parties, that rise under the aegis of unassailable leaders. In fact, nationalism provides a rational, tolerable answer to the needs of individual dignity, but it also plays to other more or less recognized needs and desires: envy, pride, aggression, and the urge to dominate. In exalting the need for glory, honor, physical force, and virility, nationalism appropriates to itself the aristocratic ideas of the Ancien Régime. It offers individuals, particularly the least sound, the resources to appease their feelings of inadequacy and impotence.³

The Group Ideal and Its Opposite

Everything that is evoked by narcissism is fragile in nature. This is why the excessive value attributed to a nation is founded on insecurity, as determined either by socioeconomic vulnerability or by causes of a more psychological nature. It implies a shadowy defense of cultural and political borders. Nationalism has an intimate relationship with xenophobia and racism. The foreigner, whose fantasy of harmonious fusion lies at the heart of his demands, symbolizes everything that puts this fantasy at risk. Nationalists arrogate to themselves the right to speak in the name of their national community and to seek to exclude those they suspect of compromising its cohesion. They use their national ideal to denigrate everything that contradicts their political concepts, projecting their need and desire for protection onto providential rulers or onto mystical images of soothing, maternal Nature. The idealized image of the nation unconsciously evokes the maternal universe of infancy, which excludes those who are perceived as seditious outsiders.

This was particularly the case for Jews at the apogee of nationalism, in the last century. With the rise of nationalism in France and Germany in the twentieth century, Jews were perceived as “intruders,” undermining the harmony of the national community. “Every society,” wrote Georges Devereux, “creates a group ideal,” which necessitates the formation of its opposite. The demonization of the Jew permitted national communities to establish fantasy borders for themselves. “It was the counter-ideal of the group,” whose essential function was to “magnify the idea of the group while incarnating—as a red flag—everything that the group was not, and which it must, at all costs, avoid becoming.”⁴

After World War II, nationalism persisted in the United States, provoking demands for national sovereignty by movements that opposed colonial imperialism. In contrast, nationalism lost its influence in the majority of European countries. The tragedies engendered by fascist regimes had discredited it, in part, while the ideological systems of the superpowers dominated political debate. Apart from this, the protections of the welfare state and consumer society offered other narcissistic gratifications than those associated with the grandeur and honor of the nation, and the armed defense of its interests.

The Return of Magicians

The “sovereignty” that populist movements embrace today, in opposition to globalism, fosters the return of certain nationalist illusions, particularly the one of a homogeneous national population. It also reintroduces rites that emphasize otherness: rallies, anthems, and banners. This nationalism gives rise both to feelings of group identity and to a need for Magicians in Chief. In this context, the migrant is blamed for falling wages, rising unemployment, and social instability, and is also associated with an “invasion” of people of different races, bearers of foreign cultural values who cause the breakdown of a society’s traditional solidarity. The migrant is also a symbol of changing times. His outcast status is all the stronger because he’s also regarded as a source of malaise, culpable for society’s upheavals. Furthermore, pretty much everywhere, religious sects born out of the failures of national integration perpetuate delusional, exclusionary, and hateful visions that are expressed in nationalism.

The public’s aspiration to renew the social contract of national sovereignty proceeds from a rational impulse. It’s an answer to the challenges and constraints of an underregulated globalism, which is responsible for a great deal of insecurity, vast migratory movements, new social polarization, and unemployment. Confronted with these economic and social realities at a time when new modes of production and interdependency are emerging, administrations are executing their responsibilities for political integration poorly and struggling to come up with technocratic solutions and paths to reform. These failures are accompanied by the erosion of broad ideological systems with utopian visions, and also with the weakening of traditional measures of socialization, contributing to the impoverishment of democratic deliberation. They prompt some individuals to seek imaginary communities characterized by extraordinary representations of nationhood, ethnicity, and religion, illusions that foster political and social alienation. They incline them to seek the aid of a civil authority, a group endowed with fantastical powers that would be capable of bringing them the protection they crave.

Populism Recruits in Every Sphere

Economic distress does not entirely explain populism, as those who support it do not all belong to materially disadvantaged spheres, especially in the United States. Their vulnerability can also have a psychological character. Voters who support populist leaders whose rhetoric is charged with violence and chants base their choice on identity. Let's consider the case of Donald Trump. During his electoral campaign, his lack of civility was an important aspect of his political success. He did not hide any of his personal failings. He advertised his immaturity, his narcissistic fragility, acting as if he'd never grown up, as if he'd never acquired a true moral conscience. His lies, exhibitionism, incoherence, and bad-boy behavior seduced the public. A large number of Americans, whatever their social status, recognized themselves in his rudeness, his outlandish behavior, his simplistic ideas, his Manichean positions, his conspiracy theories, his racism, and his exaltation of the grandeur of the United States.

Populist parties recruit primarily among those who lack much academic background or professional education—people who are not equipped to fully evaluate the consequences of the options they're choosing. The speeches of these parties rely on the language of polemics, using a narrow range of words and vulgar expressions. They flatter people who have trouble conceiving figurative ideas, or recognizing nuance, or meeting complex challenges fraught with contradictions. These voters have no patience for complicated economic questions and no taste for political debates. Carried away by their rage at the elites, they support programs that conflict with their own interests, as demonstrated by their stance against the liberalization of trade, work, debt, and monetary policy. In abusing the procedures of the democratic process, they paradoxically undermine the legitimacy of the national project.

So, are they stupid? That notion does not belong to the language of social science. If political stupidity were only a question of education, we would know it. Populism mobilizes individuals whose judgment is clouded by emotions and whose passions and personal failures can obscure their cognitive capacities. These seductive magical nostrums and this state of mind contaminate every sphere. That said, the political opinions of the intelligentsia are not infallible. In France, as elsewhere in Europe, fanatical political ideologies, from nationalism and fascism to Stalinism and Maoism,

as well as Trotskyism and other bizarre offshoots, often have been supported by people whose cultural refinement is indisputable.⁵

Blame goes here to the evolution of liberal societies, to the dispossession of the individual in the market economy, and to the culture of narcissism that favors these trends. Even if the market economy doesn't benefit as many people as it ought to, it's hard to escape the illusions of consumerism.

It's no coincidence that Donald Trump, Silvio Berlusconi, and Beppe Grillo have played an important role in telereality and the world of spectacle, a cultural stew of myths and magic words. Their made-up world is presented as if it were real, and mobilizes the sphere of individual and collective fantasies. While provoking all sorts of antisocial impulses, it also gives rise to frustrations linked to the hedonistic desires it excites. The growing heterogeneity of socialization processes, tied to the expansion of familial structures and the erosion of institutional and normative frameworks like civic solidarity, has no real connection to the rise in power of the brand of incivility that favors populism. Faced with these dramatic social shifts, the safeguarding of democracy, like the fight against the coarsening of society, hinges on the defense of principles, frameworks, and institutional equilibrium necessary to the protection of the rule of law. It also requires the active pursuit of a politics whose goal is social justice.

HOW CAN WE FIGHT COLLECTIVE ERROR?



› Claudie Bert ‹

Science journalist specializing in the humanities

In his first book, published in 2002, Christian Morel, a former human resources executive turned sociologist, gives several examples of what he calls “absurd decisions.”¹ In one example, two oil tankers follow nearly parallel routes, but one of them changes course, blocking the path of the other, which then cannot avoid colliding with it; in another, a plane is beginning the landing process when the pilot, under the impression that the landing gear has not come down, continues circling to give the cabin crew time to prepare the passengers for a rough landing—and the plane crashes for lack of fuel.

Too Much Hierarchy Kills

The author also identifies “meta-rules,” intended to increase the reliability of decisions that are being progressively imposed, or that are in the process of being imposed, in these different risk zones. The most interesting aspect of these meta-rules is that they are often counterintuitive. For instance, we all have an image of a commander or a pilot as “the man in charge.” If anyone were to ask us: “What should we do in an emergency?” we would doubtless respond, “Definitely, this man must be obeyed in an emergency, no question!” Well, actually, no. Strict obedience to hierarchy is a risk factor, as established in the case of Korean Air. During the 1990s, that airline fell victim to a series of fatal accidents that investigations attributed to one principal factor: the excessively hierarchical cockpit culture. The pilot had crashed because of his disregard for his subordinates; neither the copilot nor the mechanic had dared correct a pilot error, etc.

At the beginning of the 2000s, Korean Air’s new director profited from the findings of these investigations by implementing a series of practices that were totally contrary both to past procedures and to the country’s cultural traditions. Under the new rules, the hierarchy had to be open to communication; promotion would depend on merit, not seniority; all pilots would be educated in human factors; and the policy of non-sanction of errors would be implemented. Result: today the company is among the safest in the world. This policy of non-sanction of errors also runs counter to common opinion. As soon as an accident happens, the same cry goes out everywhere: “Whose fault was it?” But the Federal Aviation

Administration, which controls aviation in the United States, including airlines like Korean Air and Air France, calls on flight personnel to report every error in detail—anononymously. In the medical establishment, various health procedures have been adopted to report hospital errors in the same manner. This way the mistakes can be better understood and more easily avoided.

Unanimity? Mistrust!

Another piece of evidence that flouts common sense concerns the decisions made by a group. If the decision is unanimous, surely it must be right? Again, no. In high-risk settings, experience has shown that “false consensus” should be feared: members of a group often keep quiet because they’re afraid of contradicting the boss, or because they think they’re in the minority, and so on.

This has led to the adoption of procedures that test supposed consensus: like the obligation for each member of a group to offer his personal opinion; and the systematic inclusion of a devil’s advocate charged with defending the minority opinion. The meta-rules cited here concern multiple human behaviors. So it’s not shocking to discover that there’s a trend for the creation of new education programs, on top of technical training, that take human factors into account in the professional education of pilots, surgeons, or high-altitude mountain guides. The new programs take theoretical and practical group interactions into account to identify factors that influence decisions. A recent study, also cited by Christian Morel, illustrates the value of this kind of education. When seventy-four surgical centers attached to the Veterans Health Administration in the United States adopted this training, surgical mortality rates dropped 18 percent, compared to a decrease of 7 percent in the thirty-four centers that did not adopt it.

As an aside to readers who, not living in a risk zone, don’t feel involved: here’s an example from everyday life that Morel gave in his first book. A couple is entertaining their married children at their home in Texas. It’s 104 degrees in the shade. They’re all sipping cool drinks on the deck when the father cries out, “Why don’t we go get something to eat in Abilene?” (the “neighboring” town by American standards, a hundred miles round trip).

All of them accept. Four hours later, they return and collapse on the deck, exhausted by the heat and depressed by their awful lunch; and they discover that none of them had wanted to go to Abilene, but each of them had thought the other three wanted to! If only they had applied the meta-rule of mistrust of apparent consensus. . . .

WE ALL CONSUME LIKE FOOLS



A Conversation with
› Dan Ariely ‹

Professor of psychology and behavioral economics at Duke University

Q. How would you define behavioral economics?

A. Before you can answer that question, you first have to explain what “standard economics” is, which is a useful comparison of what behavioral economics is and is not. Standard economics is built around simple questions. For example, what kind of choices people should make in consumption or investment to get the maximum benefit from their decisions. This approach led to the formulation of the rational actor theory, whether that’s a consumer or a producer; and departing from that premise, it deduces political conclusions on how the economy should be run: which are the best institutions and decisions to allocate resources to.

Behavioral economics doesn’t take off from this point of view. It tries to describe how people behave in real-life situations. Its goal is not to define an ideal of rationality, but to analyze how people actually act. To do that, this field has developed experiments on the way people arbitrate between several choices when confronted with an economic decision.

For example, let’s start with a simple question: why are there obese people? The perspective of standard economics would lead us to say that these people are informed consumers, so they’re eating what they want to eat, after having calculated the advantages and the costs. And if they eat too much and become obese, that’s their choice.

But according to behavioral economics, people become obese for all kinds of other reasons. Many of them would like to eat less and to control their weight better, but when they’re in front of their plates, they have a hard time holding back. A lot of them try to lose weight, but they often crack. They’re subject to temptations that they have a hard time controlling; they make wrong evaluations of their future activities, like going on a diet. And that’s the fundamental difference between standard economics and behavioral economics.

Q. What are the principal influences that behavioral economists have studied?

A. First of all, emotions play an essential role in our buying behavior. Most of our actions are guided by emotion, not reason. If you have the

disagreeable experience of finding yourself face-to-face with a tiger, your first reaction will be to flee, not to deliberate over the best action to take. Most of the time, that's how people proceed in daily life.

An emotion like fear is a good counselor: it pushes us to confront a danger. But emotions push us to give in to the stimuli that we're presented with. Most consumer products are conceived to elicit emotional reactions in us. For example, Dunkin' Donuts is devised and presented to inspire sugar and cream cravings. Shop windows display products in the most attractive way possible to provoke temptation in the consumer. That's why, at the supermarket, we often buy more things than we'd meant to at first: our cravings have been stimulated by the presentation of attractive products, thrust before our eyes, in arm's reach.

Faced with these temptations, we of course do have a capacity for self-control. But self-control itself is limited because it's subject to psychological mechanisms that have been well studied by behavioral economics.

Imagine that you give a chocolate lover this option: Would you rather be given half a box of chocolates now, or a full box next week? Even though it's a gift, it's in the interest of the person to wait until the next week. But in reality, most of the time, attracted to the chocolates, the person will prefer to sacrifice her long-term interest to satisfy her immediate desire.

We're constantly subjected to dilemmas like this one in daily life. Take the student who puts off his homework and goes to the movies because he's tempted by a film. His choice of staying in to work or giving in to his temptation is skewed. If he chooses to stay at home, the cost is immediate and the anticipated benefit (a better chance of doing well in his exams) is hypothetical and long-term. On the other hand, if he goes to the movies, the benefit is immediate and the cost of his decision is postponed to the distant future.

That's why we often make immediate decisions that go against what we'd like to do in the long term. Procrastinators, who always put off until later what they should do at once, know this problem very well.

Q. Is there a way to master the emotions to manage your consumption better?

A. There's no one, sole, simple solution to help people "control" their consumption. But you can find personal tricks to help you make better choices. A few years back, I got a very serious illness that put my life at risk. The doctors gave me a treatment that was really hard to take: the medicine gave me unbearable nausea for hours. A lot of sick people would rather skip certain doses, or even abandon the treatment in spite of the danger. So I invented something to help me get through the ordeal. Each time I had to take my terrible injection, I allowed myself to see a video (one I love). That way, not only was the sickness less horrible to endure, but I'd mentally associated the medicine with a reward instead of a torment. When I knew I was going to have to take the medicine, instead of thinking about distressing pain, I thought about my reward. And it worked! When I finished the treatment, my doctor was surprised: I was the only one of his patients who'd completed the whole course of treatment.

That's one way to trick yourself and overcome your own weaknesses. When you try to control your consumption behavior, it can be useful to invent techniques of this type. But you can also use technologies that spur consumers to control their consumption. It's been shown that Americans significantly lower their electricity consumption in their homes if the electricity company gives them a little glowing light-bulb that turns red when too many electrical appliances are on and consumption has passed a certain threshold.

Finally, there are also political measures that encourage or dissuade consumers or producers from consuming or making certain products rather than others, penalizing products that cause pollution, favoring ethically responsible products, and encouraging people to economize or to limit the debt of their households. Controlled personal choices and public incentives can promote behavioral economics, as reflected by consumption habits.

Interview by Jean-François Dortier.

THE PARADOXES OF ABUNDANCE



Here's an astonishing marketing experiment. Six kinds of jam are presented to consumers on a display table. At the end of the day, they count the number of pots that were sold. The next day, they put out twenty-four kinds of jam. They compare the sales figures and . . . surprise, sales are higher when there are six types of jam than when there are twenty-four! Moral: Abundance of choice inhibits purchasing.

This experiment was conducted with appropriate controls by Sheena Iyengar, a professor at Columbia University and the author of *The Art of Choosing*. The book puts forth a paradox of our consumer society: the uneasiness provoked by abundance of choice.

When faced with too many options, the consumer is effectively paralyzed. This is an experience anyone might recognize. Back in the age of public television, when there were only three available channels, the television viewer chose his programs quickly. Today, remote control in hand, he can zap for fifteen minutes through the hundreds of channels that are available to him. The excessive range of possibilities reinforces indecision and even provokes a certain feeling of dissatisfaction: the feeling that you haven't found the ideal program.



TOO MUCH CHOICE HARMS CHOICE

It's often said that too much information kills information. Internet users know that the immensity of available resources on the web sometimes confuses the searcher who's looking up a

clear, simple fact. The more you refine the question, the more new paths pop up; notions that you thought you understood become more complex, the data accumulates, and you run the risk of suffocating in an avalanche of facts. That's the paradox of the culture of abundance.

In other times, food was a rare commodity and many people suffered from hunger. Today we must learn to restrain ourselves in the face of the abundant and varied gustatory temptations that present themselves to us. The same is true of information: millions of sites are a click away, thousands of television channels can be accessed by the remote control, thousands of books can be found in libraries and bookstores.

In the area of marketing, abundance also harms decision making. In *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less—How the Culture of Abundance Robs Us of Satisfaction*, the sociologist Barry Schwartz addressed the phenomenon of mental overload. In cultures of abundance—of food, information, entertainment—our problem is not to find resources, but to narrow them down. J.-F. D.

THE HUMAN: THE ANIMAL THAT DARES ALL



› Laurent Bègue ‹

*Member of the Institut Universitaire de France and director of the Maison
des Sciences de l'Homme-Alpes*

We love cows, but we eat them all the same.

—ALAIN SOUCHON, “SANS QUEUE NI TÊTE”

[“NEITHER HEAD NOR TAILS”]

Salvos of the royal cannon sounded in the crowded forecourt of the Palace of Versailles. It was exactly 1:00 p.m., and on this nineteenth of September 1783, in front of Louis XVI and his family, a duck, a rooster, and a sheep placidly entered the annals of aerospace. Having taken up residence in the wicker basket attached to the hot-air balloon of the brothers Montgolfier, the barnyard denizens soon rose 650 yards up in the air and traveled several miles, to the cheers of the amazed onlookers. Despite the misfortune of the rupture of the balloon, which would abridge their historic flight, the three woolly and feathered heroes landed in the Bois de Vincennes. They were royally rewarded by the Dauphin, who opened the doors of his menagerie to them. Only a few weeks after the exploit of the involuntary aeronauts, humans would take to the air, at less risk.

Ever since then, animals both aquatic and terrestrial (quail, jellyfish, cats, dogs, monkeys, salamanders) have been propelled by the dozens into the stratosphere, and not always with the good fortune of their three ancestors. Even now, in the twenty-first century, humanity decimates countless animals, not only to conduct scientific experiments, but for industrial production and for food. Nearly 100 million of them are used in laboratories around the world every year,¹ 70 billion birds and mammals are slaughtered for food, and a trillion fish are caught. To make such levels of production possible, we have not only developed sophisticated scientific protocols and methods of animal husbandry, we have also put in place psychological mechanisms that permit us to ignore or to legitimize the harms of this exploitation.

If the troubles that *Homo sapiens* inflicts on other species did not have unfavorable consequences for human existence itself, we could speak only of insensitivity or cruelty and not address the facetious subject raised by this article's title. Alas, through its generalized exploitation of animals, humanity takes the risk of embarking on its own version of the hot-air balloon ride with the damaged balloon: traveling in hazardous conditions. Some authors today are publishing works for the general public with strident titles about ecological disaster and the barbarousness of industrial farming (*Farmageddon*) or denouncing overfishing (*Aquacalypse*), but in spite of these warnings, we are turning a deaf ear. That is because the species we belong to possesses the dangerous privilege of being endowed

with psychological tools that permit us the spectacular folly of prospering through a senseless relationship with other animals.

Henri IV, the king who promised “a chicken in every pot on Sundays,” was fortunate to have a famous finance minister, Sully, who liked to proclaim that “pasture and labor are the two teats of France.” Expanding upon this rural idyll, we will propose here that France has three teats when it comes to the human folly of its rapport with animals: logical incoherence, ignorance, and rationalization.

The Teat of Illogic

In his book on carnivory, *L’Imposture Intellectuelle des Carnivores*² [*The Intellectual Imposture of Carnivores*], Thomas Lepeltier shares his disingenuous perplexity at our illogic: “If you grind up kittens in a blender, castrate a dog without anesthesia, or shut up a horse for its entire life in a minuscule enclosure where daylight does not penetrate, you will be pursued by the law for cruelty to animals. You might get sentenced to two years in prison. So why do public authorities permit people to grind up living male chicks, shut up chickens all their lives in minuscule cages, and slit the throats of millions of rabbits, lambs, pigs . . .?” The law preserves this illogic and perpetuates it, under the understanding that, although “animals are living, sentient creatures,” according to the “laws that protect them, animals are subject to the regulations that affect property” (Article 515-14 of the French Civil Code). Take the case of the rabbit: today it is one of the most common house pets in France, but it’s also the mammal that is most frequently consumed. If we do not meet our obligation to feed a pet rabbit, care for it, and provide it with living conditions appropriate to its needs, we are at great risk of breaking the law, since “the fact of committing an abuse of a serious or sexual nature against a pet or other domesticated animal, or an animal kept in captivity, in public or not, is punishable by two years in prison and a fine of 30,000 euros” (Article 521-1 of the French Penal Code). And yet, the law authorizes the practice of rabbit battery farming in conditions of unmitigated confinement.

But a rationale of another order hides behind this seeming illogic. In effect, the value of an animal falls on a sliding scale, determined by the

animal's instrumental utility or its emotional associations, or upon the justifications that humans make concerning the species in question. This is also the case with defenders of animal rights. According to the observations of one veterinarian, the activists who fight against animal testing act more often against laboratories or researchers that use primates or dogs than those that use mice or rats. Almost two-thirds of people who believe that one of the priorities of the animal rights movement should be the abolition of the use of their skins in clothing manufacture admit to wearing leather clothes or shoes. This anthropocentrism, which bases an animal's value on human associations, is the key to the hierarchy that we impose on different animals.

The Teat of Ignorance

For anyone who has a relationship with animals, ignorance is the most consoling comfort. Recently, the circus performer André-Joseph Bouglione, who has resolved to stop using animals in his shows completely, confessed that “the slight swaying the elephants made when they were at rest used to make me feel like they were relaxed . . . but what I'd thought was a sign of relaxation turned out in fact to be linked to confinement.”³ Lack of awareness of the cognitive, perceptive, and sensory capacities of animals has facilitated their subjection for centuries, as suggested by Descartes' notion of the “animal machine,” described in his *Discourse on Method* (which holds that animals are machines incapable of thinking), perhaps to justify vivisection, a practice he himself conducted in the name of science. “It cries out, but it does not feel,” swore Malebranche, as he beat his dog. But let's not denounce our old philosophers; stupidity exists in every age. In June 2017, *The Washington Post* published an online poll of a representative sample of Americans. Seven percent of the respondents (more than 16 million people) believed that chocolate milk came from brown cows. From bad to worse, a poll by the U.S. Department of Agriculture revealed that one adult in five did not know which animal hamburger meat comes from. Two researchers from the University of California, Davis, Alexander Hess and Cary Trexler, interviewed eleven- and twelve-year-old children and found that 40 percent of them didn't know that the meat in hamburgers comes from cows, and only 30 percent knew

that cheese was made from milk. Alimentary ignorance is similarly striking on this side of the Atlantic: a French poll of eight- to twelve-year-olds showed that 40 percent did not know where products like ham came from, and two-thirds could not identify the origin of steak. Beyond that, an elevated percentage of children declared that fish had no bones. What might be the proportion of the little darlings who imagine that the mammary glands of cows spontaneously produce milk when there's no calf to feed? All bets are open.

Age-old human ignorance of animal cognition has favored the relationship of domination, which remains hard to correct despite progress in cognitive ethology and neuroscience. Nevertheless, experts today believe that “non-human animals have the neuroanatomical, neurochemical, and neurophysiological substrates of conscious states along with the capacity to exhibit intentional behaviors” (*Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness*, 2012), and there's no shortage of works that demonstrate that dumb animals aren't so dumb, after all.^{4,5} But the simple diffusion of knowledge is not enough to curb the extravagances of reason. More and more groups involved with monetizing livestock production are devising ingenious ways to spread a bucolic, idyllic image of smiling cows, and chickens that yearn to land on the dinner table. As the philosopher Florence Burgat⁶ has observed, the disincarnation of meat and the erasure of the animal involved in its production contribute to an elaborate euphemization of the realities of raising livestock and the slaughter that the industry entails. The philosopher Martin Gibert⁷ writes that in 2013, the magazine *Paysan Breton Hebdo* [*Breton Rural Weekly*] prudently informed farmers, “You must ‘de-animalize’ the product, that is, to sever the connection it may have with the animal, and place much more emphasis on the end product.” Applying the same dissembling optics, a magazine for professionals in the meat business cited by Scott Plous of Wesleyan University noted that “to remind a consumer that the rack of lamb he's just bought is part of the anatomy of one of those cute little creatures you see gamboling on hillsides in springtime is probably the surest way to turn him into a vegetarian.”

Another form of ignorance also deserves mention. It concerns consumers' systematic underreporting of the quantity of meat they eat. For example, several polls indicate that between 60 percent and 90 percent of those who defined themselves as vegetarians had consumed meat in the

days preceding the poll. Most studies on vegetarianism reveal that no less than two-thirds of those who call themselves vegetarians occasionally consume chicken, and 80 percent eat fish! And if you tell participants that they will be shown a news report on animal suffering, they will automatically, unconsciously reduce the amount of meat they report consuming. Sometimes, to diminish animal suffering, some consumers stop buying red meat . . . but increase their consumption of poultry, which increases the number of animals consumed and therefore of animals that have truly suffered. (To obtain the equivalent of the meat provided by one solitary cow, 221 chickens must die.)

For those who've truly opted for a meatless diet, it doesn't stop there. Although sausages advertised as "meatless" may taste just as good as sausages made from the flesh of animals, when participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire evaluating a vegetarian sausage they were given to eat, they judged it tastier when they were told it contained meat. Another study showed that people who were given a nutrition bar to consume deemed it less delicious when they were led to believe that it contained soy.

The Teat of Rationalization

Joined to ordinary ignorance is something you could call motivated ignorance. To avert the discomfort of a crisis of conscience over the discrepancy between the behavior of meat consumption and our awareness of the fate of the animals consumed (which might induce us to refrain from eating meat), we modify our awareness through a process explained by the theory of cognitive dissonance. For example, one study demonstrated that the mental capacity we attribute to a range of animals is straightforwardly correlated to their edibility. Cows and pigs are perceived as having a less rich inner life than cats, lions, or antelopes. In another study, participants were asked to rate the mental capacities of a sheep after being informed either that the ovine was going to change its pasture, or that it would be on the menu for an upcoming meal. In the latter case, its mental capacities were underplayed. In a third study (which made it blindingly obvious that human beings think with their taste buds), the participants were briefly introduced to a mammal that is found in New Guinea, Bennett's tree-

kangaroo. Next, different facts were presented. In one case, it was explained that the inhabitants of New Guinea eat the animal's meat; in the other, no mention at all was made of the consumption of the animal. Participants were then asked to estimate how much pain this type of kangaroo would suffer if it were injured, and if moral criteria ought to be applied to its treatment. The results indicated that the simple fact of assigning this animal to the edible meat category was enough to modify the sensory traits imputed to it. These perceived capacities, in turn, determined the participants' moral concerns regarding the animal.

Over and over you see this kind of intellectual magic trick that permits us to justify the consumption of meat through reductive conclusions, like Aristotle's statement:⁸ "Plants exist for the good of animals, and wild beasts for the good of man"; or through lack of empathy, as in Saint Augustine's statement: "We see . . . that death is painful for animals, but man despises that in the beast"; or through the euphemistic myth of the animal's "consent" to its slaughter (by which it offers us its meat in exchange for our "kind" care); or through the denial of animal suffering ("Animals suffer less if they're conscious when their throats are cut than if they're slaughtered after they've been stunned"); or through the invocation of lofty goals, buttressed by research (like "feeding humanity," or the "argument of the child with cancer to justify scientific research on animals aimed at developing treatments"); or even the declaration that survival depends upon it ("If Man is condemned to vegetarianism, he will not survive"); or the invocation of alimentary aporia (the argument that the carrot "screams" when it's uprooted) and the demonization of vegetarianism (which is accused of misanthropy, and compared with Nazism) . . . and so on.

Human beings have dared all when it comes to animals. We're even known for this, as the screenwriter Michel Audiard has observed—"Idiots dare everything!" But we pay no price for it. One member of our species who is far from an idiot, the philosopher Michel Onfray, recently claimed, "If I thought about it, I'd be a vegetarian." This vow is not challenged by science: ample proof exists that people who eat vegetables are not pea-brained. Better yet, according to an article in the *British Medical Journal*, children whose IQs are higher than average at the age of ten are more likely to adopt a meatless diet as adults, independently of their social class, level of education, and earning power. Nor does emotional intelligence appear to

be in short supply among people who refrain from sticking their forks into other creatures—quite the opposite, if you believe the research.

In conclusion, while some hold that meat was crucial to the development of our ancestors' brains, it may be that these days the situation is different.

In this orb suspended in space that we call Earth, something is not right with the turn animals have taken. The growing knowledge of our joint fate, the profusion of risks to public health, and the many portents of ecological disaster call upon us to act more wisely.

MORE MEAT THAN REASON

In France, 99 percent of rabbits, 95 percent of pigs, 82 percent of broiling hens, and 70 percent of laying hens are raised through factory farming. In numerous cases, the living conditions and conditions of slaughter are unacceptable (for example, according to the French slaughterhouse workers' organization OABA, more than half the animals are still conscious when their throats are cut). However, not even taking into account the grinding up of chicks, the force-feeding of geese, and the systematic mutilation of piglets and cows, reasons to question factory farming abound. On the health level, the role of meat in cardiovascular disease and obesity is well established, and its status as a "probable human carcinogen" has been certified by the World Health Organization. In a report on their findings in the journal *PNAS (Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America)*, researchers at Oxford University calculated that if humanity opted for a vegetable-based diet, the mortality rate would drop somewhere between 6 percent and 10 percent.

Another irrationality: meat production causes the widescale waste of resources. Twenty-five pounds of vegetables are

required to produce one pound of beef (five pounds for chicken, and ten pounds for pork). The FAO (the Organization for Food and Agriculture of the United Nations) estimates that four to eleven calories of vegetables are required to produce a single calorie of meat. The unsustainability of the use of agricultural resources for meat production—a veritable protein factory in reverse—was recently brought to light in another *PNAS* publication. Their findings show that if the vegetables used in the production of beef, pork, dairy products, poultry, and eggs were substituted with vegan production intended for human consumption, each acre would yield from two to twenty times more protein. Based solely on American agricultural data, the authors estimate that this would make it possible to feed an additional 350 million people.

Factory farming also exacts a heavy cost on the environment. It is a principal cause of deforestation, and contributes more than any other human activity to greenhouse gases (14.5 percent of total emissions, as opposed to 13 percent from transportation, according to the FAO). David Robinson, author of *Meatonomics*, writes that “raising animal protein takes up to one hundred times more water, eleven times more fossil fuels, and five times more land” than growing vegetable proteins. (See also Fabrice Nicolino, *Bidoche: L’Industrie de la Viande Menace le Monde* [A Pound of Flesh: The Meat Industry Threatens the World].)

Finally, factory farming is regarded as a factor that fosters the development and spread of epidemics. In certain countries, it also threatens the health of the populace, which, by consuming animals who’ve been fed drugs that ward off infections caused by the confined conditions of industrial farming, contributes to the decline in effectiveness of antibiotics.

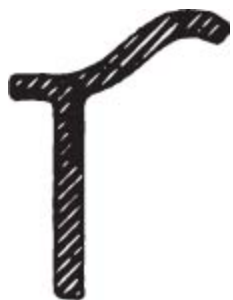
L. B.

WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT ASSHOLES?



› Emmanuelle Piquet ‹

Psychotherapist and founder of the Chagrin Scolaire centers



he term “asshole” must be defined right off the bat, because you can’t fight an enemy you can’t name.

You can feel the red-faced fury evoked by the phrase “What a complete asshole!” as opposed to its cousin, “What an idiot!” which has a more affectionate ring, though it also must be inscribed in the registry of insults. The same is true of “moron,” and “fool,” although, in the thrall of an especially melancholy bout of depression, staring into the mirror, you may prefer “fat fool” to “total loser” or “fucking idiot.”¹

Because the asshole frequently inspires immediate and violent hatred. This is because he considers himself above the rules, social codes, and other people. Objectively, he is often wrong. But the kind of violence that he evinces when he announces (explicitly or implicitly) his immense feeling of superiority to the rest of the world produces a vehement and irrepressible rage in the people around him, or sometimes a paralyzed stupor. In either case, the asshole is satisfied: whether his victims nearly suffocate in the attempt to stifle their fruitless urge to set him on fire, or whether they maintain a stunned silence, the asshole retains his power. When confronted by someone who’s more of an asshole than he is, he will hypocritically rein himself in, but with those he judges weaker, he will continue his reign. That means there’s every reason in the world for the asshole to keep on being an asshole. Given that he often wins these showdowns, there’s no reason to expect him to stop of his own free will.

So it’s up to those who suffer from his assholery to fix the problem.

Because, unfortunately, the actions of assholes can leave indelible scars on the psyches of those who are less obnoxious than they are, especially the ones who don’t succeed in changing the dynamics of the encounters they endure. But if they *do* manage to change the dynamics, here’s the good news: the asshole can be stopped in his tracks. If his popularity, influence, or feeling of omnipotence decline, when formerly they had been exceptionally strong, he will see that it’s not to his advantage to act like a jerk.

Let’s take a few examples from the adolescent world, as it’s crucial to impede the progress of assholes from tenderest youth.

The Bully

Known for the fear they elicit among their peers, which whets their desire to exercise their exhilarating power, the grade school or high school bully unfailingly chooses a scapegoat who fears his violence and is intimidated by the social dominance he wields at all times. In a widening spiral of dizzying cruelty, the asshole might mock his victim (he particularly likes this form of abuse, because it so perfectly illustrates the relationship he wishes to maintain with the designated victim²), then insult him, rough him up, or all three at once, ultimately (why not?) pushing him to suicide. He always commits this behavior in public (in real life or online) to buttress his popularity, which rests on fear.

His assholery is exacerbated by the fact that his unlucky victim can do very little to retaliate. The same goes for the sense of power he draws from his peers, which combines a blend of admiration and fear that cannot be separated from one another.

Mohamed, eight years old, is in the third grade and loves soccer. He's got a group of friends in his class, but he's often bothered by a bigger boy, in fourth grade, Égard (the bully), who's very athletic and likes to trip all the third-grade boys when they're playing soccer, especially Mohamed, who is (by his own account) the least athletic boy in the third grade, and possibly even in the second grade.

Égard has a tested technique: he sneaks up behind Mohamed, who doesn't hear him coming, grabs him under the armpits, and with a rather complicated bit of legwork, makes him fall roughly onto the playground where the games are played. Mohamed reports that he falls victim to this bullying approximately three times during each break between classes, thus, more than ten times a day, and says he can't take it anymore, but he doesn't know how to make Égard stop. And he's not willing to stop playing soccer, either, which is his favorite thing, to avoid the painful falls.

When asked what he does or says whenever he finds himself on the ground, he replies that he doesn't do or say anything. He gets up and keeps on playing as if nothing had happened. He does this knowing that his torment will begin again, a few minutes or hours later. Mohamed explains that he hasn't told the principal about it because he's afraid Égard will hurt

him more. He hasn't told his parents about it for the same reason: if he tells them, he thinks, they will immediately go inform the principal. He just hopes that Égard won't have to repeat fifth grade (he was overjoyed when the authorities forbade that, going forward), and hopes that when Mohamed is old enough to go to middle school, his bully will have found new ways to amuse himself, or a new target.

But in spite of the soccer, the breaks between classes seem quite long to young Mohamed, and he asks us if we could suggest a strategy for him to dissuade the "tripper" from acting that way toward him. We advise him to modify his attitude in the following manner: during one break, having alerted his third-grade soccer pals ahead of time, he should remain on the ground for a few seconds after Égard trips him, then shout loudly, rap style, "Égard is so brave, he attacks the third grade!" Then clapping out the beat, invite his friends to join the jeering refrain.

He tried it. Égard turned red in front of the dozen children who chanted the rap against him. He didn't play soccer that day, and he quit attacking Mohamed.

The Racist Asshole

Hikima's father was upset. It would be Carnival soon, and he had talked with his daughter, who was seven, about the Ghanaian princess costume she would wear for the occasion. Her aunt, who was a dressmaker, had begun sewing the outfit, which, according to her father, was truly magnificent. "It would be so great for us to see her wear this outfit. We really want our children to be proud of being Ghanaian," the father told me.

But ten days before, his little girl had announced that she didn't want to wear the Ghanaian princess costume; she wanted to wear a pirate costume. She said she thought the costume was ugly. Her father had insisted, first gently, asking her to explain why, and asking her if the costume could be altered in ways that would make her like it more. But Hikima refused to give the reasons why she didn't want the princess costume and cried when her parents pushed the point.

When he told her she had no choice, because her aunt had spent a lot of time making the magnificent dress, and that if she didn't wear it, it would

hurt her aunt's feelings, Hikima still refused, and cried even harder. The father said she was being perverse and ungrateful and he refused to budge: Hikima would wear the Ghanaian princess dress to the school Carnival, out of respect for her aunt's work and her own origins. The closer it got to the date of the Carnival, the more resistant Hikima became and the angrier her father grew.

One night, a few days before the day the costumes were to be worn, Hikima's mother explained to her husband that their daughter had spoken to her. It turned out that one of her schoolmates, Grace (the racist asshole), would regularly come up to Hikima, touch her forearms, then sniff her fingers and say: "That's what we thought—you smear poop all over yourself every morning. You black people are disgusting." All the girls in Grace's clique would act disgusted and retreat from Hikima as if she were a piece of garbage.

Hikima would pretend she didn't hear, but she told her mother that being black wasn't a good thing, that what she wanted was to have beige skin, and that if she wore the Ghanaian dress to the school Carnival, everyone would tease her even more, and it would hurt her feelings too much. She added that she hadn't talked about this at home because she knew it would upset her parents a lot, especially her father.

Hikima's father told me: "You'll say that talking to the teacher won't accomplish anything. But I really want to go see her and ask her to send a letter to all the parents, explaining what's happening and telling them to have a talk with their children, or even to punish them. Comments like these are unacceptable."

"You're right, sir, it's unacceptable, and it must stop. For that to happen, it's true that we count on the goodwill of the other parents and children, and we hope your letter would be enough to make them take responsibility for changing the behavior. But there's a risk that the behavior would continue, albeit surreptitiously, so it would be more useful to teach Hikima to defend herself. For instance, you could tell her that, in our opinion, for her not to wear the dress would be like putting a crown on Grace's head. It would be like telling Grace that she's right when she says such stupid and nasty things; and that's what you would find most upsetting. Because it's wrong for a princess like Hikima to bend the knee to a hyena like Grace. She could knock Grace off her pedestal by saying, the next time she insults her skin,

‘Yes, that’s true, and flies are always drawn to poo, so come on over Grace, come on over—I know you can’t resist.’”

Obviously, this taunt would have more power if Hikima were wearing the princess dress. But it would work either way.

Homophobic Assholes

Elouan is a junior at a vocational high school and his life is not easy. The whole class makes fun of him and constantly alludes to his homosexuality, calling him, for example, a “pussy,” or miming pornographic acts when the teachers aren’t looking. There’s even graffiti about him on several walls of the school.

Among the worst instances:

Moktar (the homophobic asshole), who corners him in the corridors and threatens to kill him “because gays shouldn’t exist.” Elouan is scared because he seems to be in earnest.

Dylan, who runs up, sniggering nervously, whenever he sees Elouan being bullied, and joins in, while seeming strangely uneasy.

Océane, a giantess who shoves and insults everyone, giggling the whole time; Elouan is one of her favorite targets. She calls him “my dove,” and clutches him to her breast (which is more than ample), while saying that she has ways of changing his mind. The whole class dissolves in laughter.

One day, during a week that had been particularly tough, Elouan’s French teacher asked to speak to him.

“I sense that things aren’t easy for you right now, Elouan. Is there anything I can do?”

“I don’t think so, Madame,” Elouan replied, and burst into tears, which he clumsily tried to hide, panicked by the idea that a classmate might see him crying.

“I won’t do anything if you’re definitely against it, but I think there might be a few solutions that would stop them in their tracks.”

“Really? Obviously, you don’t really know them, Madame. They don’t give a damn about anything. It’s practically their dream to be called to the principal’s office. There’s not really a comeback, or a punishment, that would scare them. And if you get rid of one of them, there’s still ten left.”

“I know, Elouan, I know, that’s why you have to punch back. But you’ve got to be the one who throws the punch. I have an idea.”

A week later, the French teacher starts class. “Continuing our series of exposés, Elouan will speak to you today on a subject that I know fascinates you all: homosexuality.”

The whole class begins fidgeting and muttering obscenities.

Quickly Elouan rolls off the definition, the figures, and the history. Then, after a short pause, he begins: “I’d like to talk now about a serious affliction known as homophobia. The question it prompts is: What are the deep-rooted causes of homophobia?”

Suddenly the classroom falls silent.

He continues: “First of all, lack of intelligence. Some homophobes have such a small brain that it can’t contain the idea that some people might have a different sexuality than others.”

Elouan looks Moktar right in the eyes and smiles. The class starts snickering and Moktar grits his teeth.

The teacher interrupts. “That’s true, now that you mention it. The few homophobes I’ve known suffer from cerebral constriction. Of course, it’s not their fault, the poor things.” (She rests her gaze on Moktar, who squirms in his seat.) “Are there any possible treatments, Elouan, for these mentally impaired people?”

“Unfortunately, for some, the brain remains constricted throughout their lives. But some others can change. The most sociable people . . .

“There’s also a second possible factor: some homophobes are themselves attracted to members of the same sex and are panicked by the fear that other people might catch on.”

Elouan stares intently at Dylan and blows him a discreet kiss. Dylan sits stock-still and lowers his eyes while everyone looks at him, alarmed because, at that moment, each one of them wonders who will be next on the list.

“Would anyone else like to address these two first causes of this affliction?” asks the teacher.

Dead silence in the classroom.

“The third cause scientists have suggested is immense lack of self-confidence, related to a psychological complex. The homophobe says to

himself: I must divert attention away from my complex and turn it toward someone who can't defend himself; homosexuals are very useful for that.”

Elouan turns toward Océane, who squirms under his gaze, and says, “So I'm fine if we don't kid around anymore. . . .”

The teacher concludes, “That was fascinating, Elouan, thank you. Now we have a better understanding of the causes of the condition that afflicts our class.”

Thinkers from Palo Alto University (on whose premises the three preceding interventions were based) proposed and proved the following hypothesis: the accommodations we make in the attempt to solve a problem often not only *don't* solve it, they aggravate it. They concluded that in many cases it was useful to adopt an opposite strategy to one that had been attempted previously and failed in order to resolve problems and ease tensions.

This hypothesis works well in combating the actions of assholes. Each of the three students mentioned above made a brave 180-degree turn in their conduct. When Elouan stopped cowering, staying silent, and hoping the problem would simply go away, he broke the vicious cycle of homophobia by fighting back, responding to insults, and taking action, rather than passively accepting hurtful behavior.

This is, therefore, the most effective way to fight assholes.

STUPIDITY FROM THE CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE



A Conversation with
› Alison Gopnik ‹

*Professor of psychology and philosophy at the University of California,
Berkeley*

Q. What are the worst things that adults, including psychologists, have ever believed about children?

A. It's a bit of a puzzle, because essentially everything that adults and especially psychologists believed about children has turned out to be wrong, and there wasn't really a clear reason why they would have thought that. So the typical view about children, for instance, was that they were irrational, that they couldn't think abstractly, that they were restricted to the immediate here and now. William James said they lived in a "blooming buzzing confusion." John Locke said they were "blank slates." And both Piaget, the great founder of cognitive development, and Freud said that they were amoral; they couldn't take the perspective of other people; they were egocentric. You still hear people saying things like children can't tell the difference between fantasy and reality. It's funny that people, including scientific psychologists, just assumed the negative about children without very much evidence. You could have said, "Well, we don't really know whether children are egocentric and can't think abstractly; we have to find out," but that wasn't what happened. People assumed that, with all the things children couldn't do, they were defective grown-ups; they were missing fundamental capacities. And again, even recently, I heard a neuroscientist comparing children and animals and people with brain damage as if they were some kind of natural grouping, and if you think about it for more than two minutes, you'll say it doesn't make any sense—there's no reason why you would think that children and animals and patients would have the same features. But I think there was a kind of picture that the thirty-five-year-old European male scientist is the peak of cognitive capacity and everything else in the world—is just a falling off from that.

Q. It seems like psychologists have forgotten that they had been children themselves.

A. That's the general way we're being stupid. There are certainly reasons why we didn't understand a lot about children, one of them is—especially if you're talking about very young children, under the age of five—we don't remember what it's like to be young children. Babies

can't talk, and even toddlers are not very good at articulating what they think. If you ask a three-year-old what they think about something, you're likely to get a beautiful stream-of-consciousness poem about ponies and birthdays; you won't get something that sounds like a really coherent account. Of course, babies can't talk at all. This is an issue that comes up with nonhuman animals as well—if you have a creature who can't talk, or communicates in a way that's very different from the way that you do, it's hard to figure out what's going on in their minds.

Although I think it's interesting that some of the poets, like Wordsworth, for example, at least remembered enough to know what it would like to be four or five. I think they actually ended up with a better picture of what childhood was like than scientists. But another reason was that the people who actually knew babies the best, the ones who were actually spending time with them day by day, looking at what they did, were women. And mothers. And those were not the same people who were writing books of philosophy and psychology. So for a long time, mothers and other women were the people who really intimately knew how children work, who were really familiar with them, and intuitively mothers thought, "there's more going on here than meets the eye." But they were not the people who were writing the psychology and philosophy books, and the people who *were* writing the psychology and philosophy books were not taking care of children.

One of the really remarkable things I discovered is that Wordsworth, for example, was a babysitter. He made money, when he was young and just starting out as a poet, by being a kind of caregiver for the child of a rich guy. Darwin had a lot of interesting things to say about babies; he actually spent a lot of time observing his own children in a really careful way. Occasionally you get someone who was really paying attention to children, and almost always they saw that more was there. But that was still the exception. I think that combination of things was responsible for the low opinion of children: We can't remember when we were children; children can't talk the same way than adults can; and the people who knew the children the best were women, and they weren't the ones writing the psychology and philosophy books. Moreover, anything associated with women was seen as being less important or less rational than the things that were associated with men. There was

the common intuition that any subject that women spent a lot of time with was not going to be rational or intelligent or intellectual, that women's worlds might include emotions but not ideas. The combination of those things meant that thinkers were not agnostic about what children were like, but formulated a specific view that scientifically turned out to be completely wrong.

Q. And it was even worse for babies. Some psychologists thought they were just digestive tracts, and baby could bear surgery without anesthetics because we thought they couldn't suffer.

A. That's right. There was the view, and I still hear this from philosophers, that babies weren't conscious. Even when I started graduate school, which is now long ago but not *that* long ago, I can remember neuroscientists explaining to me that babies didn't have a cortex, so they were basically like a vegetable; they had reflexes but they couldn't have any higher intellectual functioning, and they couldn't feel, they couldn't actually have consciousness.

Q. What about our own stupidity? Do children perceive stupidity in adults?

A. I'm not sure how much the children see stupidity in adults, but one really interesting thing that's come out of the work I'm most engaged in now is that when you ask what's rational and stupid, the answer is that it all depends. Many times things that seem stupid are really useful. For example, not actually thinking, not actually taking in all the evidence and information and trying to learn and update what you think, that's almost like a definition of stupidity. But if you have to make decisions really quickly or really efficiently, then you often can't afford to take the time and energy to actually do all the computations you would need to do to really be smart. You end up with automatic, well-practiced routines that work pretty well most of the time. But they're stupid in the sense that they're not sensitive to evidence; they're not something that you can revise, something that's actually thoughtful. The interesting thing is that if you look at children, they're actually relying much more

on learning and much less on these automatic, well-practiced ways. In our latest studies, for example, when you give children a pattern of data that supports an unlikely hypothesis, the children are actually better than the adults at figuring out that unlikely hypothesis. The children are actually more likely to update their belief when they get new data. Adults are more likely to just rely on the things that they already heard, or the things that people have told them. It's stupid in some ways, but, of course, in other ways it's very practical, because if every time you have to make a decision you had to go back from scratch and think, "Do I believe it's really true? Is it really accurate?" it would be hard to act. People in computer science talk about an explore/exploit trade off. The kind of intelligence you need to exploit and act quickly and efficiently is really different from the kind of intelligence you need to explore, learn, and create and formulate new hypotheses. A common intuition is that the "explore" intelligence is more like real intelligence—a lot of stupidity happens when we're just mindlessly relying on things that we've already done. But if by intelligence, you mean adapting well to the world around you, then creatures like children, who are so amazingly good at learning, will require many people working hard to take care of them. You get this really interesting contrast: the children are unbelievably smart—if you think about something like learning language, they're much smarter than adults—but if you're thinking about something like tying your shoes or putting your jacket on to get to school in the morning, the children look more stupid than the adults.

Q. Can they acknowledge that their parents are stupid?

A. Interestingly, I think that's not true. There's a lot of work about children's understanding of testimony, what children think about what other people around them say, and I think the evidence is the children who are three or four years old give adults the benefit of the doubt. They hear a grown-up say something, and they assume that what the grown-up is saying is true. But interestingly, even for a three- or four-year-old, if they hear a grown-up say something and it turns out not to be true several times in a row, then they won't trust what that grown-up says in the future. They kind of give grown-ups the benefit of the doubt

to begin with, because they assume they're going to be smart and tell the truth, but if a grown-up does or says something that suggests that that's not true, they'll change their minds.

Q. But what about their parents precisely? Do they suffer if they realize their parents are not that smart, maybe in their teenage years?

A. My work is mostly with preschoolers, but I've started to do some work on adolescents, and there's a lot of very, very interesting work going out now about adolescents and teenagers. The teenage years may be another period where there is this kind of creative intelligence, plasticity, learning and exploration. That teenage impulse to reject the things your parents have told you, to stop taking for granted what people around you know, might actually serve to support an evolutionary function, because it helps to allow teenage exploration in fields like social change.

Q. Can parenting lead to bullshit?

A. My view, as you know from my books, is that most of what is written about "parenting" is bullshit. I think this is another interesting example of the explore/exploit tension. If you look into science, for example, you might think that the places where you would first see science emerging would be medicine, because it's really important for people to deal with sickness and to get better. But in fact, a lot of areas that have the most practical significance were actually the last places to be scientific and arguably still aren't. The first great scientific theories are about things like the stars, which don't have much practical significance. And I think, again, the trade off and the paradox is exactly that: when things are most urgent, you have the least resources to explore new possibilities. Parenting is a very good example of that. The "parenting" industry is one of these examples where people are driven by the question "What am I going to do right this minute?" and that's a good recipe for generating a great deal of nonsense.

Q. What about screens? Do they make children dumber?

A. I think this is a very good question, and we won't know the answer for years. My guess is that they will simply make children become smarter in different ways than they are now, because that's what happened with all the other technological changes in the past. I think there's a great deal of moral panic about screens that's disproportionate to any actual knowledge that we have about their effects. In the past, what's always happened is when there was a new technology, people panicked about it and thought that it was going to be destructive and make us stupid. We almost always said the same thing, that it'd make us less thoughtful; we would rely on the technology at the cost of our natural cognitive capacities. To some extent, that's been true. The famous example is Socrates saying that reading was really a bad idea, because then you wouldn't remember things anymore. And he's right—we don't remember all of Homer anymore. But the trade off is that one of the things that happens with cognitive technology is that, indeed, you rely on the technology to do certain kinds of cognitive things that you might have otherwise done, but you get benefits in being able to do *other* cognitive things. This time might be different from all the other times in the past, but I think it's pretty unlikely. I think what will happen is children will adjust to the new technology, and it will make them smarter in some ways, but it'll also make them lose some cognitive capacities that they have now, in the same way that having writing or printing, for instance, means that you don't have tremendous feats of memorization. There might be a generation of children that assume if you need to know the answer to a question, you have it right next to you, so you don't have to memorize it. But on the other hand, you'll have a generation of children who will have all the information in the world at their fingertips all the time—it's hard to believe that that wouldn't have the potential to make you smarter.

Q. So we have to trust children?

A. Again, maybe this time it's different, but the general evolutionary picture is that children make us smarter as a species. There's a great

puzzle about why children exist at all. We humans have a much longer childhood, a much longer period of immaturity than any other species. And there turns out to be this really interesting relationship you see over and over again in biology between how intelligent the adult of the species is—and particularly how much they rely on learning as opposed to relying on instinct—and how long a period of childhood they have. This is even true for butterflies; it's true for birds like crows; it seems to be this very, very general principle. Children are sort of designed to be smart—at least, children are designed to learn, that's really what they're all about—and the basic evolutionary strategy is that we get this early protective period where we don't actually have to do anything. All we have to do is learn and be smart. And then we can use all the things that we learned as children to do all the things that we need to do as grown-ups. So from that perspective, we can trust children in the sense that the whole design, the whole point of childhood, is to be smart in the sense of being really good at learning and exploring things. With each generation, the species gets a chance to reboot. The period of childhood is like a kind of a species-wide sabbatical when a new generation of humans can look at the new environment that they're in and try to figure out what's going on with this environment—how does it work, how shall I deal with it—without actually having to make decisions the next minute, as in “Let me quickly figure out how I should avoid starvation.”

Q. In your opinion, is an adult asshole someone who refuses to remember this part of childhood?

A. I think there are certainly good arguments for that. You may have seen a piece I wrote in *The New York Times* about Donald Trump, because people kept saying that Trump was like a four-year-old. It felt like a terrible insult to four-year-olds. You start out with this very wide, open mind—open to many, many different possibilities, open to a great deal of new information—and as you become an adult, you get this much narrower, goal-focused kind of approach to the world. If you think about the Buddhist tradition, for instance, they argue that as an adult, often you're sort of stuck in your own mind with its goals and immediate desires and rumination, and you can't get out and get in tune with the

outside world. I think that's very much a difference between adults and children, that kind of narrow focus on "Here are my needs and wants, and what can I do to get them fulfilled?" Traditionally, people had argued that children were egocentric in that way, but I think the evidence is that it's grown-ups who are like that. And assholes in particular. One definition of assholes is that they're people who are so narrowly focused on their own goals and the things that they want, they can't be tuned in to anything that's going on in the world outside *them*. I think that's just the opposite of what children are like. Even people who aren't assholes in general can become assholes when they are too caught up in their own egos. Hanging out with children or being more childlike might be a good cure. Donald Trump is just an example of the way that adults become so egocentric and so caught up in the things they want to do in a particular moment, they stop looking at the world outside them. That's a very particular kind of adult stupidity, which I think is very different from the way children think.

Q. As an adult, he's like all the bullshit psychologists used to say about children: they said children were egocentric, and so he is.

A. Exactly.

Interview by Jean-François Marmion.

DO WE DREAM OF STUPIDITY?



› Delphine Oudiette ‹

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ften, we think of dreams as grand adventures. When we sleep, we suddenly become as cool as Superman, flying over the roofs of an imaginary city and heroically fighting daunting monsters. This raises a great hope: could it be that dreams allow us to escape from the stupidity of daily life?

A Lot of Stupid Dreams

Many groups of scientists have meticulously undertaken to wake innocent sleepers at any hour to ask them what's on their minds the moment they are woken. And horror! The narratives they reported were so ordinary and banal that anyone who had the audacity to recount them at a sophisticated dinner would risk boring their listeners to death. For example, one was preparing a dish of artichoke hearts, another was stuck in a hallway, and another was talking about drugging the wife of a bicyclist. The reservoir of recorded dreams, which contains thousands of dreams of men and women of all ages, confirms this devastating statistic: 90 percent of dreams are highly coherent, very credible and realistic, and of poor dramatic quality (few elements outside the ordinary). In sum, nothing you could use to write a good film script. The collective imagination that pictures the oneiric world as extraordinary has no basis in fact. Our memory is selective: for the most part, we only remember the dreams that are the most intense, emotionally gripping, and strange. The others, less remarkable, drown in oblivion.

Stupid for a Day, Stupid Always?

Though few of our dreams are exact replicas of our waking lives, 84 percent of our accounts of dreams contain autobiographical elements. The majority contain elements of our recent experiences, often jumbled with older incidents. Our waking life feeds our oneiric life. Therefore it follows that if you're stupid by day, there's little chance this will change at night.

But not so fast! People's accounts of their dreams are biased: they often censor the juicier bits of the contents, have a hard time verbally reconstructing their extraordinary adventures, or simply forget all or part of

their nocturnal exploits. Could it be that nuggets of intelligence are buried in our dreams and vanish upon waking like falling stars? Certain sleep pathologies can bring us some hints of an answer. When we sleep, we are either in a state of slow-wave sleep (known as non-REM, or non-rapid eye movement, sleep) or paradoxical sleep (known as REM sleep). The latter is characterized by intense cerebral activity, rapid eye movement, and muscular paralysis. Paradoxical sleep is also a stage associated with a greater frequency of dreams, and of dreams with more elaborate and intense oneiric content.

Among patients who have behavioral troubles in the paradoxical sleep state, the cerebral lock that paralyzes the muscles no longer functions. This leads them to “live out” part of their dreams, and their dreamed gestures and words can be captured through video monitoring with the use of an infrared camera. Thanks to the help of these agitated patients, we’ve been able to lift the veil a bit on oneiric content, freed of the inherent bias of reported dreams. Many of our patients fought invisible enemies at night, sometimes escaping from an aggressive lion, sometimes staving off alligators with an imaginary pole, sometimes fiercely battling Saracens. Their bravery emerged only in the meetings we had with them afterward! Along with dreams of battle, the patients who had behavioral troubles in paradoxical sleep also exhibited more ordinary behaviors: a sleeping ex-smoker, tempted by his past addiction, smoked an invisible cigarette; an old soldier gave orders and reviewed his troops; and a retired carpenter pounded a hammer, building a staircase. It would seem that the habits and abilities we’ve acquired in our waking years invade our oneiric scenarios. It’s hard to escape daily life, even when we are sleeping!

A Dream, or the Awakening of the Inner Idiot Who Sleeps Within Us?

There are different kinds of fools. Among them you’ll find the social idiot, the vulgarian, the thick-witted clod, the hothead. It would appear that this last moron lets himself go in dreams. A wide-ranging study investigated the nocturnal speech of 232 sleep-talkers, people who talk in their sleep. The results were astonishing. The dreamers are not all that conciliatory: of 361

phrases uttered during sleep, 21 percent contained the word “no.” This famous “no” represented 5 percent of all words emitted during sleep, whereas during waking hours, “no” constitutes only 0.4 percent of words used. But that’s not all. The nocturnal words also included a heavy dose of foul language and other curse words (9.7 percent of the sentences spoken). Here’s a sample of this colorful speech. There’s the indispensable “God, god, god, shit, shit, shit, fuck, fuck, fuck!” and “Yes, or fucking what?” Then there’s the always effective “Shut up!”; the regressive “Piss off, you stink”; the inarguable “You’re a bitch!”; the menacing “I’m going to beat him up”; or the very classy “Up yours.” From time to time a glimpse of sweetness comes as balm to the heart. A romantic sleep-talker talks to a woman in his dream: “Has anyone ever told you you’re adorable? What? No handsome young guy has ever told you you’re adorable?” The sleep-talker’s pursuit culminates with a pure moment of poetry. “But do those guys have no balls? They’re all gay, or what?” Unfortunately, the story does not tell us if the sleep-talking lothario hooked up with his dream girl. One thing is certain: between vulgarity, verbal violence, accusing gestures, and sarcastic tones, nocturnal speech is often obscene, and contrasts strongly with the pleasant daytime personality of the sleep-talkers.

The Dreamer, an Incompetent, Gullible Fool?

Stupidity in dreams is not limited to vulgarity. The dreamer is a notable incompetent who often faces setbacks. A broad study of the dreams of about seven hundred medical students, conducted on the eve of their competitive entry exam and three months before it, showed that 60 percent of the participants had dreamed of the exam. In 78 percent of cases, the dreams involved catastrophic scenarios: an alarm clock malfunction, late arrival, accusations of cheating, incomprehensible subject material, lack of time, and every other possible reason for failure. And this is not specific to medical students. Negative emotions (above all, fear, but also sadness and anger) are overrepresented in dreams, corresponding to about 80 percent of reported emotions. Dreams of misfortune (accident, illness, obstacles) are seven times more frequent than dreams in which a lucky event transpires. Of all social interactions, aggression is the most commonly reported, much

more than friendly or sexual relations. The dreamer broods in the dark, constantly thrust into unpleasant, even dangerous, situations. Clearly, he's not an example of social success!

Needless to say, in the rare dreams that are not realistic and that contain bizarre elements that are implausible or even impossible in reality, the dreamer loses all critical sense. He swallows everything he sees or hears without asking any questions. So the dreamers aren't shocked when a colleague takes on the form of a classmate from sixth grade, or when their little living room suddenly turns into a ballroom. The loss of directed thought, of voluntary control, of orientation, and of critical sense while dreaming is doubtless due to various cerebral impulses in paradoxical sleep that are connected with waking, and have a notable link to the deactivation of the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, which is a very important area for logical reasoning when you're awake. Furthermore, some characteristic incongruities of the dream—like the erroneous appearances of familiar faces—resemble known neurological symptoms provoked by certain cerebral lesions (like Fregoli syndrome, which causes difficulties in identifying faces, caused by lesions in the right frontal lobe or the left temporal lobe). Such similarities between dreams and pathological manifestations imply that, during sleep, there can be transitory deactivation of some specific visual areas of the brain, and/or functional disconnections between visual areas and other cerebral regions in neurologically healthy people.

Stupidity in Dreams: A Healthy Experience?

Remember the med students who dreamed mostly of failure in their dreams before the big test? Well, given the grades they got on the test, those negative experiences seemed to have been beneficial. The more they'd dreamed of the test, the better they performed. This result corroborates past studies of women going through divorce. Those whose dreams incorporated many elements related to the divorce adapted better to their new life and developed less depression than the others. One theory postulates that dreams may act as simulations of threats or situations that worry us, which prepare us better to handle them in real life, rather like a vaccine triggers

the production of antibodies adapted to protect us from future viruses we may be exposed to.

Beyond the “virtual reality” dimension, as a preparation for action dreams can permit us to digest our feelings, removing the emotional cloak of our memories and retaining only the important information (the memory in itself, liberated from its attendant emotions). A Canadian psychiatrist, Tore Nielsen, proposes that dreams permit a reduction of the negative aspect of anxiety-producing or traumatizing experiences by reactivating them in conjunction with neutral elements in the oneiric setting. This process brings two cerebral regions into play: the amygdala, located in the depths of the brain, and the medial prefrontal cortex, located at the front. The reactivation of the anxiety-producing element would activate the amygdala, unleashing the feeling of fear, which is very present in dreams. The medial prefrontal cortex would permit an emotional analysis of the situation (the anxiety-producing element is less disturbing when it is reactivated in another, more neutral, context) and an inhibition of fear. By this model, if the emotion is too intense or the psychological terrain is fragile, the negative emotions will wake the sleeper: the dream becomes a nightmare. By this light, nightmares represent a failure of the treatment process of emotions during sleep.

The Stupidity of Dreams, a Dormant Intelligence?

Let’s try to solve a puzzle. Picture two men, standing a few yards away from each other. They’re looking at three cows that are tied to a fence, which suddenly is electrified, making the cows leap. One of the men sees the three cows leap at exactly the same moment. The other insists that they leapt one after the other. Tempers flare, they come to blows. Who’s right, who’s wrong?

Albert Einstein encountered this absurd dispute in a dream, then became obsessed with it upon waking to such a point that years later it became a source of inspiration in his development of the theory of relativity, which holds that space and time are not absolute, and can be distorted. So both men were right. Not so stupid, this cow story! And Einstein isn’t the only one who turned a dream into a creative muse. Some works of art (the novel

Frankenstein; the mythic song “Yesterday” by the Beatles), inventions (the sewing machine), and great scientific advances (the chemical structure of benzene; the importance of neurotransmitters in neural communication) all were made possible by the occurrence of an inspiring dream.

Numerous studies have shown that our waking experiences (our memories) are reactivated in non-REM sleep, permitting their consolidation, a little like an actor who rehearses his lines out loud to memorize them better. Our hypothesis is that in the paradoxical sleep that ensues (and possibly through the dreams that accompany it), this “actor” brain becomes an improviser, leaping from one association to another, which permits the reorganization of our experiences and the emergence of new ideas that can be put into use upon waking. This hypothesis is supported by the testimony of many lucid dreamers—those who are aware that they are dreaming while they are dreaming, and who are able in some cases to modify part of the oneiric sequence as it unfolds. These virtual dream navigators frequently report using the unique freedom afforded them by the dream state to find solutions to their personal challenges (for example, to solve a complex mathematical problem or to invent a model).

As we’ve seen, dreams are strongly linked to our waking experience. That implies: 1) that it’s decidedly difficult to escape the stupidity that surrounds us, and 2) that an idiot by day will tend to be an idiot at night. But who knows? Thanks to the creative power of dreams, perhaps even a fool might be visited by flashes of genius?

FURTHER READING:

1. Isabelle Arnulf, *Une Fenêtre Sur les Rêves* [*A Window onto Dreams*] (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2014).
2. Michel Jouvet, *Le Sommeil, La Conscience et L’Éveil* [*Sleep, Consciousness and Waking*] (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2016).
3. Sophie Schwartz, *La Fabrique des Rêves* [*The Dream Factory*] (Paris: Le Pommier, 2006).
4. Isabelle Arnulf, *Comment Rêvons-Nous?* [*How Do We Dream?*] (Paris: Le Pommier, 2004).
5. Matthew Walker, *Pourquoi Nous Dormons* [*Why We Sleep*] (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2018).

THE WORST STUPIDITY IS THINKING YOU'RE SMART



A Conversation with
› Jean-Claude Carrière ‹

Author and screenwriter

Q. You once told me that you draw a distinction between folly and stupidity. What is the difference for you?

A. I said that?

Q. Yes? Why? Was that nonsense?

A. It's possible! Let us say that foolishness is always arrogant and peremptory: you'll say something completely idiotic, but confidently, and with all the requisite authority. Folly is always very sure of itself, but stupidity sometimes hesitates. I myself may say *stupid* things every day, like everyone, but I try as hard not to say too many *foolish* things, because some of them can do a lot of harm. Still, today, when you say that certain categories of human beings don't resemble others, that's both folly and stupidity, but it's folly, most of all, because you know it's not true. When someone claims that the sun is the biggest star in the universe, that's just stupidity, if it's based on ignorance. But if someone insists on it, in the face of all evidence, that's true folly, which amounts to substantial stupidity. But what's really surprising is when sometimes a fool says something intelligent. That can happen. . . .

Q. Is folly a belief that mistakes itself for knowledge?

A. At times, yes. I can't say that all the people who participated in religious councils to establish "truths" were idiots: they had the intelligence of their age and they reasoned in their own terms. Nevertheless, they produced expressions like "unitary Trinity," which comes pretty close to stupidity. The sentence that served as the key to my *Dictionnaire de la Bêtise* [*Dictionary of Stupidity*] was spoken by Msgr. de Quélen at the beginning of the nineteenth century, after the defeat of Napoleon. He preached to all the old émigrés who returned with the Bourbons and gathered in the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris that "not only was Jesus Christ the son of God, but he came from excellent stock on his mother's side." That's a sentence that couldn't be any dumber! According to Flaubert, "Stupidity consists of wanting to draw conclusions": to say something definitive and immutable. We live in a

perpetual flux of knowledge, ideas, feelings, of our perception of the world, of ourselves, of our sensations—so to want to fix things for once and for all, “that’s the way it is,” whatever it may be, that’s folly. Definitely. Because everything changes without cease.

Q. So is doubt the antidote of folly or of stupidity?

A. It’s absolutely indispensable. Science doubts endlessly: when I work with scientists, which happens a lot, they tell me that a scientific truth has a life span of ten years. Whereas faith—it admits no doubts. That’s even what defines it: Saint Thomas’s doubt is a major sin! “You joined this group that believes that truth. If you have the misfortune to doubt, you shall be ejected.” And, in not a few cases, put to death.

Q. Is it the *credo quia absurdum*, “I believe because it’s absurd”?

A. It’s something else. Theological truths, for example, the unitary Trinity (you must accept that God is “one” *and* “three”), it’s mystery, it’s absurdity. No human mind could have invented anything like it: since it’s true, and absurd in our eyes, it must be divine. But we forget that we’re the ones who decided it was true. It’s hard to admit it today, but I knew, in my generation, convinced communists who weren’t far from this state of mind. You’d give them a phrase from Marx, Engels, or Lenin . . . and the truth had been spoken. In the 1950s, to be excluded from a communist cell because you had doubts was a very serious thing! Some people suffered a lot, others died of grief, or killed themselves. I knew some of them. It was like finding yourself excluded from some gnostic or heretic sect, like the hundreds that have existed throughout history.

Q. Does stupidity have a common denominator across centuries and cultures, or does it appear in different forms?

A. There’s a common trunk, but you always have to question yourself when you’re speaking of stupidity or folly, because you’re always talking about other people’s. . . . Yet we are vulnerable ourselves, you, me, and

everyone else, at every moment, to saying something foolish or stupid. I'd say it's up to us to look out for it! This isn't a flaw that some people have and other people don't: some have it more markedly than others. We are all capable of being stupid. But some people give in to their character, their temperament, to circumstances that lead them to make enormous blunders, while others police themselves better. I've certainly said stupid things before (perhaps even today while talking to you), but the worst stupidity is to believe that you're intelligent. To think you have a clear, distinct, and well-organized view of men and women and the whole wide world. "I've analyzed the situation completely convincingly"—that is true stupidity. On the other hand, a mind that would admit to being constantly in flux, in doubt, knowing nothing, seeing nothing, would veer to another extreme almost as dumb as the first. But not entirely.

Q. Does admitting your own stupidity consist of limiting it, or even making it disappear?

A. You can hope, but that would be pretentious! You must recognize your own stupidity no matter what, that's the least of it. To be stubborn is to demonstrate that you are even more foolish than whatever you've just said. Distance, a critical spirit, self-awareness, all those things that we try to preserve as long as we can, give us an interior serenity that allows us to make better judgments.

For instance, television has been ruined, there's nothing on it but debates anymore, including debates on what has happened that very day. I've always found it very daring, very bold! On May Day in 2018, people wore hoods to the protests. That day, specialists appeared to explain what it was all about. I wouldn't have been able to: some people claimed it was groups of left-wing extremists, others that it was right-wingers, still others, that it was neither left- nor right-wingers, but troublemakers and professional anarchists. Go ahead, try to make sense of that! It's very difficult to maintain perspective, particularly when you're a man or a woman in politics and you have to make a decision in the moment. Do I press the button or not?

There are always arguments for and against. The great politicians are the ones who see things from a distance and choose the right moment, like when General de Gaulle, speaking of Algeria, used the word “self-determination,” which meant “independence” in the big picture. He’d had the words on the tip of his tongue for months and he didn’t say it by accident, or just anywhere: it was the fruit of long reflection and of a decision he had made in advance, but whose scale he might not have guessed, and which would drag into the debate both partisans and adversaries of French Algeria, as they called it at the time.

Q. What has changed most about stupidity since your dictionary was published in 1965?

A. Information, definitely. I’m like everyone else, from time to time I dip into YouTube and watch a news segment. Are they fake or real? I don’t know. Someone appears and tells you that one mystery or another has been solved, that there really are extraterrestrials in America, that the American government ordered the destruction of the towers in Manhattan . . . you can imagine! We’re now submerged in something that was scarce in centuries past: information. Without going any further back, my grandfather, in my village, didn’t know what was happening in Italy, had practically never heard anyone talk about Mussolini. Today, you know everything immediately, without verification or confirmation. That’s what strikes me the most. And this can lead to enormous stupidity. It’s never been harder for politicians: you’ll notice that very often they’ll answer “Yes—and no.”

Q. Because, on top of everything, they’re being asked to respond really quickly!

A. The true politician is the one who says, “Give me some time to look into it and reflect.”

Q. Who would dare to say, “I don’t know,” or “I don’t know yet”?

A. Some people say it occasionally. In any case, we all find ourselves drowning in a mass of information that we don't know how to parse. With the famous "big data," it's all collected and sorted to give other people information about us that we don't even know! Advertising and money extend into everything; we need to pay more and more attention. That said, when someone says to me: "It seems that you said that, that you did that," and it isn't true, I respond, "You're far off the mark! It's much worse!" I then add something that makes it totally implausible.

Q. Could this profusion of stupidity caused by the glut of information end up making us smarter by inducing us to be more skeptical? Will being taken in by fake news teach us caution?

A. When you say "us," what portion of the population does that cover? A tiny part. Moreover, the population is continually renewing itself. I have two daughters, one of them is fifty-five, the other is fifteen. It's two different worlds! They don't have the same habits of thought at all. What I tell one, I don't necessarily tell the other. Anyway, nobody listens to me!

Q. Do they think you're saying stupid things?

A. Yes, or that it's not interesting. That's possible. When I write a dialogue scene I absolutely have to write by hand, with arrows, and words that spring off in every direction, written upside down, crossed out. . . . But I've noticed that handwriting is disappearing. You can no longer follow the path that led a writer to one phrasing or another. For an author, which I am sometimes, what that computer could never give me is the rough draft, the first draft, so precious because it comes from the unconscious. Even though this draft can be stupid, naturally. The unconscious is not necessarily intelligent.

Q. Are we living in the golden age of stupidity or is this age its own creature?

A. This age has many fine days ahead, rest assured! If you contend, like Luis Buñuel, that the human being is 60 percent bad and 40 percent good, then stupidity is making progress, and so is violence. But if you believe that we have, more or less, a fifty-fifty balance, then limiting stupidity is up to laws and regulations, ways of life, the organization of the state, of society. Such questions are asked every day, and you can never resolve them with one word or with a stroke of the pen. I heard the slogan “Down with capitalism”: that means nothing! Absolutely nothing. First you have to define the words, which is very complicated, because nobody has the same definition of the word “capitalism.” You can cite a thousand examples of this kind, and not just from the present. But these watchwords are transmitted at such speed now, through all the little apparatuses that fill our pockets, that that, yes *that*, has changed. You must always reflect on what is behind the words we hear, behind the things we see.

Q. Are evil and stupidity related?

A. Definitely. But fools can be very kind and good. Hitlerian, systemic evil is categorically stupid. It is limited, it knows that one day it will be destroyed by an evil perhaps even graver than itself. To attempt to dominate the world, to exclude and exterminate part of the population and impose a thousand-year Third Reich, that’s completely idiotic. That’s truly stupidity in action. The tragedy is that the most civilized people on the planet can let themselves be intoxicated by such enormous stupidity. One must always be on guard, that’s all. And not just let yourself bang on, for example, when you answer questions on the telephone.

Interview by Jean-François Marmion.

MAKING PEACE WITH YOUR STUPIDITY



› Stacey Callahan ‹

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Toulouse 2-Jean Jaurès, and researcher at the Center for Studies and
Research in Psychopathology and Psychology of Health (CERPPS)*

Against stupidity, the gods themselves contend in vain.

—FRIEDRICH SCHILLER

Stupidity is inevitable, because we are human. Our stupid actions are of our own creation—as are our reactions to them.

Synonyms for the word “stupidity” abound: folly, silliness, idiocy, clumsiness, obtuseness. . . . However, they have a common denominator: the inherent element of mistake. Even the most absurd inanity (a farce, for example), when imposed on others, and not received happily by them, is recognized as a mistake. If the expected humorous effect doesn’t come off, it’s a shame; the action ends up just looking dumb. But it’s rare that stupid actions are knowingly committed.

In Search of Unconditional Self-Acceptance

Two things are infinite: the universe and human stupidity; and I’m not sure about the universe! —ATTRIBUTED TO ALBERT EINSTEIN

How can we accept who we are, given our imperfections, our limitations, and obviously, our stupidity? In psychology, acceptance is a very fashionable concept. For example, there’s mindfulness meditation, in which the individual is asked to reflect on his life quite straightforwardly, without judgment. There’s also Acceptance and Commitment (ACT), in which the therapist guides the patient on a course of acceptance of the factors that cause him problems (with himself or with others in his environment) and helps him adopt various strategies to acquire optimal psychological flexibility.

In psychology, the concept of unconditional self-acceptance was mainly advanced by the late American psychologist Albert Ellis through the elaboration of his rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT), a precursor to cognitive therapies.¹ He was inspired by the Stoic philosophers (Epictetus, Seneca), who recommended an attitude of general acceptance to promote happiness. His clinical observations showed him that the human being possesses a tendency, both innate and buttressed by education (parental and other), to accept himself—as long as certain conditions are met, most of them associated with performance or with actions undertaken by the individual. Because our self-acceptance depends on our fulfillment of these conditions, our identity is constructed entirely around our actions. Yet a

human being is much more than the sum of his actions: “to do” does not in any circumstance mean “to be.” Albert Ellis demonstrated that all humans have qualities and flaws (which are sometimes difficult to differentiate), and the actions and traits of an individual can’t give a satisfactory account of his “being.” A human being is neither “good” nor “bad”; he simply *is*.²

Departing from this premise, Ellis proposes the possibility of accepting oneself in an unconditional way, separating the being from his actions. The actions of an individual can be a source of validation, of course, but should not extend to represent the worth of the individual himself. Ellis calls this notion “unconditional self-acceptance” (USA).

Toward Self-Compassion

The difference between genius and stupidity is that genius has its limits. —
ATTRIBUTED TO ALBERT EINSTEIN

Unconditional self-acceptance is based on the worth a person feels for his being, not letting his actions define his identity. Under these conditions, doing something stupid doesn’t mean you’re a fool. It relates to lived experience, not to identity. Even if we accept the idea that our actions don’t define us as a person, the experience of doing something stupid feels uncomfortable. Yet the memory of the most innocuous of our stupid actions fades quickly; at worst, we feel a slight embarrassment after a certain amount of time has elapsed. At best, we can look back and laugh about it.

To optimize this process, it’s useful to adopt an attitude of compassion toward ourselves, or self-compassion.³ While we are more or less inclined to express compassion toward others, self-compassion, like unconditional self-acceptance, is a little harder, because of the lack of real models for it in our education.

Kristin Neff, who teaches psychology of education at the University of Texas at Austin, has identified three important components of self-compassion.⁴ The first is mindfulness, which currently is enjoying great success in psychology: this is the capacity to be conscious of one’s experience in the moment, without judging. It is very useful in calming anxiety. It permits us to acknowledge our suffering while understanding that

it is temporary. The second component invites us to recognize our common humanity by reminding us of our connection with many other people who have gone through what we're enduring. This prompts us to show kindness to ourselves, as we would to a friend or relative who was going through a rough patch.

When we link unconditional self-acceptance with self-compassion, the two elements consolidate our resilience to stupidity. When we accept ourselves without reservations or conditions, self-compassion becomes easier to put into practice in our daily lives.

The Virtues of the Excuse

Excuses are like an exquisite perfume; they can transform the most awkward moment into a marvelous gift. —MARGARET LEE RUNBECK

It's well known that an apology can smooth a tense situation when you've done something stupid. When we spill red wine on our host's white carpet, it's a definite blunder that we deeply regret, feeling a range of emotions from embarrassment to guilt. But a quick excuse can make everyone feel more at ease. All actions related to human stupidity can be mitigated by excuses.

However, saying you're sorry isn't always that easy, as the American psychologist Harriet Goldhor Lerner explains.⁵ She suggests that making excuses is appropriate when we regret our actions and want to express this in a sincere way to others. In a fairly easygoing way, we can apologize when we've made some gaffe (bumping into someone, making a thoughtless remark, or causing damage, like breaking a glass or dropping a plate). In such cases, excuses alleviate the situation: they allow us not only to feel accepted in an authentic way, but to show others our regret.

But excuses for more serious errors can be trickier to formulate. Sometimes we feel incapable of apologizing, or we fear that the apology itself might put a relationship at risk. However, not apologizing can also be dangerous! In all cases, making an apology puts you on a path that's generally unknown and hard to navigate. But by staying true to our authentic selves, we can find our way.

When Excuses Do Harm

An apology is the superglue of life! It can fix just about anything!—LYNN JOHNSTON

Sometimes our excuses do not hit their targets: perhaps we phrased them badly, or the person we apologized to didn't accept our apology. In the latter case, we have to reboot our self-acceptance and acknowledge that, though this is difficult to admit, our apologies will not always be accepted.

To give our excuses the greatest chance of accomplishing their goal, we should avoid falling into the traps that Harriet Goldhor Lerner lays out.

For instance, if you use a qualifier (“but,” “however,” etc.), it's easy for an excuse to miss the mark (“I'm sorry I spilled red wine on the carpet, but it's true that a white carpet isn't ideal for a party”). An excuse like that is nothing more, really, than blame cloaked as apology, as in the formulation, “I'm sorry it's so hard for you to deal with the fact that I was clumsy and spilled some wine.” That's accusing the other person of having reacted poorly to your stupidity!

We also make our apologies meaningless if, for example, the offended party hesitates to accept them and we express frustration with them. (“I *told* you I was sorry for spilling the wine! What more can I do?”) It's true that there's not much we can do in such cases, other than let enough time pass for the individual to recover from his disappointment. Goldhor Lerner explores other inept ways of making apologies, but she underscores the most important fact to retain: a successful apology focuses on the other person. An apology that centers on our own discomfort fails to achieve its end.

Accepting our mistakes allows us not only to get past them but to learn from them: to learn to accept ourselves, to grant ourselves self-compassion during painful moments, to signal our genuineness through sincere and thoughtful apologies to the other person. Who would have imagined there were such advantages to stupidity?



SHAMELESS



Stupidity is also a gift of God, but one mustn't misuse it.

—*Pope John Paul II*

In her work on the power of vulnerability,¹ Brené Brown of the University of Houston tackles the difference between embarrassment, guilt, and shame—typical reactions to our various stupidities. In discussing embarrassment, we've already remarked that it's often short-lived and transitory. Once past, it's transformed into a memory that, more often than not, leads us to laugh at our own stupidity.

Guilt has somewhat more complicated associations, because it implies that a wrong has been done to another party. We don't want to harm others, but our stupidity can have that effect: guilt allows us to recognize that we have caused pain and spurs us not to do it again. Embarrassment and guilt, therefore, are relatively adaptable reactions.

Shame, on the other hand, evokes a difficult experience that can be toxic and hard to overcome, even traumatic. Shame is not only very hard to endure (on an emotional, cognitive, and physiological level), it also can severely damage the ego. It leaves scars and perpetuates itself. Brené Brown has observed that the most adaptable individuals are “resilient” when confronted with shame. This resilience has several elements, the most important of which is to know oneself well enough to prevent shame from arising in certain situations (by identifying one's own personal shame triggers). This lucidity is joined to the capacity for acceptance: in facing our own vulnerability to shame, we are already on the road to accepting our weaknesses and our mistakes. S. C.

UNCONDITIONAL SELF-ACCEPTANCE



The idea of unconditional acceptance can clash with our profound beliefs, as we have a tendency to conflate the value of our performance with our worth as human beings. Moreover, unconditional self-acceptance is sometimes confused, wrongly, with self-esteem, which, in its original definition, relied strongly on the notion of performance and proved very unstable over time.¹ Yet, one day or another, in spite of our best efforts, our performance is sure to prove insufficient.

Unconditional self-esteem can be confused with an attitude of resignation, passivity, complacency, pure egotism, or even apathy about our most important goals. Nonetheless, it does not propose that we deny our deficiencies, rather that we simply accept them, learn from them, and resolve to make progress, while maintaining a benevolent attitude of unconditional acceptance of our *being*. S. C.

STUPIDITY IS THE BACKGROUND NOISE OF WISDOM



A Conversation with
› Tobie Nathan ‹

*Emeritus professor of psychology at the University of Paris VIII-Vincennes-
Saint-Denis, writer, and diplomat*

Q. Does stupidity vary according to culture?

A. Actually, culture serves to preserve stupidity, by generating a large number of complex ideas as a sort of shared philosophy. The more cultivated you are, the more access you have to complex ideas. Even if you are stupid, you are insulated against your own stupidity.

Q. But can you be seen as a fool in one culture and not in another?

A. I'm not sure about that. Stupidity can be recognized, whether in a discussion or in the creation of something: a book, a tool, music. . . . It's through action that intellectual incapacity reveals itself; and the more the action has been culturally organized, the smaller the chance you have of displaying your own stupidity. For example, at universities, most of the philosophers never practice philosophy, they only teach the history of philosophy: "Plato said this, Descartes said that. . . ." They never say, "Me, I say this." If they did, they would reveal their stupidity. The history of philosophy serves to dissimulate their intellectual ineptitude.

Q. Can fools get ahead by hiding their stupidity behind other people's culture?

A. They always advance in disguise! The stupider they are, the more they want to prove that they're not; it's a question of pride. So they seek tools elsewhere, everywhere. It's awe-inspiring. Lacan said that when you psychoanalyzed idiots, they turned nasty because they became aware of their inadequacies. That's one of the rare opinions of Lacan that is correct and interesting!

Q. And what about psychologists? Do they ever utter stupidities?

A. All the time! I've seen them come and go, the waves of psychology. Back when I was a student, I participated in a study in which five milliliters of ethyl alcohol were injected into our veins. Once we were a little tipsy, we preferred women with big breasts. And voilà, the

researchers' hypothesis was proved. I assure you that this was a university study that was published in the *Bulletin de Psychologie*. This is the stupidity that has preoccupied psychologists for fifty years, and that still obsesses them today: the mania for measuring things. Since they had to measure *something*, they measured men's desire for women relative to quantity of alcohol absorbed. No need for a study to show that! I think they're moving a tiny bit beyond that kind of stupidity, but not much. Then again, if they don't measure anything, then what is psychology for? Ah well, it's a problem. . . . Because then you're forced to have ideas, which is where it gets complicated, because then people can see that you're an idiot. Behind the screen of measurement, it's harder to see. It's a curse for psychology!

Q. Does neuroscience perpetuate this kind of stupidity?

A. They brought a little intelligence and originality into psychology at the beginning, when the most absolute materialism held sway—which was surprising. They should have kept it up, but the scientists didn't have the courage. Neuroscience has decayed and fallen into the same ditch of objectivity. But that's always the way with the sciences: after a great discovery injects ten or twenty years with its dynamism, it peters out in favor of patrons who want to stake their claim: it's finished, there's no more creativity. As for nonstupidity: that's the definition of creativity. And when did we see the last creativity in the subject of psychology? Seventy years ago, maybe.

Q. Overall, would you say we are living in a golden age of stupidity, or that it's just business as usual?

A. When you eliminate the possibility of erudition, and complex big ideas like religion—sacred texts, traditional rites of the people—then stupidity resurfaces. In our era, by renouncing common philosophies, we've forced people to expose their stupidity more visibly. They're not stupider than before, they're possibly even less stupid; but their stupidity is easier to see.

Q. Without erudition and the proper language, stupidity is laid bare?

A. That's exactly right! I couldn't have said it better myself.

Q. So we're both adopting the Socratic method! But what would be the best way to combat stupidity?

A. There isn't one! Why do you want to fight stupidity? You just have to avoid idiots, that's all. Me, I've tried a little, at the university, where idiotic jargon prevails. I'm naïve. It's true! And it shows. . . . I'd thought the university really was intended for research and instruction. So that's what I've engaged with. I've seen the consequences: catastrophe. If you want the slightest chance of continuing to exist in academia, you have to hide. As soon as you show yourself, you become a target. Fools don't like people who aren't fools. I may be one, perhaps, but if they take me for someone who isn't, they won't miss me.

Q. But you write a lot of books, which isn't a very good way of keeping a low profile.

A. That's not at all the same thing as showing up at an administrative council at the university, or a scientific council. Because that's terrifying: a hunting village, but much less developed.

Q. Have you yourself on occasion said or done stupid things that you later regretted?

A. Mistakes, yes. But what are stupidities? To really do something stupid is to persist in error. I've often faced the criticism of my peers. In such cases, one can make honorable amends: "I was mistaken. Psychoanalysis is the most brilliant thing that was ever invented. Mea culpa for what I said." But it's complicated because at the same time you have to save face. Then again, you can persist in error . . . and then you're taken for a fool. Some of my oldest colleagues have tried to mix psychoanalysis and Marxism. If you persist in that today, after you've been shown that psychoanalysis is dead and that Marxism is a disaster

in the political arena, then you really can say that you're stupid. Me, I've stuck to my own path, I've continued with ethnopsychiatry. I still don't know if that was a mistake.

Q. What are the worst stupidities that you've been accused of in ethnopsychiatry?

A. It began with my mentor, Georges Devereux. He himself reproached me for my interest in shamanism: "Shamans are all psychotics! They're insane! You don't know them!" Me, I think their techniques are very interesting, as well as the philosophy they convey. I've always thought that we could teach traditional therapies through their techniques. Since these are actual techniques, why not borrow them, adopt them, and apply them ourselves. As long as we understand them. I've been criticized a lot for that. I haven't been told I was stupid, but that I was perverse to defend the backwardness of these people, as if they were a personal cause of mine. Now, nobody attacks me for this anymore. People have understood that those who come from other places don't need us to defend their thinking; they do it very well themselves. We are obliged to live in a world where other cultures don't share our way of thinking. It's hard, but we have to.

Q. In our age, does stupidity have new playing fields?

A. I've been one of the most enthusiastic advocates of real, direct democracy. At last, it exists! It's social networks. The people now have a voice as strong as anyone you might name. If you're on Twitter, you have exactly the same level of influence as Emmanuel Macron, even if you have fewer followers. You can speak to him, and he to you. Me, he never talks to me, but in principle it's possible. We hadn't anticipated that in putting this direct democracy into effect, we would reveal the idiocy of three quarters of its users! It's really something to be concerned about.

Q. Do you mean that direct democracy does not show people's intellectual potential?

A. Not at all. It's a real problem. So we have to turn back, educate, instruct, guide people to creativity, make them discover complex thoughts, and give them the desire to wrestle with new ideas. That's what a teacher does, normally. We can't just throw up our hands because of social networks, quite the contrary!

Q. What if people don't want to become intelligent, after all? What if they want to react very quickly and emotionally to things, before moving on to something else?

A. Psychologists often warn us against the laziness of simply giving vent to our emotions. An emotion is compacted intelligence. The smarter you are, the more capable you are of complex emotions. We have to stop putting emotion and intelligence in opposition. Someone who uses his intelligence feels more complex emotions than someone who doesn't. Use your intelligence! I don't mean *you* in particular. It's a catchphrase.

Q. Do you have a chance of being heard?

A. None. It's a shame. In the past, people had a taste for the game of chess, a true intellectual sport, an Olympic category, which attested to the fact that you could use your intelligence like your other muscles. It was a fight to the death: "checkmate" means "the king is dead" in Arabic. Only death contained the complete knowledge of all the game's possibilities. Alas, at the present time, so do computers. If death is not the only key to truth, the game becomes pointless. For a long time, we thought its possibilities were inexhaustible, but now we can't play it anymore! This is a catastrophe bequeathed to us by the twentieth century. In any case, it's not we who are intelligent, it's the tools we make. They force us to think things. We've created a language that forces us to think, and that language is more intelligent than us. There's no abstract intelligence, despite what cognitive scientists say. That's false, it's bullshit! Besides, they themselves are offshoots of the instruments they make. To measure . . . It comes as no shock, it's logical, that at any given moment our tools will become more intelligent than us. The primary thing is that we must remain in competition with

them. This is a race we've been running since the dawn of humanity. We're still in it, but I don't know for how much longer. And when I say "we," I don't mean us, the French: but all human beings.

Q. Can we turn stupidity to our advantage? Since all we can do is avoid fools, and we can't change them, should we acknowledge their existence and thank them for something? After all, it's thanks to them that we gain wisdom: the wisdom of keeping a low profile, being patient, indulgent, tolerant. . . .

A. I'm with you, pretty much. I've taught for forty years, to the point that I've been told I was too old (in France, you don't have the right to teach after a certain age, though education is the only place where old people can be useful). At the beginning, you find yourself faced with people who either take you for a guru (which is a catastrophe, a way of burying you alive), or challenge you. When you're young, you're more dynamic but you're impatient, you find it hard to put up with people who don't understand you. You're irritated, furious, you try to convince people, in spite of it all. Over time, it's true that I acquired some patience, and a sort of sympathy for the banality of the world. I tell myself that in music, you have to have a background for the melody to appear. In the same way, stupidity is no more than the background noise that allows us to acquire a little wisdom.

Interview by Jean-François Marmion.

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Foundations and Clinical Applications]; *Cessez de Vous Déprécier! Se Libérer du Syndrome de l'Imposteur* [*Stop Undervaluing Yourself! Shaking the Impostor Complex*], with Kevin Chassangre; and *Mécanismes de Defense et Coping* [*Defense and Coping Mechanisms*], with Henri Chabrol.

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NOTES

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A THEORY OF ASSHOLES

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FROM STUPIDITY TO HOGWASH

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ON STUPIDITY IN THE BRAIN

1. A recent article of high caliber was voluntarily suppressed by members of the neurological community, particularly those affiliated with university hospitals. The article reports that taking early retirement increases the risk of contracting Alzheimer’s by 15 percent. Out of solidarity, I will not give my sources, for fear that they might be misused and wrongly interpreted by the French government’s health ministry.

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WHEN VERY SMART PEOPLE BELIEVE VERY DUMB THINGS

- [1.](#) Gérald Bronner, *La Démocratie des Crédules [The Democracy of the Gullible]* (Paris: Presse Universitaires de France, 2013), 296.
- [2.](#) Miron Zuckerman, Jordan Silberman, and Judith A. Hall, “The Relation Between Intelligence and Religiosity: A Meta-Analysis and Some Proposed Explanations,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 17, no. 4 (August 2013): 325–54.
- [3.](#) Heather A. Butler, “Who Do Smart People Do Foolish Things? Intelligence Is Not the Same as Critical Thinking and the Difference Matters,” *Scientific American*, October 3, 2017.
- [4.](#) *Les Lois de l’Attraction Mentale [The Laws of Mental Attraction]*, directed by Loki Jackal (Nancy, France: La Tronche en Biais, November 2017), documentary.
- [5.](#) John Stachel, David C. Cassidy, Robert Schulmann, eds., *Collected Papers of Albert Einstein, The Early Years 1899–1902* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987).

WHY WE FIND MEANING IN COINCIDENCES

- [1.](#) Nicolas Gaufrid, *Vous Avez Dit Hasard?: Entre Mathématiques et Psychologie [Did You Say Luck?: Between Mathematics and Psychology]* (Paris: Humensis, 2014).
- [2.](#) *Editor’s Note*: A theory elaborated by Anne Ancelin Schützenberger, inspired by psychoanalysis, psychotherapy, and psychodynamics, which proposes that tensions and traumatizing events endured by one’s ancestors can condition the psychological problems and behaviors of a subject.
- [3.](#) *Editor’s Note*: A meaningful coincidence for the observer, produced by “significant and creatively productive chance,” according to Carl Gustav Jung.

THE LANGUAGE OF STUPIDITY

- [1.](#) Picard, *De la Connerie*.
- [2.](#) George Orwell, *1984* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1949).
- [3.](#) Éric Chauvier, *Les Mots Sans les Choses [Words Without Things]* (Paris: Editions Allia, 2014), 76.
- [4.](#) It is this “indifference to reality” that is, according to Harry G. Frankfurt, “the very essence of stupidity.” Cf. Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 34.
- [5.](#) Claude Hagège, *L’Homme de Paroles, [The Man of Words]* (Paris: Fayard, 1985), 202.
- [6.](#) Cf. Jacques Dewitte, “La Lignification de la Langue” [The Lignification of Language], *Hermès, La Revue*, no. 58 (March 2010): 48–49.
- [7.](#) René Zazzo, who calls the inability of the subject to “decenter” himself and “to see through other’s eyes” one of the principal sources of stupidity. Cf. “Qu’est-ce que la Connerie,

Madame?” [What Is Stupidity, Madame?] in *Où en Est la Psychologie de l’Enfant? [Where Are We in Child Psychology?]* by René Zazzo (Paris: Denoël, 1983), 52.

8. Statements marked by stupidity and empty words chiefly reflect herd instincts. Theodor Adorno writes that they “seem to guarantee, even as they leave your mouth, that you’re not doing what you’re doing,” which is bleating “with the crowd.” Cf. Theodor Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2003), 60.

STUPIDITY AND NARCISSISM

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WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT ASSHOLES?

1. In the context of this article, the word “asshole,” used generically, enfolds the female counterpart.
2. The inclination to mock his subject will lead him again and again to disavow his role, saying, “He’s just being a wimp,” or “Quit playing the victim,” or in a still more cunning spin, “Victimization is a serious charge.”

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First published 2018 in French as *Psychologie de la connerie* by
Sciences Humaines Editions, Auxerre Cedex

This electronic edition first published in the UK 2020 by Macmillan
an imprint of Pan Macmillan
The Smithson, 6 Briset Street, London EC1M 5NR
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-1-5290-5384-5

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