



Homo stupiens: The Self-Desructive Nature of Human Culture

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Abstract

Stupidity is the learned inability to learn: That is—a normal, dysfunctional learning process which occurs when a schema formed by linguistic biases and social norms acts via the neurotic paradox to establish a positive feedback system which can render behavior irrelevant and carry detached actions to maladaptive excesses.

Keywords Human behaviour; Intelligence; Environmental contingencies; Stupidity; Functional disorder

Introduction

Who are we? [1] What are we? Why are we? [2] When seeking answers to these eternal if confounding questions, we tend to flatter ourselves by being accurate when it suits us and partial when it pleases us. In terms of our technological ability to use tools to make tools, we are truly awesome. In more general cognitive terms, our intellectual capacity to solve complex problems justifies the gratifying conclusion that we are intelligent. However, if this is true, it is only part of the truth.

It is also true that young people are turning to drugs and suicide for the escape they bring from a world in which adults preach peace [3] while surrounded by criminal violence, drug and child abuse, high school massacres, gangland vendettas, piracy on the high seas, organized prostitution and sexual slavery. More people than ever are in prisons and mental institutions and vandalism are as widespread as alcoholism is rampant [4]. Such basic social problems appear and reappear generation after generation in culture after culture. Not only have we failed to match our ability in mechanics and engineering with a comparable level of expertise in political and social relations, but our vaunted technological and intellectual genius is readily bent to destructive purposes which harm rather than help people. Thus, all things considered, we look pretty stupid [5].

Although students of human behavior have pointedly ignored our rampant stupidity, many have made careers by pounding intelligence into the ground. Rooms could be filled with the books written on the topic. No one could even keep up with the scientific literature produced in the field. Yet, as vast as this literature is, it leads to but one overwhelming conclusion — and nobody knows what it is [6]. The only thing we know for sure is that whatever intelligence is [7], it has never been tested on intelligence tests. So even if we are intelligent, we are not intelligent enough to know what intelligence is, so we do not know who and what we are.

If it is understandable that so much energy and effort should be devoted to the scientific study of intelligence, it is somewhat bewildering to find the much more common, actually dangerous, costly [8] and potentially devastating phenomenon of stupidity totally neglected. One could read the entire literature in the social sciences without finding a single reference to it. At best, it is dismissed as the

opposite of intelligence, but this just sheds more shade on the topic. Certainly, a matter of this importance deserves a fair hearing in its own right.

In this work, we will use a mixture of two approaches to answer the question “What is stupidity?” One is to consider the conditions Barbara Tuchman, in *The March of Folly*, deemed necessary for an act to qualify as a folly: 1.) Ample, relevant information must be available to the performer, who is in a knowledgeable state about the given situation; 2.) the act must be maladaptive for the performer – a factor in the analysis of folly being “Best interest”, with folly being the achievement of “Worst interest”; and 3.) there must be other possible ways of reacting available. Although we will eventually discard all of these considerations as inadequate for the purpose of defining stupidity scientifically, as we examine and then dismiss them, we will learn much about the limitations of science [9] and the Lamarkian, maladaptive essence of human nature and culture.

The other approach is to answer that stupidity is the learned inability to learn: That is – a normal, dysfunctional learning process which occurs when a schema formed by linguistic biases and social norms act via the neurotic paradox to establish a positive feedback system which can render behavior irrelevant and carry detached actions to maladaptive excesses. This article will elucidate the interactions of the enumerated specifics of this commonplace process by which learning corrupts learning. In this context, note that stupidity usually manifests itself in two interacting functions of the human psyche the self-deceptive inability to gather and process information accurately [10] and the neurotic inability to match behavior to environmental contingencies. Further, it has epistemological, social and moral dimensions.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Self-Deception: (S-d) In an epistemological context, stupidity is the failure to gather and use information efficiently and there-fore is the illegitimate brainchild of self-deception [11]. Traditionally, self-deception has been considered only in terms of the use or abuse of information present within a cognitive system — that is, a person has to “Know” something in order to deceive himself about it. However, we must acknowledge it is also self-deceptive (i.e., misleading) and usually self-defeating for one to refuse to gather new, relevant information about matters of importance [12]. In any context, s-d comprises such an essential element of human nature that our capacity for it is

apparently infinite: We like agreeable data and nothing is as agreeable as data which confirm our beliefs [13].

Not surprisingly, behaviorists have coined unnecessary explanations for the pervasiveness of s-d. All port (1937) posited a survival advantage due to the delay it permits a person to cope with unpleasant truths – although how delaying coping promotes survival is unclear. Trivers (1976) suggested s-d helps deceive others in that one who is unconscious of his own motives is less likely to betray them to competitors/enemies. Further, Kra-kauer (1978) reasoned that s-d promotes rational analysis by separating disturbing percepts in the unconscious from awareness in the superegoish, presumably and sometimes logical brain [14].

Beyond s-d, when considering stupidity in relation to knowledge and data processing, it is imperative to distinguish between the related phenomena of “Agnosticism” and “Ignorance”. Both words may be used to indicate the condition of “Not knowing”, but they describe entirely different ways of maintaining that condition. Pure, innocent agnosticism is not really stupid, in that it does not indicate an inability or unwillingness to learn. Agnosticism is the cognitive state when information is physically inaccessible (unavailable) to an individual or organization. Relevant data are simply not present in the environment in a form discernible to the sensory apparatus of the living system (person, group, etc.). For example, humans cannot see light in the ultra-violet and infrared bands, so we are agnostic (rather than stupid or ignorant) for missing any such environmental cues which may be there [15].

The newly coined term “Agnorance” covers the situation when a system has information which does not get into the decision making process. This occurred in the Roman Empire in the 4th century, when the bureaucracy kept the emperor from knowing what was going on: [16] Information was in the system; it just did not make it to the top.

Pure ignorance, on the other hand, usually indicates stupidity in that data are present but unheeded [17]. A classic example of this was aviatrix Amy Johnson, who, in 1930, presumed to fly from London to Sydney. As she later wrote, “The prospect did not frighten me, because I was so appallingly ignorant that I never realized in the least what I had taken on” [18].

The reason ignorance does not always indicate stupidity is that some information could seriously disrupt existing psycho/social systems were it to penetrate the cognitive defenses so exclusion may sometimes be somewhat adaptive. This is really a rather complex and imperfect process, as stimuli must be at least superficially perceived (i.e., screened) before being rejected by the system as being threatening to the existing belief structure or “Schema”, the standard picture each of us has based on our individual personal, sensory experiences: [19] it is used to evaluate incoming data with an inherent bias toward maintaining its own integrity and proclivity for inventing data to confirm if not complete a form or image – as in Gestalt psychology. Some disturbing data do get through without the mind’s awareness although motivation can play a role in ignorance if some relevant, available information is prevented from getting “Into the system” (i.e., accepted and incorporated into the cognitive program). This is likely to occur when a person senses that learning more about a particular matter might force him to experience anxiety, feel guilty, upset his existing psychic equilibrium [20] and perhaps undergo the most traumatic, terrifying ordeal one can be compelled to endure — he might have to change his mind [21].

In fact, recent research shows that misinformed people when exposed to valid facts rarely change their minds. For example, the demotion of Pluto from the rank of planet pops to mind: Not only Plutonians but many humans found this quite disturbing [22]. Even incredible, people often become more strongly set in their false beliefs when confronted with contradictory facts [23]. Thus, facts can actually make a misinformed belief stronger because admitting one is wrong is psychologically difficult if not unacceptable. When there is accommodation to new info, it is at first timid, minimal and as conservative as possible [24].

Knowledge

While knowing is nevertheless supposed to be good, there can be so much knowledge that the quality of information processing suffers. When buried in the New Age bane TMI (too much info), people limit themselves by specializing sacrificing breadth for depth, with each doing well if he knows something about anything. In terms of quality of information, people debase themselves by qualifying their standards sacrificing validity for appeal, with each accepting whatever is suitable often leading to counter-info [25] i.e., misinformation. As Ronald Reagan once noted, the problem with liberals was not that they were ignorant but that what they knew was wrong [26]. So, we must bear in mind that both the validity and quantity of what is known are equally important.

Unfortunately, these compromises not only fail to protect people from an overload of trivia but can keep them from knowing what is going on in their world. Worse yet, this overload can be self-created as happened with the American intelligence community after the truck-bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut in Oct., 1983. The intelligence postmortem showed a need to connect known dots, but, to the detriment of the victims of 9/11, the intelligence establishment gathered more dots [27].

The process of dot gathering is part of the general intellectual process which has been encapsulated by the acronym “OODA”, standing for Observation, Orientation, Decision and Action [28]. Observation is obviously the process of gathering dots. Orientation is the process of integrating gathered dots into the schema. When dots are rejected or invented for the sake of the schema’s integrity, stupidity is invited if not invented, as attempts to make observations fit preconceptions increase the risk of disorientation [29]. Thus, a posfeed system can induce rigidity and/or irrelevance for lack of corrective information in a constantly changing cultural environment.

A classic case was Lyndon Johnson in 1960, when he refused to listen to anyone who disagreed with this analysis that John Kennedy would not have enough delegates at the Democratic Presidential Convention to win on the first ballot. In that vein, a staffer who reported that Kennedy had Wyoming sewn up was fired: consequently, fewer and fewer people told him the truth as they saw it [30], leaving him to hear only those who told him the truth as he saw it.

Generally, an open system can process only so much incoming information so fast and that should be important material, not irrelevant (e.g., sexual orientation or religious affiliation of co-workers) or insignificant detail. However, not only are systems sometimes overwhelmed by sheer volume of information [31], but important material present and known is not always brought to conscious light. At an institutional level, the RAF experienced this problem in France in the spring of 1940, when intelligence simply was not getting to those who needed it in time to act upon it partially because of organizational

complexity [32]. Worse yet is the penchant of leaders like W for “Deniability” rather than accountability [33] – they are not interested so much in doing a job as in shifting blame for failure elsewhere.

At the national level, every government has its covert band of operatives who skulk around doing whatever is necessary and improper. The general population and even most government employees are better off not knowing what is going on because the CIA, James Bonds, etc. skulk around betraying the ideals which hold civilization together, so their actions may be hidden from us for the good of our leaders if not us.

At the individual level, knowing certain otherwise innocuous things may be suspicious, as a completely innocent Mid-Eastern detainee could find when being interrogated by overzealous anti-terrorist federal officials. “You know that? How do you know that? You must be connected to terrorists!”

As many doctors well know, too much candor can also be disastrous. There was a case of a terminal cancer patient who was given a useless drug (Krebiozen) and recovered. Upon learning the drug was useless [34], he had a relapse. Given a super-strength placebo, he again recovered, only to have a final and fatal relapse when learning that drug was useless. This was a case in which belief worked a miracle cure; it was knowledge that killed.

As important as the quantity or quality of knowledge present in a system is the attitude toward gathering more. Often, people are hampered by their reluctance to learn more, although usually learning is helpful — particularly if it leads to a stronger, more inclusive belief structure. On the other hand, learning more may threaten one with having to change his ego-defining schema, which most is reluctant to do.

Another aspect of “Knowing” is that a person has had some experience which prepares him for the decision at hand – that is, he has some idea about what he should do. For example, when, in late 2011, Penn state football coach Joe Paterno was faced with a charge of sexual misconduct brought against one of his assistants, part of his explanation/defense for his (mis)-handling of the situation was that he had never had to deal with anything like this crisis before [35]. His action might not be considered stupid because, in this case, he really had no idea how he should proceed. While no situation is totally new and there should be some basic principles involved which give a clue as to how to deal with any situation, some experiences go off the graph of expectation leaving a deer in the headlights to wonder what schema if any to extend to a given set of novel circumstances [36].

Finally, we must throw “Forgetting” into the mix. A lesson may be learned, only to be lost over time usually due to being left unused – you lose what you do not use. A modern example was the lesson the American army learned in Vietnam regarding insurgency: Fifty years later, it had to be relearned in the Mid-East [37]. On the positive side, relearning a lesson is usually quicker than was the original learning process.

Emotions

In all situations, the desire to know is often tempered by a sense that learning might be more emotionally disturbing than helpful. This complicates any consideration of stupidity, when “Knowing” is one of the defining criteria for the condition. If a person does not know what is going on, he might do something maladaptive, but it is not stupid as such. However, if a person is making a point not to find out relevant

in-formation in his environment, is that not even stupider? If it would seem so, bear in mind we all have defense mechanisms to protect us from awareness of embarrassing cognitions and psycho/cultural mechanisms to help us cope with the unsettling cognizance of our own inevitable death [38]. Thus, the condition of “Knowing” appears to be of little value when one attempts to determine if an act was stupid or not.

Once people gather information, they treat it in one of two ways depending on whether they like it or not. The double standard is known as “Confirmation bias” and is quite simple: That which is confirming is accepted [39]; that which is contradictory is rejected [40]. To put it another way, the standard for evidence required to change one’s mind is higher than that to confirm one’s beliefs. A prime example of this phenomenon was the double standard stupidly applied to information regarding the planned invasion of Iraq by President George W. Bush in Mar., 2003. A former CIA official stated, “When it comes to information supporting the invasion of Iraq, the bar was low. When it comes to intelligence that doesn’t say Iraq has weapons of mass destruction, the bar was incredibly high...” To make matters worse, top leaders at the CIA played to the White House audience and highlighted the intelligence 43 and his minions wanted to hear. Further, once intelligence was provided to the administration, it elevated any rationale which justified invasion and, on the other hand, suppressed any – i.e., the absence of WMD—which cast doubt on it [41].

It might be ideal if all data were treated equally, but personal biases predispose people to be either selectively ignorant or unconsciously inclusive [42] to the point of invention. During the Civil War, Union General George McClellan chronically indulged in the former condition by always insisting he was facing forces vastly superior to his own and his intelligence staff fell into line by obligingly providing him with estimates of enemy troop strength which confirmed his belief all valid evidence to the contrary[43]. On the other hand, 43’s regents created an alternative reality for him by never letting him see any information showing they (and he) were wrong [44] – an element of a positive feedback system which worked pretty well until August 2005, when TV news coverage of hurricane Katrina blew away insiders’ self-serving illusions about how well the federal government relief efforts were working on the Gulf coast.

Relevance

In most situations, ignorance promotes a common characteristic of stupid decisions — irrelevance. When stupidity is in full glory, the most discrepant cognitions are somehow matched up in the most implausible ways. Further, obvious relevancies are ignored, so the behavioral world takes on the bizarre, chaotic quality of a Wonderland gone berserk. Fantasized cause-effect and means-ends relationships are coined at random while real ones are blithely ignored. The monumental is trivialized and the crucial disdained as an afflicted mind locks in on and pursues its own worst interest with happy abandon.

Unfortunately, the determination of “Relevance” is quite judgmental, so stupidity is inherently an arbitrary/subjective phenomenon or as the eponymous Emma observed in Jane Austin’s novel, “...folly is not always folly”. Deeds once considered stupid may turn out to be brilliant. On the other hand, achievements initially hailed as works of genius may later be exposed as patently moronic [45] (e.g., the Maginot Line and the Edsel).

While much is made of the human brain's ability to associate various cognitions (ideas) in relevant cause-effect relationships, the amount of fatuity in the world suggests that the brain might also prevent or inhibit such functional associations while it pro-motes irrelevant connections. The child's brain begins by treating all possibilities as equally probable. Learning couples certain stimuli with certain reactions. No behaviorist's model of functional rewards, however, could not possibly account for the diversity of the world's religions nor does the battle science have constantly had to wage against agnosticism and the oft theologically induced intellectual sin of ignorance [46].

In this cognitive context, it appears that stupidity is a very normal way for the human mind to compromise with its own emotional inability to deal directly with information coming from the physical environment in the context of emotional re-wards from the psychosocial environment. This is a schizophrenic reaction which permits us to cope with distinct but interacting features of the human condition. For each of us, the invention and development of our special strategies are functions of a commitment to a particular lifestyle determined by both our general culture and our specific personal experiences.

Neurotic paradox

(N-dox) In terms of intellectual development, stupidity may justly be viewed as both adaptive and maladaptive. In the short run, it is adaptive in that it helps an individual adjust to his cultural group's values by permitting him to accept any obvious contradictions between the real and ideal. As a means to short-term adaptation, stupidity is a classic example of the "Neurotic Paradox" which promotes behavioral patterns which are subject to immediate short-term reinforcement although the long-term results will be negative [47]. A related drawback is that short-term errors may be hard to overcome in the long run [48] if the immediate decision sets you off on a bad behavioral pathway which becomes progressively more and more difficult to escape from later. Addictions to drugs or "Pleasure" would be commonplace examples of this basic physio/psychological principle of learning and life [49]. As philosopher Honoré de Balzac noted, "Pleasure is like certain drugs, to continue to obtain the same result, one must double the dose and death or brutalization is contained in the last one" [50].

If stupidity is adaptive in helping one fit into his immediate surroundings, it is maladaptive over the long run, as it inhibits innovations and constructive criticism of the social environment. Individuals adjust to the group, but the group loses its capacity to adjust to its surroundings as members sacrifice their individual integrity, insight and ideas and conform to prevailing mores for the rewards of social acceptance.

Of course, the bottom line, long-term net effect of stupidity is negative, but its universal presence cannot be understood without recognition of its role in helping people adapt to their immediate, short-term social situation. Thus, it becomes clear how there can be so much stupidity around although it is, in the long run, maladaptive. Survival within the system is promoted if one is so stupid as to accept the system's stupidities. Also, short-term survival of the system (institution, group, etc.) is promoted through enhanced social cohesion. However, these immediate gains are countered by the long-term loss of induced inefficiency of information processing. Our cultural life is really a very human trade off among these three dependent features: 1.) Objective, rational, logical processing of

information; 2.) psychological gratification and self-image of the individual and 3.) group cooperation and social cohesion.

With the qualification of arbitrariness in mind, it should be noted that most people who find stupidity in others judge efficiency of processing information and usually do not even consider the emotional and social dimension of decisions affecting individual and institutional life. Accordingly, what might be regarded as stupidity may in fact be a healthy, short-term compromise with psychic satisfaction and group cohesion? Real stupidity comes when one factor (information processing, psychic comfort or social cohesion) disrupts the others.

Extremes

One of the reasons a student of human behavior has difficulty generalizing about stupidity is that both opposite extremes can lead to stupid behavior. In a given situation, it may be stupid to do too much too soon or too little too late [51], so if being a day late and a dollar short can be disastrous, so too can being the first to move too quickly. As Bill Gates observed, "Microsoft does all the stupid things first" and then other companies profit from those mistakes [52]. Just as overreaction and under reaction may both be counter-productive, hypersensitivity and insensitivity can both have negative effects. The Golden Mean may indeed be the best policy in most situations, but that leaves contradictory opposites having equally negative results. Ergo, the student of stupidity, when citing a cause for the condition, must automatically ask himself if the opposite extreme on the conservative/inventive schematic continuum might not also have produced a similar effect. It can be equally stupid to rely on superstition as depend on routine; to spurn efforts at improvement and reform as have exaggerated confidence in given individuals, organizations or tactics [53].

Viewed the other way, most actions can be criticized as stupid from either side. For example, de-Bathification of Iraq after the successful invasion of coalition forces in 2003 has been generally denounced as leading to civil disorder and political upheaval [54]. However, some critics maintain it was the correct policy but should have been done sooner. The final criterion of judgment of any act must be its (in)effectiveness in accomplishing a given goal, stated or not, without inducing negative side-effects, which are more likely to ensue after more extreme rather than moderate actions performed sooner than later.

As long as a functional balance between polar extremes is maintained, stupidity can be viewed as a normal part of the human experience [55]. It is a mechanism of cultural selection which will be found wherever people speak, organize and act. Static human systems usually cannot cope with themselves nor – as in the case of Rome – the conditions they create. An organization evolves to deal with a set of given circumstances and, in at-tempting to solve perceived problems, creates new problems. It then either adapts to the conditions it creates or stupidly tries to maintain itself until it is replaced by the next institution in the hopefully endless cycle of human organization.

Positive feedback

(Posfeed) It is important to bear in mind that such stupidity in moderation may be an effective defense mechanism which promotes self-confidence in an individual and cooperation within a group. It is only when it goes to excess that it tends to become stupidly maladaptive, but it is precisely this which is rare in nature [56] but

made probable when a behavioral or cultural trend develops into a self-rewarding, positive feedback system as happened, for example, in Germany in the 1930's. When this occurs, a pattern of activity (e.g., belligerent nationalism/rationalism) becomes rewarding in and of itself regardless of its detrimental extrinsic consequences [57]. Behavior may then go to extremes because it is reinforced by the schema, which functions as an intrinsically gratifying, internal reward system for such conduct. With the waning of critical self-examination, individuals or groups may become victims of their own excesses as the confirmation bias of inner directed behavior becomes self-defeating [58]. The fact is criticism is necessary and healthy [59].

However, a dysfunctional imbalance develops when, through internally induced, sustaining, self-reinforcement, a system gradually becomes insulated from moderating influences of the external environment until it becomes a perpetual motion machine whose prime if not sole purpose is to stay in motion [60]. This is exactly what stupidity is — a schematically generated, self-deceptive substitution of an internal feedback mechanism which gradually and progressively disrupts the monitoring of behavioral impact on the environment, thus leading to poor decision making as the belief system (i.e., schema) becomes increasingly out of kilter and at odds with and unaffected by available but unheeded evidence of its deleterious effects [61]. A classic example was the Labor Party's incessant power grabs in Britain in the late 1940's, when every self-induced problem was used as an excuse for another power-grab, which led to even more problems [62].

In such cases, indulgers think themselves immune to Healey's Law—when you get to the bottom of a hole, stop digging [63]. The feedback loop has broken down so they do not realize further digging is counter-productive so they keep at it. As psychologist Charles Ponzi (of Ponzi Scheme infamy) said: "A man always wants more. More money. More possessions. More power. The more he buys, the more he wants to buy. It's human nature" [64]. The same principle can drive a social fad to a mania, as happened with the goldfish-swallowing jag in America in 1939: It started with one, went to three and eventually to the hundreds [65]. Basically, this positive feedback principle is fundamental part of our psych cultural nature at the very least.

To wit thousands of years earlier, Greek historian Polybius (204-122 B.C.) recognized this general problem in his analysis of various forms of government which, if left alone, go to similar self-defeating extremes. Monarch tends to tyranny; aristocracy to oligarchy; democracy to mobocracy [66]. He also found the solution: checks and balances provided by cooperatively competing administrative, legislative and judicial branches. Hail Madison.

An alternative but sinister arrangement is a mutually rein-forcing system of two cultural/psychological trends. The science of global warming paring up with the mass media's need for grabby stories is an example. Each one piques the other to greater excesses: More research produces more doomsday scenarios which justify more scientific studies.

To put this all another way, it may or may not be stupid to make an error; however it definitely is stupid not to learn from a mistake but rather repeat it. As Cicero observed 2,000 year ago, "To err is human, to persevere in error is only (sic) the act of a fool." A classic example of this was the commitment of the popular press to the erroneous theory that high cholesterol causes heart problems: Research results to the contrary were round ignored by the mass media in the cause of supporting bogus dogma [67]. One concrete contribution of this article might be to help everyone recognize stupid conduct and prevent its

repetition by learning from it and filling in with knowledge where the original feedback loop broke down. The general process is for those with a socially condoned, linguistically acceptable theory at first to adapt the evidence to the posfeed theory—even to the point of ignoring evidence right in front of their noses [68]/eyes – and then, second, adapt (i.e., tweek) the theory to fit the evidence (e.g. add epicycles to the heliocentric model of the solar system), and, if necessary, finally junk the theory when it, via the n-dox goes to maladaptive excess and then ultimately breaks down because it no longer can cover irrefutable, factual evidence and perhaps even causes real, deleterious consequences.

Cooperation

This breakdown often follows from stupidity's initial success in creating an arbitrary world that will maximize group cooperation in a counter-productive cause. This can be done by blocking disruptive input – like refusing to recognize A causes B – or by inventing pleasing images and ideas – by creating causal connections which do not exist [69]. Such tactics may prove to be maladaptive in the long run, but this is the price for the immediate reward of enhanced cognitive consonance and social cohesion.

As effective as stupidity may be in promoting intra-group cooperation, it disrupts a system's capacity for effective learning. Understanding is sacrificed for the sake of emotional comfort and cultural stability. The drawback of this intellectually limiting complacency is that it all but guarantees frictional competition and conflict with other equally maladapted individuals and groups.

One might reasonably expect that such competition and conflict would weed out stupidity so that the more intelligent individuals and systems would eventually prevail. However, it appears that there is at least as much stupidity now as ever before, so it seems that competition merely replaces one stupid system with another. If this leaves people with the option of being ruled by a bunch of idiots or a pack of fools, they can be excused from being too concerned about the difference. On the other hand, anyone who wants to understand what makes everyone else so stupid would do well to consider the factors which contribute to this most common mental state.

Language

If it is human to err, it is even more human to speak; it is in language systems that we find a major source of human stupidity. Language has two basic functions in society: it permits people to exchange information as it promotes cooperation. Stupidity necessarily follows from the compromise reached by people as they balance these two factors. When people speak, they usually both impart information and convey their group identity. This social aspect of language expresses common values and presumes common assumptions. It also means that critical information is often couched in terms and tone acceptable to all — which in turn means a lot of criticism is muted and stupidity glossed over if not induced.

Much is made of the brain as a system for processing information, but there is relatively little interest in how information is not used or is misused. One common assumption is that if knowledge is misused, there was some breakdown in the rational system of the mind. However, much of the mishandling of data is systematic and based on the way words can freeze understanding [70] and verbal social values render language a cultural rather than computerized processing medium.

While it is difficult to study how people do not do something, we must consider how and why people do not use certain information readily available to them. The answer has to be that some facts are emotionally disturbing and would be emotionally/socially disruptive if permitted to pass through the cerebral word processor. This emotional element throws off judgment — or provides a shifting basis for analysis. It is also the source of the “Motivated ignorance” which characterizes the human propensity to be not just uninformed about ego-defining issues but biased by the values implicit in the linguistic system used to process data. Such bias can be deliberately induced as when Newt Gingrich’s political action committee GOPAC published a campaign pamphlet in 1994 which suggested using “Contrasting words” (e.g. betray, cheat, collapse, corruption, crisis, decay, destruction, failure, hypocrisy, incompetent, in-secure, liberal, lie, sick, etc.) [71] as convenient labels for Democrats’ actions.

Evidence of awareness of the importance of this principle came to light during World War II, after the German’s devastating raid on Coventry led to the coining of the term “To concentrize”—meaning to devastate. The German Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, made a deliberate effort to prevent the term from gaining international usage because he sensed the negative implications that would have. Likewise, Adolf Eichmann chose to cloak the deportation of German Jews and inmates of mental institutions to Concentration Camps by using the term “People emigrated elsewhere”. This raises the questions, whom were they trying to fool and why? Why were the Nazis not proud of what they were doing? Why not brag about it? Did they know in their heart of hearts how wrong and bad and evil it was and they were? Were they afraid that they would lose the war and that someday, someone would hold them accountable?

To put the worm on the other foot, Heinrich Himmler denounced bourgeois values—e.g., that Jews are humans and that women are entitled to some deference. Members of the SS were explicitly not to be encumbered by such absolute rubbish and over-refined civilized decadence. Rather, they would champion the German people.

Not only the Nazis but organizations and institutions in general commonly develop their own argot. Thus, in the Pentagon, “Burn” does not mean “Light on fire” but “Copy”; “Chop” does not mean cut into pieces with an axe or clever but “To sign on” to a proposal or program. Finally, you get the self-contradictory “To sign off on”, which means to approve.

In general, language is basically a coding system people use to accomplish two interrelated ends: convey information and maintain or increase group cohesion. Language categorizes experience so that generalizations about the environment are possible, but the labels (words) used for these categories often pick up emotional connotations which disrupt the processing procedure — expressing feelings while distorting perceptions [72,73]. The evaluation of the informational component of language then becomes inextricably bound up with the emotional life of the speakers/users and shapes attenuated cognitions [74].

It is this emotional factor which precludes objectivity within any linguistic system. Hence, stupidity is best construed as a social defense mechanism parallel to the Freudian defense systems which protect individuals from an overload of awareness. Just as many Freudian defense mechanisms are generated within individuals who fear self-knowledge [75], stupidity develops within a society to inhibit unacceptably accurate cognitions of both personal and institutional ineptitude. Along with idiosyncratic forms of individual stupidity,

members of a society exhibit collective forms of idiocy (e.g., suppression of dissidents or embarrassing news) within the context of — or reaction against — social values.

Filtering

The induced subjectivity underlines the essential social nature of stupidity. Society defines awareness of factuality as it funnels fictions into our consciousness. The mind is really a psychologically conditioned filter which a given experience may or may not penetrate, depending on the value structure of a particular culturally condoned and constructed prism and the nature of the incoming data.

In virtually all cases, stupidity is perpetrated subconsciously, in that the agent cannot sense that his actions are counter-productive in terms of his/her self-sustaining set of values. What he does sense is an emotional satisfaction that precludes any objective analysis on his part (and which is incomprehensible to any outside observer) because one does not consciously engage in self-analysis when cognitions are successfully shunted into emotionally acceptable if irrelevant categories.

In the rational/intelligent model of behavior, discriminative stimuli guide actions so that behavior is “Appropriate” and likely to lead to positive results: behavior is considered to be under “Stimulus control” [76] and this model is actually fairly descriptive of how the mind routinely handles unimportant matters. However, the more a matter is an ego-defining issue, the greater the role of the schema vis-a-vis immediate stimuli in shaping attendant behavior, with the result that actions become increasingly inappropriate and even counterproductive. To put it the other way, stupid behavior becomes increasingly common as a schema blocks the perception of impinging stimuli and an understanding of issues and/or creates substitute stimuli and idiotic ideas through fantasies [77]. Perception trumps reality when the schema becomes rigidly maladaptive and self-sustaining as with Presidents Wilson, Hoover and Lyndon Johnson, who clung to failed policies and dysfunctional schemas when it was clear even to their advisors that in each case the selected course of action were failing [78].

The basic problem with the rational/intellectual model of the brain as a computer is the presence of self-sustaining bugs. Computers may or may not have bugs, but the brain has built-in emotional biases which fade in and out depending on the nature of the “Input”. The appropriate computer model in this vein would not be a bug but an electronically unstable machine with a defective program which keeps the hard drive steady by preventing major alterations of its programs. In human terms, correcting a program (i.e., changing one’s mind) is necessarily emotionally involving and therefore done only reluctantly. In computer terms, any program is inherently maladaptive because of its necessary and inevitable impact on perception [79] (i.e., the process of data input and analysis) [80].

Perception

The act of perception can be broken down into two separate steps. First, information gets into the system as a result of selective attentional processes. The brain does not treat all external stimuli equally. Perception is a process of directed discrimination, with stimuli deemed “Important” getting attention denied the trivial. However, what is deemed important is in no way a function of objectivity, since the emotional component of information interferes with the accuracy of its hand-ling. Some stimuli get favored treatment and are

emphasized while others are ignored. Generally, inference can perform the job of perception by filling in missing information when incoming data are insufficient or incompleton [81]. The paranoid may perceive something trivial as threatening so as to justify his fear.

Alternatively, someone else might pass over potentially upsetting stimuli as too disturbing to contemplate.

Speech writer Richard Goodwin made two summary statements of stupidity when dealing with Vietnam. One came when he called a Pentagon troop estimate “A guess derived from speculation informed by ignorance and fueled by desire” [82]. The other described his reaction to President Johnson’s “Gulf of Tonkin” speech in August, 1964 as “...the product of ignorance blended with wishful thinking and dulled perceptions [83].”

The dulling and skewing of perceptions occurs partially be-cause after stimuli enter the system, they are then organized into “Meaningful” units, with “Meaningful” being as arbitrary as anything can be. This process of organizing is linguistic categorizing, which commonly results in illusions, stereotypes and misperceptions. The net result is that selected data are arbitrarily construed to conform to the existing cognitive program — the self-sustaining, self-promoting schema [84].

Schema

The schema is the ego-defining belief structure of the individual [85]. It is the frame of reference for the perception of stimuli and defines the behavioral repertoire available for responses to them. The schema provides both general and specific expectations about their relations and affects memory by limiting recall of stored information but, as compensation, may fill in information when experience with an object/event is limited [86]. It is modifiable by experience as the individual interacts with his/her environment [87] and minor adjustments are quite common and occur with little or no emotional reaction or awareness.

The schema is a verbal/behavioral construct through which situations are perceived in a linguistic context which systematically distorts incoming information so as to reinforce itself at the expense of contradictory, disturbing data. This is the basic mechanism of stupidity, as it necessarily causes people to be out of sync with their environment. The schema is a self-sustaining cognitive paradigm which maintains its emotional base by misperceiving the environment through verbal labeling of stimuli and cognitions. It has something of a hypnotic effect, focusing attention on schema confirming percepts so that these data can be processed while reality testing on the rest of the perceptual field is suspended. The garnered data then serve to strengthen the schema as they are incorporated into it.

As a function of experience, the schema can both help and hinder the individual dealing with problems in the environment. The schema is an advantage when the person confronts a problem similar to one already solved, as each time it gets easier to deal successfully with such situations. However, the schema may limit insight — the act of pulling together various facts into novel relationships. In this sense, experience and the created schema can inhibit innovation, limit perception by stereotyping [88] and contribute to the persistence of behavior which was adaptive but has become irrelevant.

Again, we must emphasize the inherent arbitrariness of the entire phenomenon. There is no particular virtue in holding or changing a given schema except relative to the environment over time. This, in

turn, is an uncertain base, the perception of which is confounded by linguistic bias.

Judgment

Stupidity thus results both from and in perceptual limits on learning which prevent a system from recognizing its own limitations. A new idea is not judged objectively by an independent standard but is regarded primarily as a challenge to the prevailing ego/social system. This is an emotionally based, usually subconscious reaction. Only secondarily can the cognitive content of new information be processed consciously and rationally on its actual merits.

When pondering the passing of many great human institutions down through the ages, one must conclude that most failed to adapt to changing conditions. What is not so obvious is that the new conditions were often induced by innovations produced by the institutions themselves. The development of the clock and schedule by Benedictine monks provide an obscure but apt example of this point: They both eventually enhanced the secularization of time with the rise of commercialism to the ultimate detriment of the Church [89].

Generally, turnover of organizations is inherent in the human conditions to the degree that the prevailing schema limits values to those appropriate to the circumstances present when it developed. These values unduly sustain the status quo by preventing recognition of problems created by the impact of the institution. This perceptual failure occurs concurrently with the general schematic restriction on the development of any novel modes of thought or behavior. Indeed, one of the sad ironies of cultural life is that most innovators must fight the system in order to improve it. Very few organizations encourage innovation, so most transcendent achievements first have to overcome entrenched opposition from the establishment.

Although we all delight in the triumphs of the crackpots who contributed to the advance of civilization, it is impossible to appreciate the tragedies of those who failed not because they were wrong but because they could not overcome the built-in idiocy of their cultural environment. When stupidity reigns supreme, the establishment stifles critical analysis so as to thwart improvement and protect the reigning schema for as long as possible.

Such was the case in 1929 when, months before the Crash, Alvin T. Simonds sent an objective article to Nation’s Business suggesting a business decline, only to have the accurate, reality-based piece rejected because it was “Pessimistic” [90]. Worse yet was a visit by five FBI agents, in 1931, to the Wall Street Forecast for reporting on the “Dismal situation facing banks and investors”. After the interview, one of the agents reported they had thoroughly scared the editor, who was unlikely to resume disseminating the truth about the banking situation [91]. It is noteworthy that accuracy was treated as an irrelevancy in this case. Agnosticism in the general business community was promoted by wishful thinking. This is just a single example of the blind egotism so common in stupidity — the reluctance to perceive and respond to unpleasant realities.

Socialization

Mechanisms

Along with its linguistic/perceptual mechanism for preventing recognition of reality, stupidity has another ally which inhibits effective coping with problems. This is the mechanism by which social life

establishes conflicting standards for rational behavior. That is, stupidity is actually encouraged by the basic nature of group interaction.

First

No one is perfect. Stupidity is grounded on this basic fact. The point is not that we all make mistakes because we are not perfect but that we cover them up for each other because we know sooner or later it will be our turn to goof up. In considering stupidity, we need not belabor maladaptive, incidental “Noise” in the human system — the errors people make from sheer inadvertence, fatigue or accident [92]. But if we do not belabor them because they are not symptomatic of any significant, underlying behavioral principle, it is important to note that society politely hides our imperfections behind a self-deceptive illusion of mutual assurance.

Second

When imperfect people interact, they are not even trying to be objective or honest or to learn about themselves. They are usually trying to prolong a social relationship. This provides, for example, the basis for the cozy relations of the media and their sponsors, which may be fine for the sponsors but which necessarily, makes the credibility of the media at least suspect. Usually, they overcome this potential image problem with sincere pronouncements and very thorough coverage of events not in the sponsor's worst interest. The abject failure of the American media to inform the public that our foreign policy backed by our military muscle is a front for corporate business interests is an example which easily pops to mind [93].

Functions

Most social groups exist for two related functions: Group maintenance and goal achievement. The relative importance of these two functions will vary with conditions and with compromise the normal state, most people live in a genial, casual pursuit of some particular achievement. As sacrifice is the nature of compromise, one of society's inherent stupidities is that goal achievement must often be traded off so as to perpetuate an organization whose expressed purpose is to accomplish that goal.

It is in this dual nature of group function that one finds pressures for both accuracy in and distortion of knowledge. Generally, rationality is a function of an individual mind with emotionalism induced in direct proportion to the number and intensity of social relationships – a lot of contacts or very few deep commitments can induce absurdity. Looked at the other way, to maintain a group, some rationality/Infoaccuracy may have to be sacrificed, making goal achievement a little less likely or more difficult. The ultimate in the chronic stupidity of institutional life is that maintaining the group may become an end in itself, in which case cognitive incest obliterates any pretense at logical justification for self-sustaining acts by group leaders.

Groups undergoing this process begin to separate from reality and define their own existence when the proper handling of and response to incoming information demands socially intolerable adjustments of group procedure and structure. This climaxes when social inertia disrupts effective reactions to the determining, selective external milieu.

Civil service bureaucracies are notorious centers for such useless workfare programs. These repositories for the dysfunctional contribute nothing to the nation's health or wealth. It would be absurd even to

suggest a scale for measuring their monumental waste and pathetic inefficiency. However, if they are an overall drain on society, they contribute indirectly to the pride of a nation which, in its stupid magnificence, provides a place of employment for the hopelessly inept — a cumbersome, unresponsive government [94]. As debilitating as it may be that the workforce is of limited competence, it is worse yet that high ranking government officials may, in their imperial arrogance, deliberately dispense with objective reality in favor of their own fanciful, self-serving version of it albeit to the detriment of their ability to function effectively with other people in our shared, external world [95]. To put it the same way differently: Never trust the bureaucracy to get it right because it is typically constituted by “Layer upon layer of fossilized shit” [96, 97].

Norms:

Within the formal context of written laws and rules, daily routine of most social life, institutional and otherwise, is regulated by norms — social standards for acceptable behavior, dress, manners, modes of speech, etc. These norms encourage stupidity by providing a systematic pattern of reinforcement conducive to conformity for its own sake. It is the acceptance and approval of members which first induces and then sustains a common schema and its system of values that form individuals into a group.

Life in groups is a given of the normal human experience, with a new born learning all that is needed to survive from a birth group which provides the necessary information, as the tot matures, via socialization. The initiate not only learns a particular language (with all its perceptual limitations) but also develops a sense of belonging which inhibits criticism of the fundamental assumptions of his culture. People may be critical when ideals are not realized, but they rarely criticize the ideals themselves. To do so automatically classifies one as an outsider and most people obviously would prefer to belong than be critical.

The process of maturation is one of falling into the opinions of those in one's immediate surroundings. It is noteworthy that this is only indirectly related to reality. Truth is whatever conforms to the verbal environment as the member comes to believe in the assumptions of his peers rather than regarding them as hypotheses to be verified. This may entail some cognitive constraint, but submission by the individual consolidates the collective mental habits of his group. On the other hand, if one regards truth as an absolute, objective entity, telling it in a culture of deceit is usually regarded as a revolutionary threat and may be violently suppressed.

Internalization

When socialization completes this process of mental control, a schema will not be altered unless an external reward is more appealing than the discomfort of changing the schema is emotionally wrenching. People rarely change just for the sake of accuracy, unless they have internalized objectivity and learned to abide by the respect for data demanded by a disciplined methodology like that of science. Only the more superficial things (like fashions) change just for the sake of change.

When attempts are made to comprehend behavior in terms of maximizing positive outcomes and minimizing negative results, the importance of the internal reward system is often underestimated. Only such a system could account for fiascos like the Edsel, the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba and Watergate. The psychological basis for such

idiocy is the positive feedback system that socialization and the schema create and the cultural environment maintains.

Conflicting or contradictory data from the external environment are deflected or deflated by the belief system, which develops into a fundamental religion. Any objective analyst may easily discern all kinds of logical inconsistencies and perceptual absurdities in someone else's religious schema, but that type of analysis is invariably based on a rational evaluation of factual data. Actually, devoutly held schemas are functional not because they effectively define and address particular problems but because they help bind self-deceptive people together. This emotional/social dimension as it contributes to group cohesion is usually overlooked by rationalists, thus making their analysis flat and somewhat irrelevant. However logical, neat and smug self-contained texts in cognitive psychology may be, they usually omit this central point and leave the reader with the same vaguely empty feeling he would have were he to see a production of Hamlet without Hamlet.

Secular religions

Although the term "Religion" – from the Latin religion "Binding down" – is traditionally defined in reference to the supernatural, it will be used in this discussion to refer to any compelling belief system, whether the object of the schema is supernatural, natural or man-made. Thus, much of this consideration of stupidity will be dealing with "Secular religions", such as beliefs in democracy, capitalism, equality, freedom or whatever [98]. Our concern is not with the nature of the belief's object (i.e., God or the state or some "ism") but with the nature of the belief. Indeed, it is worth noting that religious thinking in Western culture is as strong as ever: the object simply has changed from God to the State [99]. In fact, one could posit that "Belief in God" x "Belief in State"=K, so however dead God is, the state is doing comparatively better although the belief in either may be unjustified/unreasonable if not outright stupid.

The crossover to a state religion was expressed in a denunciation made by Senator Josiah Bailey of North Carolina in 1935 of any attempt to amend the Constitution as a "Violation of ...the Ark of the Covenant" [100]. It was later more thoroughly displayed in a speech former President Herbert Hoover made at the Republican Nominating Convention in 1936: "The American people should thank Almighty God for the Constitution and the Supreme Court...Have you determined to enter the holy crusade for liberty...? Here in America" (his words underscored by claps of thunder from outside – meaning God was apparently applying some dramatic special effects indicting divine approval) "where the tablets of human freedom were first handed down, their sacred word has been flouted. Today, the stern task is before the Republican Party to restore the Ark of the Covenant to the temple in Washington [101]." The speech left the choir and converts standing on their chairs, screaming, cheering, chanting and weeping. Presumably it left everyone else reaching for aspirin tablets and barf bags.

A year later, Senator Burt Wheeler reminded FDR that "The Supreme Court and the Constitution are a religion with a great many people in this country [102]." If such religious belief is unjustified or unreasonable, it usually is so because it is a compromise synthesis of reality cum mentality. Such a condition may be functional and is a normal, acceptable method of balancing the many factors which interact in our social lives. When this compromise is itself compromised, the process of schematic crumbling is simply too ambiguous in the early stages to be defined as such, so it is defined to suit the viewer. Only when the process nears completion — i.e., when it

is too late, can it be labeled as clearly stupid. Along the way, one finds that the more emotional the attachment to an idea, the less effect facts will have on altering it.

As for religious organizations, the basic requirement is not that they be logical but that they keep in touch with their members. Keeping in touch with the external environment is secondary or perhaps coequal. This commitment to the group does not really make the system less sensitive overall, but it might seem that way, as attention must be directed inward as well as outward. Also, the data that are gathered from the outer world are processed not in their own right but in terms of the internal schema. Naturally, to an external observer (who himself can never be totally objective), the responses of the system might appear irrelevant to the given conditions, but what he often mindlessly fails to consider are the further "Givens" that are not elements of his own schema [103].

Mode

One of the basic mistakes made in evaluating behavior as stupid stems from the assumption that people are really trying to achieve a particular goal — even one in their own best interest. Many people function more in a particular way than toward a particular end, even though the way may be self-defeating. For example, some fool may be committed to being honest rather than to making favorable impressions: he is simply honest and lets impressions take care of themselves. Such a person might lose out to an imposter, if both are applying for the same job, but the specific goal of getting the job is secondary to his basic commitment to honesty.

The gutters may be filled with people like that — too dumb to deceive in a world of scams, but honesty and objectivity do not always stand in the way of success. William Howard Taft was an amusing example of remarkable insensitivity in social relations: For example, he mentioned Grant's drinking problem in a eulogy to the former President. He spoke to be accurate, not to obtain a particular effect but nevertheless managed to become President and Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.

Creed

Although situation ethics may carry most individuals far in a world of superficial impressions, groups need not only belief systems but statements of those beliefs as rallying points for their sense of identity. These pronouncements are the "Creed" of the group. They are not guides for behavior of the members but verbalizations which promote group cohesion by providing superego satisfying justifications for whatever is going to be done. Thus, the military claims that "Peace is our profession" and courts tout "Justice". Such creeds have a self-deceptive, hypnotic effect on group members and inhibit the development of any sense that what they do is maladaptive in terms of their expressed goals. At best, creeds make people not knowledgeable but unaware, as the kind of knowledge gained is used to 1.) Sustain the group schema, 2.) sustain group identity and 3.) help the group cope with its environment.

This creed rarely fools our classic objective, outside observer. He is usually quite quick to note when a given group is behaving in ways contradictory to its expressed values and he then makes the mistake of asserting that the members are hypocritical if not stupid, in that they are engaging in behavior inconsistent with their creed. Once again, we return to the perennial nemesis of arbitrariness — by what standard is stupidity judged? The creed? The observer's creed? Goal achievement?

Despite obvious incongruities, people may decide subconsciously that it is emotionally preferable to hold on to their creed rather than try to adjust their ideas to fit either their actions or incoming, potentially disturbing bits of information [104].

Best interest

If identifying the “Best interest” of a party is difficult for anyone, concerned or not, then we should not be surprised at the persistence of maladaptive behavior even if no one knows what it is. The internal reward system of the self-sustaining schema can promote a course of action totally irrelevant to anything in the perceivable environment. As maladaptive behavior persists, pride becomes a prime motivating factor for perpetuating what is arguably a mistake — that is, people would rather go on being wrong than admit it and take corrective measures. If the war in Vietnam might possibly once have been winnable or even justifiable for the United States, those possibilities passed away years before the fighting wound down to its disgraceful conclusion.

The military effort in Vietnam actually turned out to be unusually stupid, in that it was idiotic in two different ways at once. It induced internal conflict while becoming an international debacle. Often, stupidity is found where a system disrupts itself. Alternatively, a conflict between systems (e.g. countries, religious groups, etc.) may be induced by stupidities that are mutual or complementary, so what might begin as legitimate competition can degenerate into misunderstandings, recriminations and worse. In terms of laying an egg, Vietnam was a double yolker.

In the context of the stupidity of a system struggling against itself, Barry Goldwater once opined he might sponsor a Constitutional amendment which would require all decisions of the Supreme Court to “Make sense”. The Court would find it difficult to function effectively with such an unreasonable restriction and in more general terms, “Making sense” is about the last thing any human system should be expected to do, however, pleasing it may be to behavioral analysts who prefer logic to life.

Types of stupidity

Arbitrariness notwithstanding, there are basically only two types of stupidity. By far the most common is that of principle — a system too committed to itself to adjust: Its reward system becomes so internalized that it ceases to respond effectively to external change. The other type is, as might be expected, the exact opposite: This is the hypersensitive stupidity of overreacting not only to incidentals in the environment but to fantasies as well. This type usually leads to chaos, with opportunism of the moment substituting for development by a guiding schema characterized by faith in things known to be untrue [105]. Both types have their places in the dynamic disorder of the tragicomedy we refer to as the human experience.

Once again, it is necessary to point out the compromise nature of the human condition. When an organization has to trade off a logically perfect system which makes sense with itself in order to find a balance with the psychological needs of imperfect people, social reinforcement will shape the behavior of those sharing common assumptions, values and beliefs. If this is a less than ideal process, it is at least consistent with the general biological principle of replacing living systems which were once but no longer are the best adaptation to an environment they altered. The peculiar thing about human systems is not that they create so much of their own environment, but that they usually create

one in which they cannot survive with their belief systems both honored and intact – in which case they seek refuge in stupidity or patriotism.

Groupthink

One specific form of rigid stupidity as induced by social norms deserves special mention because it has been identified and studied so intently. “Groupthink” is a very in-tense form of stupidity as it works its magic on a small, tightly knit band of people too committed to their common schema to save themselves [106]. The Kennedy-condoned Bay of Pigs invasion remains the classic example of groupthink in all its stagnant glory. All the elements of stupidity became concentrated in the White House as the best and brightest set about creating the perfect disaster. It exemplifies the most dangerous of all possible combinations: smart people in positions of power behaving stupidly.

If it is possible to be too cooperative, then groupthink is both possible and probable. It occurs when a decision making group is highly cohesive, insulated from outside opinion and working on a policy already strongly endorsed by the leader. Under such conditions, no member is likely to risk his group status or membership by pointing out flaws in the considered policy. In the absence of external feedback and internal criticism, anything less than the perfect plan is sure to go awry as analysis is trumped by the persuasiveness of the strongest personality if not the best argument [107].

Not only is there this cognitive drawback based on the tendency toward uniformity of opinion among members of an isolated group, there is also an inherent danger in modern bureaucratic systems that leaders derive some sort of perverse satisfaction from being removed from reality. In accordance with Reedy's Law (i.e., “Isolation from reality is inseparable from the exercise of power”), status seems to demand that those who make the most important decisions have information presented to them packaged in predigested form [108]. Rather than surrounding themselves with truthful advisors as proposed by Machiavelli to his theoretically knowledgeable Prince, many modern rulers content themselves with deluding sycophants. The miracle is not that such leaders make so many stupid decisions but that they make so few [109].

Social neurosis

In general society, the lack of critical analysis typical of all stupid systems stems from members' commitment to their group creed (or their commitment to group maintenance). As the schema becomes a religious belief, it is removed a second step from reasonable criticism. (The initial separation from logical control occurs when the linguistic system of the group inhibits negative evaluation of fundamental assumptions, since the words used to convey information convey implicit values as well.) Of course, there is something vexing about a whistle blower pointing out that the system does not work, so nothing is likely to disturb the almighty or the attitude of religious worshipers quite so much as a few accurate, practical observations.

One type of observation is that of a mismatch between creeds and deeds. This problem is inherent in the human condition. Our verbal creed not only allows us to describe our world but also helps us work together in it. It provides us with ideals to live up to and hide behind. Also, our actions are compromises with all the many factors of life which impinge upon us. Small wonder, then, that there are often discrepancies between our verbal and real worlds. This can be stupid,

but mostly it is simply an expression of humans attempting to function in a world of arbitrary compromise.

Counter-productivity

In its latter stages, stupidity is easy to recognize, as it invariably promotes what it should prevent and prevents what it should promote: that is, it is counter-productive. When ideals become stumbling blocks, preventing their own realization, there is something wrong. When, in the name of justice, we walk all over someone's rights, there is something wrong. When, in the name of fairness, we suppress the oppressed, there is something wrong. Just what is wrong is may not be clear and in a world of conflicting absurdities, we may become a bit jaded and accepting of stupidity as a condition so common that we may not recognize it as anything or certainly not unusual at all.

The ultimate danger really is to be found in the extremism that such indifference permits and fanaticism promotes. Compromise and balance are the first victims when people stop caring enough to note the stupidity surrounding them, so if we accept the absurd, we deserve the disastrous. When control comes not through reason but primarily through conflicting powers, we have a tenuous future at best and unfortunately, that is exactly our situation today. At least we have structured our domestic power conflicts so that confrontations are channeled through the halls of government and the courts. In such places, the most irrational decisions can be reached with maximal attention to decorum and minimal concern with reality. All things considered, the miracle is not that we get along so poorly but that we get along at all.

Reformers

Invariably, failing excesses of the establishment do engender checks on themselves. Reformers arise among the disenfranchised and proceed to add their particular brand of stupidity to those dominant forms already flourishing. Usually in the names of improvement and progress, reformers become persecutors and strive to reduce life to some grand order through change. They might wreck the economy in their efforts to improve the standard of living, or perhaps they induce riots and war in their quest for harmony, peace and justice. In America, the purveyors of righteousness are always ready to make the country "Right" or great again — or for the first time — if the human victims can stand it, the public will buy it and the world can afford it.

The main problem reformers must contend with is that the game is stacked against them. Almost everyone early on falls under the illusion that the establishment wants to be fair. It is rather incredible that anyone with an IQ exceeding his age would entertain such a notion. Perhaps this is just a backhanded tribute to the awesome power of stupidity — that anyone can believe such a thing. The establishment wants to stay established: If it can be fair and retain final control, it will be, but prevailing institutions are basically indifferent to "Fairness" in and of itself.

By itself, being "Right" is of no particular advantage in a dispute. It can make a person aggravated and an aggravation, but it has minimal persuasive impact. All this shows is how powerful stupidity is as a factor in social life. Institutions promote it by being inherently conservative, trying to impede any significant changes in the status quo. As all judgments are arbitrary, anyone can be both right and stupid. In fact, many people are right and/or stupid, but it is seldom clear who is which and when. What is clear is that the establishment is indifferent to those who are right but powerless, because the mighty

tend to judge everything according to their own self-serving, self-sustaining standards for an appealing public image, cultural stability and immediate worldly success.

ETHICS

Science

This arbitrarily based indifference if not hostility to those with good ideas underlines our pervasive stupidity in social relations. By contrast, the basis for our undeniable successes in matters technical becomes all the more obvious. If we could but apply scientific objectivity to the social domain we might undercut our proclivity for individual and collective maladaptive behavior. This is well worth considering, if indeed our faith in science is justified and if the application of scientific analysis to human behavior would lead to a reduction in stupidity as this article portends.

Science, in the form of the social sciences, has already proved successful in helping people learn about themselves and their interactions with their institutions. It has also proved useless in providing any sort of ethic to direct the application of knowledge gained to any clear-cut, long-range benefit to humanity. Science is especially good in the narrow, immediate sense of gathering information about a specific problem or set of conditions and the more specific the context, the better. How those data and possible solutions to problems relate to society in general is another problem in itself and beyond the scope of true science. All science can legitimately contribute to the application of knowledge to problem solving is projections of likely future results and sometimes sample test case studies of how things went in the past.

As previously noted, one of the major shifts in our mental world in the past few hundred years is that we tend more and more to believe in human institutions with a fervor previously reserved for presumed supernatural forces. Thus, although the influence of established churches may have waned during this period, religious belief is still as powerful as ever as a factor shaping human behavior. All the horrors and cruelties which used to be the province of the devoutly sectarian (as evidenced by their witch hunts and inquisitions) have been extended and expanded upon by the devotees of secular (i.e., political, economic and cultural) institutions. It is expecting too much of science, which in its pure form is morally neutral, to combat such forms of socially induced subjectivity. Scientists can be objective and may make us more knowledgeable, but they will not make us better.

Technology

The real problem confronting the foes of stupidity is not one which can be solved by gathering more knowledge, which is the function of scientific research. The solution will be found in the humane application of knowledge, which is a matter of technological ethics, with stupidity in this context being something of an intellectual sin [110]. It is very much to our credit that we are so clever as engineers — efficient at inventing and building all kinds of sophisticated machines and contraptions. A list of major human achievements would read like a "What's What" in technology — moonwalks, atomic power, heart transplants, gene splicing, etc. But all this success in applying knowledge comes up short and leaves the feeling that this success is that of a detached system which has taken on a life and purpose of its own rather than that of one virtuously filling a human need. Although we rejoice in the qualitative improvement in health attributable to

medical science, the overall plight of humanity has been poorly served by those who apply what we know, with each plus for a special interest group seemingly balanced by a minus for the general public and each cultural advance accompanied by new political, economic and social problems.

If a worst-case scenario is needed to make the point, it is, unfortunately, all too available and recent. The fundamental and total immorality of the Nazi regime scars the conscience of civilization because it proved, in an incomprehensible way; knowledge does indeed make us free. It expands our ability to “Do” without providing any kind of human value or humane ethic other than operational efficiency. In fact, the most disturbing aspect of the tragedy is that the Nazis were so efficient in a cause so perverse. Survival in the concentration camps – based on the evillest if not stupidest misapplication of force in the pursuit of an ideal – seems just that much worse when we realize it was made possible only by the willful rejection of the truth: At this extreme, it was “Be stupid or die” [111].

Worse yet, Nazism was much worse than technology gone mad for its own sake. It was the logically calculated use of the most advanced technology of the time, by the best educated, civilized culture of the time attempting to realize a policy deemed by its democratically elected leaders to be in the best interests of humanity. If the Last Reich had occurred anywhere else or at any other time, it would have been bad enough, but at the turn of the century, Germany was the center of civilization, with the greatest of universities and a culture of such breadth and depth that it has never been surpassed and rarely equaled. In science and music, Germany was preeminent [112], in philosophy and engineering, Germany predominated and this was the era when the leaders of the Nazi empire received their formative education and basic values of pride cum arrogance.

Two features of the rise of the Nazis stick like undigested lumps in the craw of Western civilization – that the German universities were a prime means by which the Hitlerians infected the Fatherland with their poison [113] and that democracy was the means by which they rose to power. There is, unfortunately, nothing inherent in the educational process to keep motivated maniacs from usurping the lessons taught and learned. Worse yet, when times are bad, demigods can be embraced by an electorate deceived by appealing propaganda. For all its education and democratic if not Christian tradition, Germany remained essentially pagan and tribal. Its intellectual accomplishments were those of detached elite but did not reflect values shared by the voiceless many. Culturally, it remained as shallow as it was great and its reversion to Fascism revealed how superficially Christianity and humane values had coated the land [114].

As ultimates in the annals of stupidity, none top those who deny the Holocaust happened. They start where with an answer and do not budge. The most convincing way of confronting them with the fact of the event is the result of interrogations of some 10,000 of those accused of perpetrating the horror. The most common response was, “I was ordered to”. However, it is most significant that of all those questioned, not a single one said, “It did not happen”.

On the other hand, the Judaic ethic conveyed by the story of Abraham and Isaac speaks to the willingness of a devout believer to follow an immoral order. God ordered Abraham to kill his son, Isaac and he was ready to do so before God rescinded the order. The Biblical fact remains, Abraham was ready to carry out the extremely immoral act because he had been ordered to do so. The lesson, unfortunately, is that the human conscience is not an effective control system for

preventing blatant immorality when a higher authority gives the order for it [115].

Nor are science and technology. Both are methods: the one helps us learn, the other helps us do. Neither is a control system. They are both morally neutral and offer humanity no ethical precept which will protect us from ourselves. Worse yet is the realization that all the cultivated learning in the world seemed to encourage rather than prevent the most despicable abuse of power ever. Worst of all is the fact that the gas chambers were so efficient in the commission of mass murder. From the selection and transportation of the victims to the creation of the ashes and soap, the whole operation was a marvel of engineering proficiency. It would be very stupid indeed to think that it could not happen again or anywhere else. The sad fact is that if it could happen in Germany then, it very certainly could happen somewhere else some other time. Nationalism and racism, a sense of injustice and betrayal, a frustrated feeling of superiority and most especially, a fanatical elite with a mission to purify the world by replacing diversity with righteous order — all these elements are common in too many societies today. The miracle is not that we have so much trouble but that we have so little.

Problems

Trouble we do have, of course. In contrast to our great achievements in technology, we have our dismal failures in human affairs. Poverty, starvation, disease, crime, drugs, riots, wars (real and potential) all confront us every day on the news. Science helps us learn about nature and technology pro-vides us with the means for effecting change, but neither pro-vides us with the understanding we need to help ourselves. Hence, people continue to suffer in sloth and apathy — ill-housed, ill-clothed, ill-fed — while a self-content middle class smugly convinces itself it is somehow morally superior to the disadvantaged and government charity doles out just enough useless help to keep the disenfranchised hopelessly dependent on the long spoon.

If this is the best we can do, we are indeed in a mess. Perhaps we would do better if we recognize that we and the institutions we believe in are the causes of our problems [116]. Much psychological research has gone into the study of humans as problem solvers, which is all well and good because we can and do solve problems. However, virtually no attention has been directed toward analyzing our considerable ability to create difficulties and even less to our inability to resolve them. On the one hand, we are rather deft at dealing with natural problems; our scientific and technological triumphs are all over natural phenomena — the human body, genes, electromagnetism, space. On the other, our failures are self-generated and we cannot correct them because those in power who created them do not re-cognize them as problems solvable within the system [117]. Nor, often, are they: Catholic Mexico’s population problem pops to mind, as does America’s Mid-East policy based on the fact that we are wedded at the lip to Israel to the same degree our politicians are committed to deficit spending as a fiscally irresponsible way to get re-elected. Perhaps if we understood our foibles by applying the schematic model for stupidity advanced here, we could render human behavior comprehensible. Ethics could then be a function of knowledge rather than religious and cultural taboos in the way our technological expertise allows us to make informed rather than mystical decisions about our interactions with nature.

Cooperation

One example of the interaction of expertise, knowledge and ethics in human affairs is that of the increasing moral imperative for cooperation. Ironically, while technological success has promoted the growth of human populations, computers have made disruptive innovative thought more difficult and individual creative thought anachronistic. The development of new disruptive ideas is more difficult because technology is standardizing our cultural world. Conformity in dress, behavior and thought is promoted by centralized control in the fashion industry, the legal system and the media. We isolate ourselves from interpersonal contact with headsets plugged into boom boxes playing synthesized music or endure prefabricated laugh tracks on sit-com TV. Finally, old-line fanatics, like religious fundamentalists, confirm the cultural quo.

Thus, creative thinking which promotes unity is now the responsibility of some undefined, centralized establishment. It would be nice if this were a planned process, with each idea adding to our collective happiness, but it is basically haphazard, with each item adding to someone's bank account regardless of long-term consequences for society in general. Without realizing what has happened, we have turned our right to be original over to the amassed media. Oddly, this constitutes one example of stupidity due to the lack of an overseeing schema as growth without development has produced change without progress. As might be expected, a competing example of repressive stupidity lies at the other extreme – the enforced conformity ominously presaged in George Orwell's dystopian 1984.

A more extreme example of amoral stupidity is the way we are wrecking our environment. Thanks to our failure to plan resource development, we are killing our lakes and streams, poisoning our forests, turning rain into showers of acid and are generally strangling our life support system [118]. Just as nuclear weapons forced reason upon diplomats, it is the technological excesses that are forcing reason upon us. As classic examples of the neurotic paradox in action, their immediate, short-term profits blind corporate executives to the long-term negative effects their practices have despoiling everyone's land, water and air [119]. These indulgences beget, however, protesters who assert their right to live and breathe and who gather strength from the obvious soundness of their position that if things continue at the current rate, there soon will be no environment left to despoil [120]. Thus, the battle of those who would wreck the world in a random, chaotic, indulgent way versus those who would save it by systematic, controlled planning [121]. With the political power structure being what it is today, they will probably reach a compromise — to wreck it by systematic, controlled planning.

Power

If it is rather trite today to observe that our technological excesses are challenging our morality, it is still worth noting that this development may decrease the likelihood that compromises in the future will be reached on the basis of sanity rather than power. Power sharing based on rights meant that more often, more people dealt with each other as equals, but we are surrendering our inalienable rights to the shadow establishment.

In a more realistic vein, it would be nice if someday all existent disputes could be settled fairly rather than by force or formality and that all decisions reached would be functions of reason rather than irrationality. Whether we ever reach such a state will depend to a large degree on the role stupidity plays in our future. Stupidity can both

prevent survival, by promoting misunderstandings and pro-mote it, by making us more accepting of our limitations. It is most likely, however, that stupidity will transcend survival because we do not understand our limitations. Specific cultures rise, flourish and then pass away for lack of effective self-control — too much or too little. However, stupidity remains, appears and reappears in successive generations and civilizations with such monotonous regularity that we cannot expect ours to be an exception to the pattern and endure unless we find an answer to that overwhelming question never seriously posed much less answered before: how can we be so stupid?

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