Giancarlo Livraghi

The Power of Stupidity

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by Giancarlo Livraghi

Chapter 1 – The Stupidity Problem

Stupidity is a nasty problem. I have always been fascinated with human stupidity. My own, of course – as well as all sorts of stupid attitudes and obnoxious mistakes messing up everyone's life every day. That's a big enough cause of anxiety. But things get much worse when one has a chance to find out how powerful and influential people decide and behave on matters that have large scale (and long term) consequences.

We generally tend to blame awful decisions on intentional perversity, selfishness, astute mischievousness, megalomania, etc. They are there, of course – in staggering quantity. But any careful study of history, or observation of current events, leads to the invariable conclusion that the single biggest source of terrible mistakes is sheer stupidity.

This fact is quite widely understood by anyone who has had a chance to look into the subject. It's effectively summarized in *Hanlon's Razor*: «Never attribute to malice that which can be adequately explained by stupidity.» [1] The concept was confirmed by Robert Heinlein in a shorter and simpler statement: «Never underestimate the power of human stupidity.»

When stupidity combines with other factors (as happens quite often) the results can be devastating. In many situations human stupidity is the origin of a series of events that combine into constantly increasing complication, with effect that can be quite funny – until we discover that they are tragic. In other cases stupidity is not the origin of the problem, but all sorts of stupid behaviors make it worse and prevent effective solutions.

A fact that surprises me (or does it?) is the very little amount of study dedicated to such an important subject. There are University departments for the mathematical complexities in the movements of Amazonian ants, or the medieval history of Perim island; but I have never heard of any Foundation or Board of Trustees supporting any studies of Stupidology. [2]

[1] The origin of Hanlon's Razor is uncertain. It can be considered as a corollary to *Finagle's Law of Dynamic Negatives* (which is similar to *Murphy's Law* – see chapter 4.) It's inspired by a classic, *Occam's Razor* (and it's equally sharp). "Hanlon" is probably a phonetic variation on the name of Robert Heinlein, who had stated that concept in his novel *Logic of Empire* in 1941.

[2] A "stupidity class" was annnouced by the Occidental College in 2009, but it's irrelevant.

In the literature if all times there are several comments, and descriptions of facts, that can help us to understand the problem. But very few books that get into any depth on this issue.

One I read when I was a teenager, but never forgot. It is called *A Short Introduction to the History of Human Stupidity* by Walter B. Pitkin of Columbia University, and was published in 1934. [3]

I found it by chance many years ago while browsing around old bookshelves – and, much to my delight, I still have it. Old as it is, it's still a good book. Some of Professor Pitkin's observations appear extraordinarily correct seventy years later.

Even before reding the book, there is an obvious question. Why did he call a 300-page book a "short introduction?" At the end, it says: *«Epilogue: now we are ready to start studying the History of Stupidity.»* Nothing follows.

Professor Pitkin was a wise man. He knew that a lifetime was far too short to cover even a fragment of such a vast subject. So he published the Introduction, and that was it. [4]

One of Pitkin's observations is that it is difficult to study stupidity because nobody has a really good definition of what it is. Geniuses are often considered stupid by a stupid majority (though nobody has a good definition of genius, either). But stupidity is definitely there, and there is much more of it than our wildest nightmares might suggest. In fact, it runs the world – which is very clearly proven by the way the world is run. (See chapter 10 *The Stupidity od Power*.)

A few years later (1937) also Robert Musil, in his lecture *On Stupidity*, noted how scarcely studied was *«the shameful domination that stupidity has on us»* – and commented dismally that he had found *«unbelievably few predecessors in dealing with this subject.»*

In recent years the literature on stupidity is somewhat less scarce. But all authors probing into any depth find that there is a lack of studies on this subject.

When we try to understand stupidity, we are dealing with a subject that is scarcely studied, rarely understood, broadly avoided because it's uncomfortable and disturbing (as we shall see in chapter 28). It's as though we all knew that we are stupid, but were uneasy abut admitting it.

We are not going to solve the problem by being afraid of it – or pretending that it isn't there. So let's venture into the tricky swamps of human stupidity and see what we can find.

* * *

[3] It is reported that also Jorge Luis Borges, in 1934, started writing a *Historia Universal de la Infamia* – but gave up when he found that the task was too big for a lifetime. Gustave Flaubert was always obsessed with stupidity, but he was never able to complete his planned "encyclopedia" on this subject (see chapter 28.)

[4] In Pitkin's opinion, four people out of five are stupid enough to be called "stupid." That was one and a half billion people when he wrote the book; it is over five billion now. Of course he didn't mean to say that such figures could be taken literally. But the fact is quite worrying. (See chapter 25 – *Is stupidity growing?*)

The essence of stupidology is trying to understand why things go wrong – and how that is due to human stupidity, that causes most of our problems. But even when stupidity is not the original source of a mishap, its consequences often get worse because of our stupid reactions and clumsy attempts to find a solution.

This analysis is essentially diagnostic, not therapeutic. [5] The basic concept is that, if we get to understand how stupidity works, we have a better chance of controlling its effects.

We can't defeat it altogether, because it's part of human nature. But its impact can be less harmful if we know that it's lurking everywhere, we understand how it works, and so we are not taken by total surprise.

* * *

Some readers may feel that it's too soon, in this first chapter, to quote some authors that have interesting things to say about stupidity. But I believe that they are properly placed here. Not just to "give credit" to those who deserve it, but, more importantly, to begin to set the environment for the development. in the rest of the book, of a subject that is generally undervalued or misunderstood.

In chapters 5 and 6 we shall discuss the key contributions of two brilliant authors, Cyril N. Parkinson and Laurence Peter, who didn't write about stupidity, but help us to understand "why things don't work". And chapter 7 is about *The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity* as defined by Carlo Cipolla.

Of course interesting contributions are offered by Scott Adams, not only in his famous "Dilbert" strips, but also in his books about what's wrong with organizations – including *The Dilbert Future: Thriving on Business Stupidity in the 21st Century* (1997) that isn't an essay on stupidity, nor an exercise in forecasting, but a sharply ironic description of the structural and cultural decay in business enterprises.

An exception in the general scarcity of academic work on this subject is *Stupidity* by Avital Ronell (University of Illinois – 2003). She confirms a basic fact: stupidity is hard to define and poorly understood. *«Essentially linked to the inexhaustible, stupidity is also that which fatigues knowledge and wears down history»*. And it is a serious problem. *«Neither a pathology nor an index as such of moral default, stupidity is nonetheless linked to the most dangerous failures of human endeavor»*.

Stupidity, says Robert Sternberg, in his preface to *Why Smart People Can Be So Stupid* (Yale, 2002), is a subject *«which the vast majority of theories in psychology, including theories of intelligen*ce, *seem to neglect. The world supports a multi-million dollar industry of intelligence and ability research, but it devotes virtually nothing to determine why this intelligence is squandered by engaging in amazing, breathtaking acts of stupidity.»* [6]

[5] Some "antidotes" are explained at the end, in chapter 30.

[6] This book is a collection of essays by different authors, with several examples of "smart people doing dumb things".

This is explained even better by James Welles. In 1986 he published the first edition of *Understanding Stupidity*, that he further developed in 1990. [7] Like Pitkin an Musil seventy years ago, he finds that stupidity is one of the least understood or discussed subjects in the study of history and culture.

James Welles defines the problem quite clearly. *«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 – nobody knows what it is. The only thing we know for certain is that whatever intelligence is, 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.»*

«We cannot really understand ourselves without understanding stupidity, and if we understand stupidity, we will understand ourselves.»

«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 and potentially devastating phenomenon of stupidity totally neglected. One could read the entire literature in the social sciences without finding so much as 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 hearing in its own right.»

* * *

We shall see, in other parts of this book, how and why the problem of stupidity is either overlooked, or misunderstood, or dismissed too easily as just "silly". The fact is that, as we take further steps on this subject, we move into uncharted territory. But the exploration can be quite interesting – and it becomes less distressing when we begin to understand how stupidity works and how we can cope with its insidious power.

It isn't easy. But comments by many readers (of the Italian printed edition and of the online material that has been developing for twelve years) show that this book is offering some useful insights. The initial chapters are introductory, because some premises need to be explained before we get into the core of the subject. In any case, this book can be read in two ways. From the beginning to the end – or choosing subjects (chapters) according to one's inclinations and curiosities, then exploring the rest from there.

[7] Latest printing (Mount Pleasant Press) 2003. James Welles also wrote *The Story of Stupidity – A History of Western Idiocy from the Days of Greece to the Present* (1995, extended and revised in following editions – latest printing 2006). It's a series of interesting comments on the ways of being stupid (and, more broadly, on the ways of thinking) in different ages and cultures. Unfortunately now these books are out of print, but both are online in `stupidity.net/story2` and some suggestions on how to find printed copies are in `gandalf.it/stupid/welles.htm`

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Chapter 2 – Stupidity and Biology

Though it isn't an illness, stupidity spreads like a virus – or, more broadly, multiplies as all living creatures do. But, in a basic biological environment, the "stupidity problem" doesn't exist. The process is based on the production of an extremely large number of "dumb" mutants. Only very few (the "fittest") survive, and that's it. From that point of view, what we see as catastrophe is just another variation in the "natural" course of events. Occasional destructive fires are understood by botanists as a necessary, indeed desirable, step in the evolution of a forest. Millions of living creatures that die in the process may disagree, but their opinion is irrelevant.

In that perspective, solutions are simple and very effective. If there are too many people, all we need is another plague (or any mass slaughter device that will not interfere too much with the overall environment) that can kill 90 percent of humankind.

The surviving ten percent, as soon as they get over the shock, are likely to find the resulting environment quite agreeable. They are also likely to be genetically similar: share specific traits of appearance and attitude. If they all had green hair, pink eyes and liked rainy weather, they would soon come to consider the (extinct) people with any other hair or eye color, as well as people that like sunny weather, as rather quaint and "inferior". Their moisture-resistant history books would treat most of us as we treat the Neanderthals.

The destruction or sterilization of our planet, by man-made nuclear (or chemical) power, or maybe by collision with some wandering rock, would be an irrelevant detail in a cosmic perspective. And, if it happened before the development of space travel and colonization, the disappearance of our species (along with the rest of the terrestrial biosphere) wouldn't cause much of a stir even in our galaxy.

But in the particular biological environment that is set by certain species (such as ours) the system is based on the assumption that the environment can – and should – be controlled; and that each individual in our species (and in other species that we "protect") should be able to live longer, and more pleasantly, than he or she would in an uncontrolled environment. This needs a particular breed of organized "intelligence." Therefore stupidity, at this stage and in this sort of evolutionary environment, is extremely dangerous.

Some people seem to think that the decay is beyond repair, that by some awful twist of evolution stupidity has totally prevailed. There are, quite distressingly, many facts that appear to confirm that view. This book is an attempt to understand if and how an extreme catastrophe can be avoided.

* * *

It could be long and complicated to get into the scientific debate (often pointless, but sometimes enlightening) on the intelligence of biology or the biology of intelligence. One can argue, depending on the point of view, that evolution is intelligent – or stupid. And the same contradictions can be found in the study of human cultures.

On this subject there is another interesting observation by James Welles. Archeology is mainly dedicated to searching for intelligence. That is, what since the origin of our species makes *homo sapiens* different from other humanoids that (according to our criteria) appear to have lesser thinking ability. Or, in not so remote times, finding facts that show "progress" – improvement in technique, science or social organization. History, on the other hand, is an inexhaustible collection of errors and failures – an endless celebration of the power of stupidity.

Another observation by the same author is the ambivalence of cultural heritage. Tradition is a buildup of experience and useful "know how." But it is also sclerotic rigidity of prejudice, superstition, habit, dogmatism, constrictions, obedience, that hinder knowledge and are often the roots of human stupidity.

Not only in philosophical and scientific evolution, but also in everyday life, we are often faced with a choice. What must we keep of our knowledge from experience and what should we learn from new stimuli – or from things that we already know, but we haven't yet understood as well as we could? We need to do both, whenever we have an opportunity. There is a lot that we can learn by combining experience with curiosity.

Recent studies in paleoanthropology help us to understand that at the origin of our species, in the most "primitive" human cultures, there were coherent and cohesive social structures. [1] There are values, deeply rooted in human nature, that can quite effectively reduce stupidity and counteract its effects. The problem is how to find them and make them work in the turbulences and complexities of today.

[1] See *The Evolution of Evolution* `gandalf.it/stupid/darwin.htm`

It would be far too complicated, very long, and somewhat boring, to get into a discussion on the nature of intelligence. Theoretical debates are endlessly complicated and often inconclusive. But one fact is relevant: it makes no sense to define intelligence as only linear or logic – and it's equally wrong to discard as stupid what doesn't seem to be fully explained by rational thinking.

Reason and emotion, logic and intuition can't be separated. Great steps in knowledge (and science) were made by intuitive perceptions that only later found a precise "rational" explanation. Also daily experience proves that intuition can be faster, and more effective, than too much reasoning.

We can be stupid if we allow ourselves to be led only by emotion, but we are not very bright if we think that all problems can be solved following an apparently logical sequence. This is one of the reasons why, at the end of this book, there are some "informal" observations on how to simplify complexity.

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Chapter 3
Predictable or Unpredictable

One of the reasons why stupidity is dangerous is that it's unpredictable. We shall get to that subject in other parts of this book (specifically in chapters 4, 7 and 30.) But there are facts to prove how we can be quite stupid about things that *are* easily predictable, though we choose to ignore or misunderstand the clear signs of what is going to happen.

I have deliberately avoided, in this book, to use specific examples. Because even a superficial collection would fill thousands of pages. Because each case has its own story, its individual diversity. Because for events of the past there can be disagreements in historical explanations – and in many recent situations there are conflicts of opinion, position or interest. Even when they are well chosen, examples can blur, rather than clarify, the substance of a general statement.

But there was one case, as clear as practically harmless, that because of its staggering simplicity (and lack of complex, harmful or worrying effects) may be worth quoting. It is interesting also because it didn't involve a group of people, or a particular culture, but all of humanity (or, at least, that part of humanity that is aware of the most widely shared calendar and can easily access "global" information systems, directly or as reflected by local media.)

Ten years ago, in 1998 and 1999, there was a lot of noise about "the end of the millennium." It was generally accepted, with hardly any doubt or perplexity, that the twenty-first century, and the third millennium, would start on the first day of year 2000.

All that fuss is practically forgotten. There are still a few (and often pointless) discussions about "the new millennium", but this is no longer a "hot" subject. So we can be cool and detached in trying to understand why there was an obvious and silly mistake.

Few things have ever been as easily predictable as the fact the twentieth century (and therefore the second millennium) would come to an end at 0 hours, 0 minutes, 0 seconds of January 1, 2001.

It's quite bewildering that there was such widespread confusion, with so many ceremonies and celebrations a year ahead of time.

It seems that there were meaningless debates on the same mistake a thousand years earlier – as well as some discussion in 1899 about when the nineteenth century would come to an end.

Many people, who are neither stupid nor ignorant, were quite convinced that the century and the millennium would end at midnight on December 21, 1999. They found it difficult to adjust to obvious arithmetic. After a few minutes of perplexed pondering, they grudgingly admitted *«well, maybe, actually there never was a Year Zero.»* But they were uncomfortable about having to adjust their thinking.

Was this stupid? Maybe not – if we define stupidity by its practical effects (see chapter 7.) The "millennium mistake" caused a lot of noise, but little harm – and if some people seized the opportunity to celebrate twice, maybe they had some fun.

It was disappointing for many sellers of gimmicks and gadgets. Maybe too much confused discussion, as well as doubts about the date, made people bored and uninterested. Lots of things labeled "millennium" remained on the shelves. Champagne producers sold less than they expected. Travel agents not only had poor results, but also faced some deception claims for selling the wrong date.

This "comedy of errors" wasn't totally harmless, though it didn't cause a great deal of damage. But the worrying fact is that the most absurd idiocies, if repeated often enough, can be widely accepted as "truth." How many things that are told as "certain" are equally false?

* * *

Another subject, widely discussed ten years ago, really had its deadline on December 31, 1999. It was the infamous *millennium bug*, that doesn't worry anyone any more – though many problems, old and new, are still lurking in technologies.

The stupidity, in this case, was very obvious – and quite dangerous. The Gregorian calendar was defined 415 years earlier. It was nonsensical for anyone in the technology business to ignore the fact that electronic systems unable to handle four-digit year numbers would malfunction. Those systems were conceived in the Sixties. But only one or two years before the "deadline" did anyone begin to be concerned.

After decades of careless lethargy, in which the problem was ignored, things changed abruptly to hysterical, exaggerated alarm – forecasting catastrophes that luckily didn't happen.

There are many examples in the history of technologies, old or recent, of problems that could have been easily avoided, or effectively solved, by being a little more careful about what systems were supposed to do. But this is only one of many areas in which there are such blunders.

In a much broader sense, it is inconceivable that there could be so much carelessness for so many years, followed by so hasty and confused flutter. How many other problems, now ignored or unmanaged, will become loud and messy fracas when it may be too late?

* * *

There are very serious problems that were precisely predictable, but have been stupidly ignored or ineffectively handled. One of the obvious examples is the aging of population, that could have been mathematically projected with close approximation fifty years ago. In countries such as Italy it wasn't faced when it would have been less difficult to manage it – and it's still causing more pointless discussion than effective solutions.

There is the obnoxious idiocy of continuing to burn fossil fuels, with all sorts of ever-increasing – and more and more alarming – problems, instead of investing in what is needed to find more intelligent solutions.

There is the increase of population – with a growth curve that seems somewhat less steep than was projected some years ago. While no real solution is in sight, there are some gradual improvements, partly due to intelligent developments, mainly cultural awareness. [1] But the forces at play include very stupid and awful perversities, such as diseases, famine, slaughter, wars and other forms of extreme violence.

Another problem that was easily predictable, but was ignored until it became catastrophical, is the so-called financial crisis – that, when this book is going into print, is far from being resolved and isn't even understood in any reasonable way. More comments on this are at the end of chapter 25 – *Is Stupidity Growing?*

Mental blindness, myopia, stupidity are running the world. As seen by an observer in remote space, it could be very funny. But, as an inhabitant of this planet, I am having a hard time trying to find it amusing.

* * *

Of course these are only a few of many examples that we all can find. Large-scale problems that involve everyone. Or small embarrassments that, taken one by one, may concern only the people directly involved. But, in their infinite quantity, they combine in many ways to multiply, spread and increase the overwhelming power of stupidity.

[1] A fact that is clearly proven, but not well enough understood and practiced, is that the most effective solution for birth control is to increase women's education level and independence in decision. Also many other problems could be solved with more widespread knowledge and awareness.

Obviously this isn't just about those problems or dangers that are predictable, but aren't prevented before they get worse. Here we are back to the basic notion that stupidity is often unpredictable – or its effects can be felt in unpredicted ways.

It helps to be prepared. To understand that nothing ever happens in a totally coherent manner – and not be scared by the unexpected, where there are often problems, but there can also be opportunities.

Stupidity is everywhere, but it doesn't always prevail. If we learn to know it better, we can not only limit the damage, but sometimes even reverse the process, finding some sparkle of intelligence in what appeared to be a dismaying wasteland of stupidity.

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The Power of Stupidity

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Chapter 4 – Murphy's Law

A well known fact, closely connected to human stupidity, is that often "things don't work." We shall discuss some interesting observations on this subject in the next two chapters. But let's start with the most popular definition of this problem. It's called "Murphy's Law" – and it has been repeated and quoted widely for sixty years. Of course it was true, and largely confirmed by facts, thousands of years ago. But with confused culture, clumsy government, hasty and near-sighted management, financial gambling and messy technologies, its effects tend to multiply.

It was never stated as a "scientific law." It's just a "saying" and it's often supposed to be funny. But it's worth taking quite seriously.

There are conflicting theories about how it started, but for the sake of these considerations let's assume that it was a comment by an Air Force technical officer, Captain Edward Murphy, in 1949, in a specific case of human stupidity: someone had risked his life because some instrument hadn't been set correctly.

Whatever the origin, or the occasion from which it was born, the fact is that it has become proverbial. *«If something can go wrong, it will, at the worst possible time.»* [1]

On Murphy's Law there is a vast literature, often amusing, with countless variants and corollaries (many are just funny, but some are practically relevant) applied to different situations and all sorts of activities, but generally with the same basic meaning. [2]

[1] The same concept is defined in a variety of "sayings", such as *Sod's Law* – or *Finagle's Law* as mentioned in a footnote in chapter 1. *Flanagan's Precept* says that *«both Murphy and Finagle were incurable optimists.»*

[2] There are many collections and anthologies. Some are online, such as *Murphy's Laws* (`murphys-laws.com`) and *Murphy's Laws and Corollaries* (`roso.epfl.ch/dm/murphy.html`).

Joking on the subject can be fun – and maybe we can be lucky. Things don't always go wrong. But it's a real problem that they do, and that isn't just "grumbling" by Murphy or whoever is saying the same thing. It's the wisdom of knowing how things happen – and being prepared for "unexpected" glitches.

Sometimes things can go surprisingly better. But it would be stupid to expect them to counterbalance those that go worse.

Countless variations on "Murphy's Law" don't tell us why things go wrong. Often the mess is so malicious that it seems to be the work of some mischievous gremlin. But it's pretty clear that the most frequent origin is human stupidity.

It can be our own stupidity, because we have made a mistake, we haven't checked as carefully as we should, or we have failed to consider a variable whose effects come into play when we least expect them.

Or it can be someone else's stupidity. Someone near to us, who has done something wrong – or is making things unnecessarily complicated.

Or maybe someone, we may not know who, how or where, somehow caused us to have wrong or misleading information – or designed a tool that breaks down "at the worst possible time." [3]

"Murphy's Law", if properly understood, is a resource for intelligence. The point is that the unexpected is practically unavoidable. Because we are never able to control all variables. Or because some external factors, that we can't control, come into play when they are least expected.

There are several ways of coping with this problem so that we are not "taken by total surprise." One is to have an effective backup of solutions that can replace the one that suddenly isn't working. Another is flexible planning, that treats the unexpected not as an obstacle, but as a different route to the objective – or maybe the opening of a new opportunity.

Above all, it's important to know that the unexpected exists – and be mentally prepared to face it. Not to be confused or scared, but to be ready to find new solutions, to meet new opportunities, to learn from the stimulating experience of change. (See the appendix *Simple Thoughts on Complexity* – online `gandalf.it/stupid/chaos.htm`)

* * *

An interesting (but rarely understood) "corollary" to Murphy's Law is that, if a problem has a way of solving itself, it will do so when there is a state of alarm, several actions are in place to try to fix it, etcetera. One of the consequences of this fact, more often than it may seem, is that in some situations the best solution is to "wait and see" without making any move – but of course it's difficult to know beforehand in which circumstances this may be the most effective behavior.

[3] See chapter 19 *The Stupidity of Technologies* – or online `gandalf.it/offline/stutech.htm`

It helps to know that this sort of thing can happen quite often – and be ready to cancel the alarm before the remedies turn out to be worse than the disease or cause unnecessary panic, confusion and complications. And, above all (in such cases and in any other difficult circumstance) to be willing to admit *«I made a mistake.»* Insisting on errors, or false alarms, is a dangerous form of stupidity.

* * *

So Murphy's Law is a serious concern, but not a reason for despair or "giving up." Quite to the contrary, it's a tool for knowledge – and for effective planning, management and behavior.

If we pretend – or assume – that there are "infallible" or totally reliable technologies, methods or plans… we are heading for bitter, sometimes catastrophic, surprises. As Douglas Adams explained: *«The major difference between a thing that might go wrong and a thing that cannot possibly go wrong is that when a thing that cannot possibly go wrong goes wrong it usually turns out to be impossible to get at or repair.»*

If in any large or small project (making coffee, organizing a journey or building a dam) we consider the unavoidable "Murphy phenomena", we can organize it with the appropriate flexibility, consider the mistakes and the unexpected circumstances as likely variants and not unmanageable mishaps.

So we can reduce anxiety, improve quality and avoid the awful mess that is generated by the unexpected and multiplies all sorts of mistakes.

Let's be grateful to Edward Murphy (or whoever else is the real author of the "law") and let's try to make good use of his bright observation, as often as possible, in everything we do. We shall get better results and, at the same time, a considerable improvement in "quality of life."

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Chapter 5 – Parkinson's Law

While there has always been scarce depth of thinking on the problem of stupidity, there are some remarkably good studies about "why things go wrong." One of the most interesting is *Parkinson's Law – The Pursuit of Progress* by Cyril Northcote Parkinson. This "classic" was published in 1957 – and fifty years later it's even more relevant. [1]

It's essentially serious, but it's also amusing. This is one of those rare and unusual books that discuss a complex subject with lucid simplicity and with a refreshing sense of humor. It includes illustrations by Osbert Lancaster (in other editions, by Robert Osborn) that aren't just entertaining or "funny" – they pleasantly help to understand the meaning of the text (while they are irksome for bureaucrats and pedantics.)

In spite of its success, it was – and it still is – an "uncomfortable" book, often disregarded by management theorists, ignored or forgotten by people running organizations. The reason is obvious. It says too many embarrassing truths – and, that is even more irritating, it does so in plain and brilliantly readable English.

It was disturbing and distressing when it was first published. It is even more so today.

[1] It was originally published as an article in *The Economist* in November 1955, and expanded to become a book in 1957. It was reprinted many times, until 2002, but now it seems to be "out of print", though copies can be found in libraries and in the "second hand" market. Several other books by Parkinson were published, developing some specific concepts and subsidiary "laws". Parts of the book are summarized in www.vdare.com/pb/parkinson_review.htm Some explanations are online – such as www.adstockweb.com/businesslore/Parkinson's_Law.htm

Parkinson's Law is generally quoted as *«Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion.»* But this book also explains why organizations grow, regardless of any increase or decrease of what they are supposed to do, as a result of hierarchic mechanisms and functional anomalies.

Fifty years ago it was mostly a case of structures growing, with increasingly complicated internal relations. Parkinson explained that an organization of a thousand people can use all of its time and resources communicating only with itself, without generating anything worthwhile for the outside world.

Nowadays those problems still remain – while there are additional complications in the opposite direction. Personnel cuts are often a rough and brutal short-term tool to increase profit (and it's even more so with mergers and acquisitions.) The size of organizations decreases for non-functional reasons – and quite often this is done without reducing the over-staffing in useless or cumbersome roles.

This bizarre combination of bulimia and anorexia is one of the most serious diseases in all sort of organizations – business, government, politics, private or public service. The bigger they are, the worse it gets.

The basic problem is that an organization, like a living organism, is driven by an urge to grow and reproduce itself. But while life, as such, has value for the sheer sake of existing, this is not so for business enterprises (or any other public or private organizations) that deserve to exist only if they are doing something useful for someone else – and for society as a whole. Growing, if and when there is a need for more of what they are doing – or shrinking when their usefulness decreases, disappearing if they no longer serve a purpose.

This is a constant in all human ventures, regardless of whether they are for profit or for other purposes, such as institutional, political or public service.

Another of Parkinson's observations is that the amount of time and attention spent by management on a problem is in inverse proportion to its real importance. [2] This can't be taken as a "general rule" and it isn't always so. But anyone familiar with how organizations really work knows that it happens quite often.

There is also a disease called "The Law of Delay." [3] When a problem is urgent, serious, taxing and complex, the people in charge avoid responsibility by delegating and delaying, doubting and hesitating, fussing and discussing, postponing and dismissing, until it's beyond repair.

In the state of exaggerated and paranoid haste in which we are living (as we shall see in chapter 16) it may seem that "delay" is no longer a problem. But the fact is that it's as bad as ever – and often getting worse.

[2] This is also known as *The Law of Triviality*: *«The time spent on any item of a committee's agenda will be in inverse proportion to the sum of money involved.»*

[3] *The Law of Delay*, with other comments by C. Northcote Parkinson, was published as a separate book in 1970

Imaginary urgency and haste with no reason often lead to setting aside whatever doesn't appear to have an immediate solution. The result is the combination of two mistakes: deciding in a hurry on things that needed more thinking, while putting off decisions that it would have been better to take at the right time.

The resulting confusion leads to more blundering haste, combined with a confusing buildup of problems that wouldn't be there if they had been handled properly at the right time. This isn't only an unmanageable mess, it's also a never-ending vicious circle that makes things even worse.

We have already seen several disasters caused by this syndrome. But the fact is that decision systems are decaying in many organizations while they appear to survive – and their collapse will come as a "surprise" if we continue to ignore the termites of mismanagement that are lurking inside them.

Another disease explained by Parkinson is called *injelitance* – "the rise to authority of individuals with unusually high combinations of incompetence and jealousy." *«The injelitant individual is recognizable from the persistence with which he struggles to eject all those abler than himself.»*

This isn't new, it has been causing all sorts of problems since the origins of human society – and it's proliferating in the complexities of the world as it is now. There are two closely related subjects: the rise of incompetence, as explained by *The Peter Principle* in the next pages (chapter 6) and the stupidity of power, as we shall see in chapter 10.

Stupidity is not mentioned, as such, in *Parkinson's Law* and in other analyses of "why things go wrong." But it's pretty obvious that those destructive behaviors are stupid – and it's even more stupid that, fifty years after they were so clearly diagnosed, they continue to happen, with added complications making them worse.

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The Power of Stupidity

by Giancarlo Livraghi

Chapter 6 – The Peter Principle

Another basic text on organization problems (or, as the author called it, "the salutary science of Hierarchiology") is *The Peter Principle – Why Things Always Go Wrong*, published in 1969 by a Canadian sociologist, Laurence Peter. After the success of this book, he wrote three more on the same subject, expanding the concept and also (ironically but not unreasonably) suggesting solutions.

Forty years later, his observations are still as useful as they were. Not only for studies of "hierarchiology" and organization diseases, but also for all people who wish to have a better perspective in their work and life. As well as, of course, whoever is trying to understand human stupidity.

The Peter Principle is so widely known that it is included in dictionaries as part of the English language. [1] But, proverbial as it may be, it is poorly understood, and even less applied, in the practical running of organizations.

Peter's books, like Parkinson's, combine an intriguing sense of humor with sound and serious thinking. They are as much fun to read as they are thoughtful, interesting and useful.

The Peter Principle says that people in an organization, if it's driven by meritocracy, will advance to their highest level of competence and then be promoted to, and remain at, a level at which they are incompetent. When they are good at doing something, they are moved to something else, for which they are inadequate or unqualified.

[1] It's mentioned in many collections of "quotations", with added variations and corollaries. It has been included (with hardly any practical effects) in some business administration teaching. In 1981 there was a board game called *The Peter Principle Game*. From 1995 to 2000 *The Peter Principle* was a television show, a BBC situation comedy. Etcetera.

Though this sounds a bit simplistic, it can be summarized as *«the cream rises until it sours.»* But while sour cream can be quite tasty, and healthy, this sort of "rising" is a recipe for poison.

It happens that a person, who isn't stupid in a specific task, is moved to a situation where he or she becomes "stupid", not in a general sense, but because of "incompetence" in a new role.

The result, as such moves multiply, is a continuing growth of incompetence (or *injelitance*) at all levels in the organization. And the competent people, who haven't yet been promoted to their level of incompetence, are hindered in their work by reporting to those that are already there.

In one of his books, *The Peter Prescription*, in 1974, Laurence Peter re-examined the problem and suggested solutions, that of course are humorous, but may have some uncanny practical value. For instance he suggests that, when someone is getting close to the risk of incompetence, the way out could be some whimsical or unconventional behavior, disturbing enough to avoid promotion, but not so serious as to risk being fired (or "demoted.") And so remain happily in the right place. [2]

Is it a joke? Yes. But it could actually work – and some lucky people enjoying their jobs may have done so without even being aware of it. Is this why many of the best people in all sorts of places have unusual (and often quite interesting) personalities?

There can be other complications in the reasons why people may want to refuse, or avoid, "promotion." They may be afraid of, or embarrassed by, co-worker's jealousy (this is almost a reverse case of *injelitance* as discussed in the context of Parkinson's Law – chapter 5.)

There are also people who simply don't want to be burdened with responsibility. That can be, according to the circumstances, wisdom or cowardice. But it has little, if anything, to do with the Peter Principle and with "why things go wrong."

Peter's teachings are often ignored, not only because they are uncomfortable, but also because people at the top of organizations don't like to be told that they have been wrong in promoting their staff – or, even worse, that they are the ones who have reached the fatal level of incompetence. [3]

[2] This is sometimes (rather improperly) quoted as *Peter's Rule for Creative Incompetence*: *«Create the impression that you have already reached your level of incompetence.»* But that would be destructive, encouraging people to deliberately do bad work. In addition to a depressing decrease in job satisfaction, such behavior could lead to worse than "not being promoted."

[3] A peculiar case is that of so-called "innovation." In many businesses the most competent people were placed in "traditional" areas, where competition was more aggressive, while it was felt that in "innovative" sectors growth would be so fast that it would take care of everything – and as, anyhow, nobody really knew what was going on, they could be managed by less reliable people.

In February 2000 I wrote a short article on this subject: *Do androids dream of electric money?* `gandalf.it/offline/androids.htm` (if someone thinks that I was mimicking Philip Dick – yes, of course, I was.)

Have things changed much in following years? Not really. In some ways, they are getting worse. On the stupidity of technologies (and of the way they are understood and used) see chapter 19.

"The Peter Principle" has generated a number of "corollaries" and variations. Such as *The Dilbert Principle* by Scott Adams (1996) *«The least competent, least smart people are promoted to where they can do the least damage: management.»*

A few years ago there were quotations of something called "the Natreb Principle", but it seems to have faded into oblivion. It said that *«people gravitate to the professions where their incompetence is most obvious»* or *«every profession attracts the least fit.»* That, of course, is an exaggeration. But things of this sort are happening on a distressing scale. The real question is: why are tasks, including some very important ones, assigned to people who are inept for the purpose?

The situation today is worse than it was when Laurence Peter defined his Principle. The concept of "merit" is more and more confused. People are "promoted" (or chosen) because of protection by oligarchic power, superficial appearance, intrigue and other reasons that have little, if anything, to do with "competence."

Incompetence is promoted also by the overwhelming dominance of financial manipulation that rewards cunning trickery – or maybe a stroke of luck in riding the tide when the stock market is driven by a twist in large scale gambling.

The results are quite dismal for whoever is left with the task of picking up the pieces and trying to "put Humpty together again." But in the meantime the lucky gamblers (when they don't simply run away with the money) can be "promoted" far beyond their ability to manage a business or produce results in a real market.

To try to solve high-level incompetence problems, some management consultants are suggesting quaintly named maneuvers, such as *percussive sublimation* or *lateral arabesque* – that can be boiled down to an old notion, much more clearly defined in Latin: *promoveatur ut amoveatur*.

Incompetent people at the top, or high in the hierarchy, are "moved up" (or laterally) to roles of mere appearance, so that actual management can be left in the hands of those who have not yet been promoted above their competence. But this sort of expedient is only one of several reasons why stupid people are in important and "highly visible" roles. They are often placed at the top of the hierarchy by criteria that have little to do with merit and competence.

There are cases, unfortunately not uncommon, that go beyond the Peter Principle – such as promoting to a higher level people who were already incompetent in the role they had.

Another problem is the impact of mergers, acquisitions and concentrations, causing the loss of corporate cultures that had led companies to success, destroying their competence, expertise and dedication in doing something better than anyone else.

Many people are removed not because they are incompetent, but because in two or more merging structures there are duplicate roles (and also because part of the cost of acquisitions is recovered by cutting staff.)

In the steaming cauldron of the mixed up organization roles overlap and interfere with each other. Rewards don't go to the best qualified people, but to those supported by the winning faction.

Power games and office intrigue prevail on merit and quality. The best people, if they survive the ordeal, are often moved to roles in which they are less effective – and anyhow they are demotivated by an environment that doesn't reward good work. Appearance is worth more than substance, competence doesn't matter, the name of the game is struggling to stay afloat in murky waters.

This is how the Peter Principle combines with other diseases in the hierarchy game to increase and multiply the power of human stupidity.

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The Power of Stupidity

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Chapter 7 – Cipolla's Laws

One of the most interesting essays ever written about stupidity can be amusing because of its tongue-in-cheek, ironic style – but it's better to take it quite seriously, because the subject isn't funny. It's called *The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity*. It was written originally in English, over thirty years ago, by Carlo M. Cipolla, Professor Emeritus of Economic History at Berkeley. But it was practically unknown to the general public until it was included, in Italian, in a book that was published in 1988. Unfortunately the English text is not publicly available. [1]

Some of Carlo Cipolla's observations (bright as they are) confirm existing knowledge and general commonsense. Such as the fact that the size of the problem – or "the number of stupid people", in all human categories and societies – is generally and broadly underestimated. [2] This is something that we can all notice everywhere and every day. Aware as we may be of the overwhelming power of stupidity, we are quite often surprised by its surfacing when and where we least expect it.

[1] Carlo M. Cipolla, *Allegro ma non troppo*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1988, Italian translation by Anna Parish. *The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity* are in the last 37 pages. In 2001 that book was published in Spanish and Portuguese – but not in English. Cipolla's essay on stupidity was written in the early Seventies and circulated privately by photocopy. In 1976 it was printed in a thin booklet as a Christmas gift to a few colleagues and friends. In 1987 it was published by the *Whole Earth Review* – apparently without the author's agreement. In 2002 the original English text was online, in *Ecotopia* and other websites. But suddenly, in 2006, the copyright owners decided to prohibit its publication everywhere – including the internet. And so it became, again, unavailable. That's a pity. But, alas, that's the law. Sometimes it reappears in different places online, but I can't say where, because it's "illegal" – and, by the time this book is printed, it may have vanished again.

[2] Cipolla's First Law: *«Always and inevitably everyone underestimates the number of stupid individuals in circulation»* – page 45 in the Italian edition

Two consequences are pretty obvious in any analysis of the problem. One is that we often underestimate the awful effects of stupidity. [3] The other is that, because it is so unpredictable, stupid behavior is more dangerous than intentional mischief [4] (as was clearly summarized by Robert Heinlein in *Hanlon's Razor* – see chapter 1.)

What is missing in this perspective (as in the case of Walter Pitkin and almost every author dealing with this subject) is a consideration of our stupidity – or, in any case, of the stupidity factor that exists even in the most intelligent people. See chapter 9 for more comments on this subject.

One of the key notions in Carlo Cipolla's theory (as well as in the studies by James Welles) is that a person's stupidity is "independent of any other characteristic of that person." In other words, stupidity is equally shared by all humanity. [5]

This is a basic point, that may contradict some widespread opinions, but it's confirmed by any careful analysis of the problem. This isn't just some bland, superficial way of being "politically correct." It is substantially true that no human category is more intelligent – or more stupid – than another. There is no difference in the level and frequency of stupidity by gender, age, race, color, ethnic background, culture, education, etcetera (ignorance may be influenced by stupidity, or vice versa, but they are not the same thing – see chapter 13.)

There is a concept, in Cipolla's theory, that I have adopted as a method in some of my analyses. It's defined in his "Third (and Golden) Law" – *«A stupid person is a person who causes losses to another person or to a group of persons while himself deriving no gain and even possibly incurring losses.»* [6]

An important advantage of this approach is that it avoids the thorny problem of trying to find, in theory, a definition of stupidity (or intelligence) while it evaluates its relevance in relation to practical effects.

It's pretty clear that, with this criterion, different categories of behavior can be defined. At one extreme we find people who do good for themselves as well as for others (therefore we call them "intelligent.") At the other end of the spectrum there are people who do harm to themselves as well as to others (and those are "stupid.")

Obviously there are at least two "in between" categories. One that harms others while gaining self advantage (Cipolla calls them "bandits.") And one where we place people who harm themselves while doing good for others.

[3] Cipolla's Fourth Law: *«Non-stupid people always underestimate the damaging power of stupid individuals. In particular non-stupid people constantly forget that at all times and places and under any circumstances to deal and/or associate with stupid people always turns out to be a costly mistake»* – It. ed. page 72.

[4] Cipolla's Fifth Law: *«A stupid person is the most dangerous type of person»* with the corollary *«A stupid person is more dangerous than a bandit»* – It. ed. page 73.

[5] Cipolla's Second Law: *«The probability that a certain person be stupid is independent of any other characteristic of that person»* – It. ed. page 48.

[6] This is the central focus of Cipolla's theory – It. ed. page 58.

The definition of this last category isn't as simple as it may seem. It isn't always appropriate to call them "hapless" or "hopeless." That approach may seem correct if gain or loss are measured according to simplistic criteria of "classic" economy. But it can be wrong when applied to people who deliberately sacrifice some of their own benefits for the good of others – as explained in the next few pages (chapter 8.)

The most useful concept in Carlo Cipolla's approach is the definition of stupidity (and intelligence) based on the results of human behavior, not on difficult and questionable theories. We shall see in the next two chapters some practical results of this method – as well as the reasons why some of the criteria that I am following in the development of this subject are different from those indicated by his "laws."

* * *

I am deliberately avoiding any attempt to offer a formal definition of stupidity. We can be quite precise on the subject by discussing how stupidity relates with other behaviors. As well as what it does, how it works, the nature of its causes and effects, the ways in which it can be understood and its hideous influence can be prevented or reduced.

However, for those who are interested, there is a definition – by James Welles – that fits the purpose better than any other I have ever read. It's online, with my comments: `gandalf.it/stupid/defining.pdf`

Essentially, it points to a key fact: the problem of stupidity is basically connected with information, communication and knowledge. The basic tools to control it are listening, curiosity and doubt. As we shall see in the next chapters – especially at the end, in *Antidotes and Prevention*.

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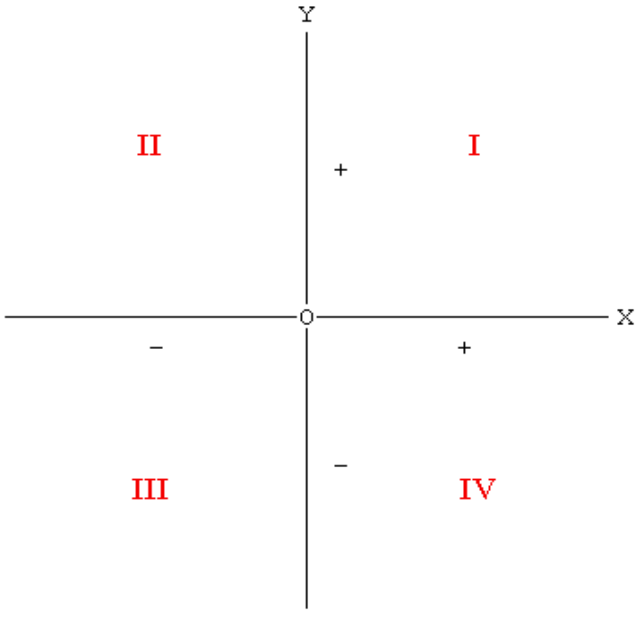
The Power of Stupidity

by Giancarlo Livraghi

Chapter 8 – The Stupidology Graph

When stupidity and intelligence – or other human behaviors – are defined by their practical effects, obviously the estimated data (or hypotheses) can be "charted" quite simply, and effectively, by using the classic (twodimensional) "Cartesian coordinate system."
Of course not all results can be measured as numbers, but a "calculated guess", if appropriately defined, can be enough to "draw a a picture."



It is "standard procedure" to define four "quadrants" numbered counterclockwise from I to IV.

If we place on the horizontal ("abscissa") X-axis the advantage (or disadvantage) that someone obtains from his or her own actions, and on the vertical ("ordinate") Y-axis the effects on other people, anyone of us can find a position, based on the practical consequences of behavior, where a person (or group of people) is to be placed. It's obvious that behaviors in "quadrant I" (top right) are at various levels of "intelligence", while in "quadrant III" (bottom left) it's stupidity. It is also obvious that in the fourth quadrant (bottom right) we can find different levels of "banditism." But those in the second (top left) can't be so easily defined.

These people may be "hapless" or "hopeless" if and when they harm themselves and others without being aware of what they are doing. But the same placement in the coordinates could be the result of deliberately generous or "altruistic" behavior. In such cases the analysis could take one of two courses. Consider moral and social benefits – and therefore place those behaviors in the "intelligent" area. Or leave them where they are, on the left of the Y-axis, but use a different definition (more on this subject in chapter 11.)

Without getting into the details, that could be quite complex, of what can be done with this sort of analyses, a key fact is that the evaluation of different behaviors can be done on an individual basis (one-to-one) or on a wider scale, involving "large" systems (nations, international communities or even humanity as a whole) or not-so-wide environments (local situations, companies, associations, organized or informal groups, human communities of any sort, nature or size.)

The system, as a whole, can improve or degrade as the result of a combination of several different behaviors, not all necessarily "altruistic."

But it's clear that the greatest improvement is the result of "intelligent" action – and the worst deterioration is caused by stupidity. In other words, if each person or group of people mind too much their own interest, and don't consider the effect of their actions on everyone else, there is a general decay of society as a whole – and so also those who thought they were being "smart" turn out to be stupid. But it often happens that this is understood when it's too late. This confirms the basic concept: the most dangerous factor in every human society is stupidity.

Of course there are specific, and often dramatic, consequences when there is an unbalance of cause and effect. As in the case of actions by a few people that have an effect on many. For more on this subject see chapter 10 *The Stupidity of Power*.

* * *

In the use of the coordinates there are some differences between the approach suggested by Carlo Cipolla and the method in my reasoning. They are mainly three.

Observations by Cipolla (as well as Walter Pitkin and nearly everybody considering this subject) are based on an assumption of total separation: some people are intelligent and some are stupid. As we shall see more specifically in the next chapter, I believe that almost nobody is totally stupid, and nobody can hope to be always intelligent. Therefore we need to consider the element of stupidity (and also of other behavior patterns) that exists in all of us.

Analyses based on results can be made by trying to define a person's general behavior pattern or be limited to a particular set of circumstances. This second option is not to be excluded.

It can be quite interesting to find how the same person, in different roles or situations, can behave in ways that lead to different results and definitions. Each one of us can be more often "stupid" in some sorts of circumstances, less so in others. It can be useful to try to understand which environments, or types of activity, are more likely to influence the behavior of a certain person – or our own. And so, as far as possible, to prevent the same problems from happening too often – or, at least, to be better aware of when and how those mistakes are likely to happen.

It isn't less relevant to understand that stupid results can happen quite often outside of any verified or assumed "usual pattern" of personal attitude and behavior. [1] This can help us to remember how and why stupidity can be unpredictable. (Luckily we see, sometimes, unexpected "intelligent" results. It can be useful to understand how and why they occur, but it's better if we don't "count on" them, because they never happen often enough.)

The obvious attitude is to place ourselves in the "X-axis" and someone else in the "Y." But it can be very useful to do it the other way round, tracing the effects of our actions on other people. The difficulty lies in the fact that, of course, the quality of results is to be measured by the point of view of whoever is at the receiving end. But it's always a useful exercise to try to "put ourselves in someone else's shoes" – especially when we are trying to measure our level of stupidity (or intelligence.)

* * *

Of course everyone can, depending on the circumstances, choose the criteria in drawing a "stupidity graph." It's quite easy to do it with a computer graph or a spreadsheet, but it isn't necessary. It's enough to draw two crossing lines on any piece of paper – or use squared paper to mark the numerical indexes. It isn't always possible to have reliable data to "measure" the results of someone's behavior. But precise figures are not indispensable. The use of "perceived values", even if they are hypothetical or vaguely estimated, can have a relevant meaning.

* * *

Some readers find the use of "cartesian coordinates"
interesting, intriguing and amusing,
while others think it's obscure and boring.
That isn't a problem. All of the reasoning can be understood
without ever reading or drawing a graph.
And this applies also to the five diagrams in chapter 11,
where they are added to "visualize" trends,
but concepts are fully explained in the text.

A description of the book is online – stupidity.it

[1] Or area of "incompetence" – as explained in chapter 6.

The Power of Stupidity

by Giancarlo Livraghi

Chapter 9 – Tree Corollaries

A pretty obvious fact is that responsible and generous people are generally aware of how they behave, malicious and nasty people understand what they are doing, and even the weakest victims have a feeling that something isn't quite right… but stupid people don't know they are stupid, and that this is one more reason why they are extremely dangerous.

This is generally well understood by anyone trying to look into the uncomfortable problem of human stupidity. But it's quite alarming. And this, of course, leads me back to my original, agonizing question: am I stupid?

I have passed IQ tests with good marks. Unfortunately, I know that they don't prove anything. Several people have told me that I am intelligent – or so they think. But that this doesn't prove anything, either. They may simply be too kind to tell me the truth. Conversely, they could be attempting to use my stupidity for their own advantage. Or they could be just as stupid as I am.

I have one little glimpse of hope: quite often, I am intensely aware of how stupid I am (or I have been.) And this indicates that I am not *completely* stupid.

At times, I have tried to locate myself in the Cartesian coordinates (see chapter 8) using as far as possible measurable results of action, rather than opinion, as a yardstick. Depending on the situation, I seem to wander around the upper side of the graph, above the X-axis, sometimes in the quadrant on the top right, that is to say, with a relatively "low" or "high" level of intelligence. But in some cases I am desperately lost on the left side, hurting myself as well as others. I just hope I am "useful to others" as often as I think.

But I know that it's impossible to never make mistakes – and that there is never any end to learning.

On a broader scale, one would expect the strongest success factors to lie in the first and fourth quadrant, that is, on the right side of the Y-axis. However, the staggering number of people who belong on the other side, and have wonderful careers, can be only explained by a strong desire on the part of several leaders to be surrounded by as many stupid people as possible (see chapters 6 and 10.)

The problem isn't just how to place ourselves in the graph, but also to understand how our stupidity can interact with that of others. Since the remote origins of human thinking, practically everybody (including some of the best writers on the subject) appeared to believe that there is a neat separation: people are either intelligent or stupid. But, embarrassing as this can be, it's pretty obvious that it isn't so simple.

Shortly after reading his essay on human stupidity, I wrote a letter to Carlo Cipolla. Much to my surprise, he answered, briefly but kindly.

I had asked him: *«What do you think of my "corollary" to your theory?»* The answer was *«Well… why not, maybe…»* – which I think can be taken as agreement on (or, at least, no objection to) a concept that has a strong influence on how we understand the problem of human stupidity.

Livraghi's First Corollary [1]

In each of us there is a factor of stupidity,
which is always larger than we suppose

This "inside factor" in each person creates a threedimensional coordinate system and I don't think I have to explain its complexity, because no stupid (or timid) person would have had the courage to read this far.

Of course, in addition to our own and other people's stupidity, we can introduce other variables, such as our behavior factors, and their many ways of combining with those of others. It may be wise to forget the "intelligent" factor, as there never is enough of that – but to consider "fourth quadrant" values, because even the most generous person can sometimes behave like a "bandit", if only by mistake.

These additional factors generate multi-dimensional models that can get fairly difficult to manage. But even if we consider only our individual stupidity values, the complexity can become quite staggering.

Try it for yourself… and get really scared.

* * *

[1] This "corollary" isn't necessarily related to a single author. It could be applied to Cipolla's "First Basic Law" (see chapter 7) or to *Hanlon's Razor* or *Finagle's Law* (chapter 1) or "Murphy's Law" (chapter 4) as to any general consideration on the ubiquity of stupidity, that is often, if not always, more widespread and more dangerous than expected.

When this concept started to develop, in the early stages of studying the problem of stupidity, it had taken shape in my mind as the "first corollary." This sounded rather strange, as I had only one. But my original feeling was right… I have since discovered that there are at least three.

Second Corollary:

When the stupidity of one person combines with the stupidity of others, the impact grows geometrically – i.e. by multiplication, not addition, of the individual stupidity factors

It is a generally accepted concept that "the sum of a network increases as the square of the number of members" and it seems quite obvious that the same criterion applies to the combination of stupidity factors in individual people. This can help to explain the well-known fact that crowds as a whole are much more stupid than any individual person in the crowd. [2]

Stupid behavior and thinking tend to reproduce and multiply so dangerously that the contagion can spread to otherwise intelligent people when they don't realize how they are influenced by collective stupidity.

Stupidity, as an aggregate, has more consistency and continuity than other human attitudes. But obviously the picture is more complicated, and the consequences even more worrying, if we consider that nobody is totally immune.

Third corollary:

The combination of intelligence in different people is more difficult than the combination of stupidity

This isn't only because the power of stupidity is generally underestimated – and its consequences are often unpredictable. There are multiple and complicated causes of this problem.

Stupidity is brainless – it doesn't need to think, get organized or plan ahead to generate a combined effect. The transfer and combination of intelligence is a much more complex process.

Stupid people can combine instantly into a super-stupid group or mass, while intelligent people are effective as a group only when they know each other well and are experienced in working together.

The creation of well-tuned groups of people sharing intelligence can generate fairly powerful anti-stupidity forces, but (unlike stupidity bundling) they need organized planning and upkeep; and can lose a large part of their effectiveness by the infiltration of stupid people or unexpected bursts of stupidity in otherwise intelligent people.

[2] This can happen in "crowds" or "mobs" as well as in organized systems. A classic Latin saying is *Senatores boni viri, Senatus mala bestia*. We can have doubts now, as there were then, about Senators being "good men" – but even when they are the assembly as a whole is often more stupid than its individual members. On the problems of organizations see *Parkinson's Law* and *The Peter Principle* in chapters 5 and 6.

In some situations these dangers can be partly offset (if not totally controlled) by being aware of the potential problem before anything goes wrong – and having "backup intelligence" in the group (and in whatever equipment is being used) to fill the gaps, organize the resources and correct the mistakes before the damage becomes too serious.

Any good skipper of a sailboat knows what I mean; so does any other person that has experience of an environment where the cause-effect process is bluntly direct and tangible. [3]

Communities and organizations with a high intelligence factor are likely to have greater opportunities for long-term survival, but for this to be effective we must avoid the potentially devastating short term impact of shared stupidity, which (unfortunately) can cause major damage to large numbers of non-stupid people before it self-destructs. [4]

Another dangerous element in the equation is that (as we shall see in chapter 10) the machinery of power tends to place at the top of the pyramid people who care more about their own advantage (and the interests of restricted groups) than about the well-being of everyone else – and they, in turn, tend to favor and protect stupidity and keep true intelligence out of their way as much as they can.

While the power of stupidity is insidious and dangerous in all its ways, even more harm is caused by the stupidity of power.

A description of the book
is online – stupidity.it

[3] See *In Memory of Peter Blake*, 2001 `gandalf.it/offline/blake.htm`

[4] There are some comments on such developments in chapter 11.

The Power of Stupidity

by Giancarlo Livraghi

Chapter 10 – The Stupidity of Power

The stupidity of every single human being is a large enough problem, with all sorts of consequences that aren't easily identified. But the picture changes when we consider the stupidity of people who have "power"– that is, control over the destiny of other people. Also in this case, I shall continue to follow the concept of defining stupidity, intelligence, etcetera by the effects of human behavior. But there is a substantial difference, an unbalance, when the relationship is not of equals. One person, or a small group of people, can influence the life and well-being of many more. This changes the size, the impact and the nature of all the cause-and-effect relations in the system.

Power, "large" or "small"

Power is everywhere. We are all subject to someone else's power. And (except perhaps in the case of extreme slavery) we all exert power on others. Personally, I loathe the concept – but, whether we like it or not, it's part of life.

Parents have (or are supposed to have) power over their children, but children have a great deal of power over their parents, which they often use quite ruthlessly. We may be "owners" of cats and dogs, horses or hamsters, elephants or camels, sailboats or cars, phones or computers, but quite often we are subject to their power.

It would be far too complicated, for the sake of this subject, to get into the multiple intricacies of human relations. Therefore I shall concentrate on the most obvious cases of "power": those situations where someone has a defined role of authority over a large (or small) number of people.

In theory, we all tend to agree that there should be as little power as possible, and that people in power should be subject to control by the rest of the people. We call this "democracy." Or, in organizations, we can call it leadership, motivation, distributed responsibility, sharing and personal empowerment – as opposed to authority, bureaucracy, centralization or formal discipline.

But there are relatively few people who want real freedom. Responsibility is a burden. Many find it quite convenient to be "followers." To let rulers, bosses, managers, "opinion leaders", all sorts of "gurus" or "celebrities", movie stars and television "personalities" set the pace and (we suppose) do the thinking – and put the blame on them if we're unhappy.

On the other hand, there is a somewhat special breed of people who *enjoy* power. Because they are so dedicated to the substantial effort needed to gain a lot of power, they prevail.

We must assume that the general concept applies: there are just as many stupid people in power as there are in the rest of humanity, and there are always more than we think. But two things are different: the relationship and the attitude.

The power of power

People in power are more powerful than other people. It isn't as obvious as it sounds. One might argue that this is not always so. There are *apparently* powerful people with less real influence than some who are much less visible.

Without getting into the complexities of this difference, it's worth noting that there is a widespread bizarre and stupid behavior. There are many people who go out of their way to be followers of "apparent" power – and so are actively committed to the advantage of others while damaging themselves. [1]

Regardless of how and why power is held and used, and of appearances that often confuse roles, this is about real power. The uneven relationship caused by the fact that some people have a stronger influence on circumstances than others – and in many situations a few people can do good or harm to many.

A basic, and quite obvious, criterion is that the effect of behavior must be measured not by the yardstick of whoever does something, but from the other end the point of view of whoever is subject to the effects of that person's acts (or lack of action.)

A clear result of this basic concept is a drastic shift in the "stupidology diagram" – as we shall see in chapter 11. The harm (or good) is much larger, depending on the number of people involved and the impact of actions and decisions. What appears as a detail in the "ivory tower" of power can be very important in the lives of "ordinary" people.

If a person in a hypothetical "equal" relationship (as we have seen in chapter 8) gains as much personal advantage as the damage it causes to someone else, the system as a whole remains balanced. But it's obviously not so when there is a difference in power.

In abstract theory, we could assume that, as the percentage of intelligent or stupid people is the same, the effect of power will be balanced.

That hypothesis may be relatively close to reality in a few "small power" situations – in narrow environments where personal interaction is direct and mutually effective. But when power deals with large numbers of people the one-to-one relationship is lost. It is much more difficult to listen, to understand, to measure the consequences and the perceptions. There is a "Doppler effect", a shift, leading to an increase of the stupidity factor.

Even in open, democratic societies, where power isn't isolated and remote, information is freely available, elected representatives are supposed to act on behalf of "The People" and their actions are (or should) be open to public scrutiny, the relationship is not "of equals."

All serious studies of power systems (while they are not necessarily based on the notion that power is stupid) point to the need for power separation, and for power conflicts to be formalized so that they don't lead to violence, in order to avoid "absolute power" (i.e. extreme stupidity.)

That's a big enough problem to keep us all on constant alert against any exaggerated concentration of power – and to explain why so many things aren't working as well as they should. But there is more.

1 This is one of the problems of "idolatry" – as explained in chapter 22.

The power syndrome

How do people gain power? Sometimes by not even trying. They are entrusted by other people, because other people trust them. They have natural leadership and a sense of responsibility. [2]

This process, more often than not, produces "intelligent" power. A situation in which the chosen leaders do good for themselves – and a lot more for others. Sometimes it can lead to deliberate sacrifice, when people do harm to themselves for the benefit of others (if that is done intentionally it doesn't fall into the "hapless" category because of the moral good, including self perception and the approval of others, gained by the person who deliberately places common good over private interest.)

But there are much fewer examples of such "intelligent power" than we would all like to see. Why?

The reason is that there is *competition* for gaining and maintaining power. An aggressive, sometimes fearsome, often anxious, always troubled, craving for power.

The people who don't seek power per se, but are more concentrated on their responsibilities in doing good for others, have less time and energy to spend on gaining more power – or even holding on to what they have. Those who have a greed for power, regardless of its impact on society, concentrate on the struggle for power.

Most individuals are placed somewhere between the two extremes of that spectrum (responsibility or power-mongering) with many different shades and nuances. But the manipulating element is the most aggressive in the power game and therefore it gains more power. Even people with the most generous initial motivation can be forced, over time, to dedicate more energy to maintaining or increasing power – to the point of losing sight of their original objectives.

Another element, that makes things worse, is megalomania. Power is an addictive drug. People in power are often led to believe that *because* they have power they are better, smarter, wiser, than ordinary people. They are also surrounded by sycophants, followers and exploiters enhancing their delusion.

Power is sexy. This isn't just a manner of speech. There is an instinct in the nature of our species that makes powerful people (or people who *appear* to be powerful) sexually attractive. Though many people playing the power game are too busy with it to be able to have any decent sex – or to care about emotion, affection and love.

The power syndrome isn't only a disease of powerful people, but also of their followers and of most of the people they know or meet, or who are trying to get into their environment. It's a known fact in all human communities, and at all times in history, that the people in the service of power (or wishing to be) thrive and prosper in a stupid symbiosis with the powerful, that tends to increase and complicate the stupidity of power.

The victims of this intricate mechanism aren't just the "ordinary people" who are subjected to the whims and abuse of the intermediaries as well as those of the powers above. They are also, quite often, the people at the top, who become prisoners of their entourage.

It is not uncommon, in history, for the "apparatus" to survive the fall of power. In many revolutions, after the "tyrant" is removed, power doesn't go to the revolutionaries, or to the people, but is held by the same oligarchies that had it before – or by others behaving in the same way.

2 There can be cases in which power is concentrated in the hands of a particularly considerate and generous person, as there can be wise oligarchies that behave like philosophers in Plato's *Republic*. There are such examples in history – but they are rare exceptions. It is possible, sometimes, that an intelligent person "in the right place" may reverse, to some extent, the stupidity of power – but it doesn't happen as often as would be desirable. We shall see, in the next chapter, some (hypothetical) examples of "intelligent power." But it is generally true, as Lord Acton said, that *«power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely.»*

An example is the end of the colonial system. In many countries it left control in the hands of local cliques, that aren't any better (sometimes even worse) than the foreign powers that they replaced. This didn't happen only in the twentieth century. There are many such cases in previous history – and also in some recent events.

* * *

There are "syndromes" that can coincide with power, but they can also infect people who don't have it. A reader of the Italian edition of this book commented that arrogance isn't just another form of stupidity, it can be its root. She is right. The delusion of "feeling superior" is an aggressive cause of stupidity. And so is violence – stupid not only for its consequences, but also for the cowardice and mental weakness that are often its origin.

Even when there is no physical abuse, arrogant people do all they can to force others into obedience. And, unfortunately, they are often allowed to succeed.

The stupidity of war

War is a serious, tragic and complex subject. It would be difficult to cover it thoroughly even in a whole book. [3] But it may be appropriate to summarize here a few comments on its obvious connection with stupidity.

Sixty years ago, after a second awful world war, there was a probably naive, but not unreasonable, perception that wars had come to an end. Unfortunately this is not so. There have been, and there are, wars and other hideous conflicts in many parts of the world – and no end of these horrors is in sight.

The perception that wars can, and should, be avoided is, per se, an intelligent evolution – though it still has inadequate development. So is the growing (but not effective enough) opposition to the death penalty. And the fact that for over half a century (with the painful exceptions of the Balkans and the Caucasus) there hasn't been another war in Europe. [4]

The development of information systems, that in the second half of the twentieth century made it widely possible to know more directly the horrors of war, helped to change our perceptions. But, sadly, facts prove that this new state of awareness isn't as strong and coherent as it appeared.

We are no longer convinced that armed conflicts are "always" necessary, as we had been led to believe for millennia – but we seem to be going back, though uncomfortably, to the notion that wars are, sometimes, "unavoidable" in the turbulent evolution of human affairs. [5]

3 There are historians who have written essays on wars and conflicts, in ancient history and recent events, where stupid decisions have caused all sorts of catastrophes. Examples of books on this subject are *The March of Folly – from Troy to Vietnam* by Barbara Tuchman (1984), *Der Hinge-Faktor* by Eric Durschsmied (1998) and *History's Worst Decisions – Encyclopedia Idiotica* by Stephen Weir (2005.)

4 After 1945 there have been no "major wars" between European countries, but there have been violent conflicts in Europe, such as "internal terrorism" in Ireland and Spain – and, in a different way, in Italy in the Seventies. They are perverse and essentially stupid, but they are not the same as wars.

5 Wars continue, in several parts of the world. Recent developments, such as international terrorism, all sorts of violence, fanaticism, arms trading, mercenaries, organized crime, aren't as new as they may seem. They existed, in different ways, many times in history. Obviously they are as stupid as wars – with some additional perversion. Not only because of the suffering they inflict and the terror they spread, but also as a result of what is done with the intention (or pretext) of fighting them, with many abuses and distortions falsely justified as prevention or repression.

War can be placed, in the stupidology diagram, somewhere between stupid banditism and aggressive stupidity. Many wars are serious damage for all, including the winners. But even when someone gains some advantage the stupidity of power is devastatingly effective: the gain of a few is a horrible tragedy for too many.

* * *

All situations are always complex. For instance, in the case of war – as in other conflicts or disasters – there are countless opportunities for the multiplication of violence, cruelty, abuse, exploitation, trickery and stupidity. But there are also many little openings for the ability to manage difficult circumstances. With some of the best qualities in human nature. Mutual help, solidarity, generosity, understanding, love and friendship.

In extreme conditions we find that stupidity remains dominant, but intelligence is never totally missing in human behavior. It would be interesting to find a way of being more intelligent, and human, also in times of peace.

* * *

The problem is that (while it can – and should – be limited, controlled, scrutinized and conditioned) power can not be eliminated altogether. Humanity needs leaders. Organizations need people who take responsibilities, and those people must have some power to perform their role.

So we've got to live with power – and its stupidity. But this doesn't mean that we must accept, tolerate or support its arrogance. Or be deceived too easily by gestures, words, promises and declared intentions.

Power should not be admired, trusted or even respected unless it shows practical intelligence in what it does to us and to the world. (It should be for us and for the world – and when it's effectively so it's welcome – but the machinery of power, combined with the obstinate stupidity of bureaucracy, often frustrates even the best intentions.)

As far as I can see, there is no "universal" or standard solution to this problem. But we are half way there if we are aware of it – and if we never allow ourselves to be blinded or seduced by the treacherous glitter of power.

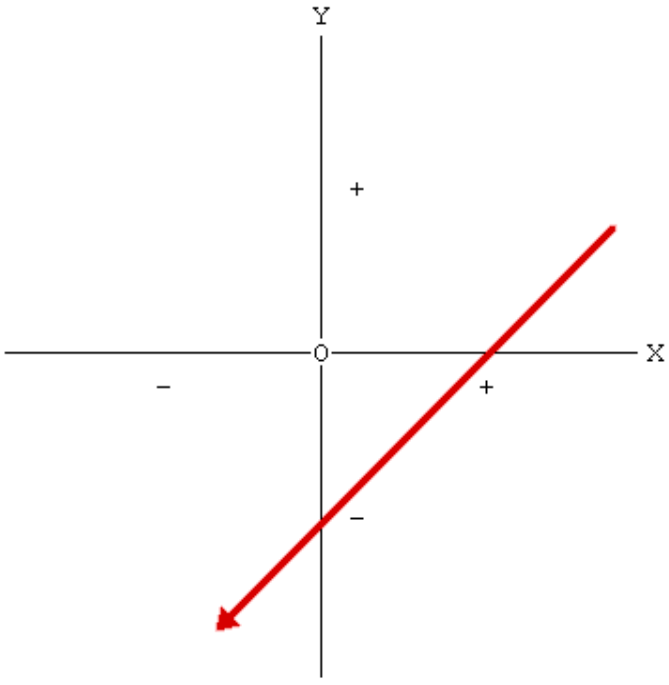
A description of the book
is online – stupidity.it

The Power of Stupidity

by Giancarlo Livraghi

Chapter 11 – The Ways of Power

People who have or seek power are, as an average, just as stupid or intelligent as any other person. But if we follow the method of measuring intelligence and stupidity by the effect of behavior, not motive or technique, the result is that in the effects of stupid power make things worse, shown in this diagram [1] – where the red arrow is the "power" factor. There is a general deterioration in the system, with a shift from "intelligence" to "stupidity."

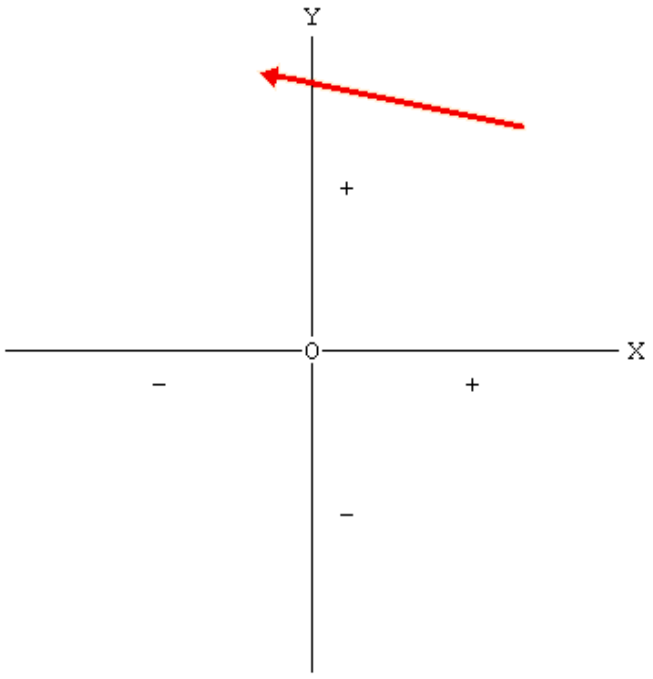


A careful reader may notice that the arrow isn't in the center.
This is to allow for the fact that a few people (those in power and their entourage)
gain some advantages – and therefore the shift in the system
is not from the center of the "intelligent" area to that of the "stupid"
but it leans on the lower right side crossing the harmful fourth quadrant.

1 Based on "Cartesian coordinates" as defined in chapter 8.

The pursuit of power increases the stupidity factor. The impact can be relatively large or small depending on the amount of power (the importance of matters influenced by power and the number of people subject to its effects) and on the intensity of the power struggle.

As we have seen in chapter 10, power, as a system, is more stupid than basic human nature. We can, however, imagine others sorts of evolutionary process. Let's assume, for instance, a situation in which "intelligent power" prevails. We would probably see a trend like this.



Let's remember that the "first quadrant" (top right)
is the "intelligence area", while in the "second" (top left)
we find people who do good for others, but not for themselves.
The more someone's behavior benefits others,
the higher it is placed on the "Y-axis."

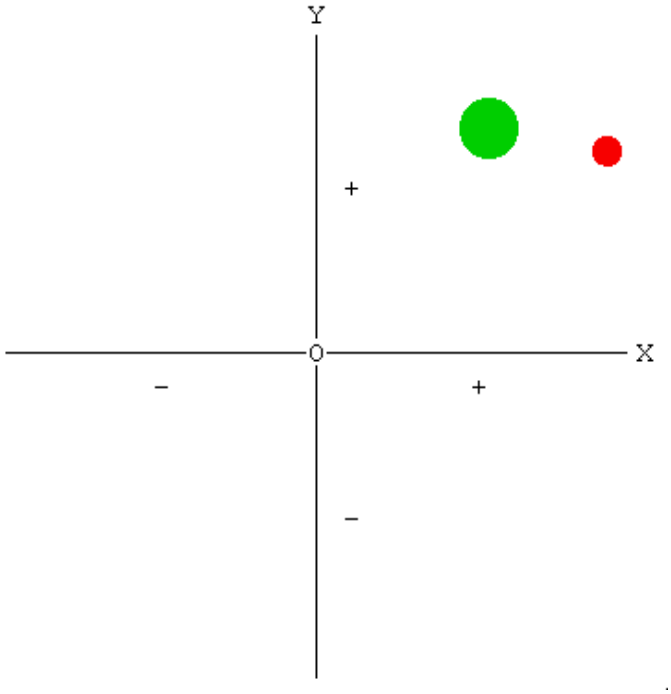
Power, in this case, deliberately chooses to offer greater advantages to the community than to itself, to the point – sometimes – of accepting some disadvantages if they help to improve general well-being. [2]

The shift to the upper part of the "Y-axis" is unlikely to be fast, but it tends to be steady and consistent. Such situations are not impossible. There are nearly always a few in some parts of the system. But they depend on unusually well tuned, well motivated teamwork – harmonies that aren't easily generated or reproduced, and can fall apart because of changes in the environment or disruptions in their structure.

Rare as they are, such teams are extraordinarily effective. Real innovations and improvements in society are much more likely to develop when and where there are synergetic teams, active symbiosis, instinctive cohesion and strong humanity.

When such behaviors prevail, the result is a situation like the one shown in the next graph (where the red area marks the position of people in power, the green is the rest of the community.)

2 As noted in chapters 7, 8 and 9, in this case people in power can not be placed in the "second quadrant or defined as "helpless" or self-defeating. If we consider ethic and human factors., their behavior is remarkably intelligent.



Here we find all results placed in the intelligence area,
with people in power gaining greater
advantage for themselves (+ in the "X-axis.")

There are no "direction arrows" in this diagram because, in the most favorable circumstances, such a system can remain stable (or make slow progress, as indicated in the first graph.)

In a stabilized, or improving, situation people in power are likely to have greater advantages than the rest, but as this works for everyone's benefit it isn't a problem – as long as two (opposed but synergetic) stupidity factors don't get into the picture: servility and envy.

I don't want to complicate the picture, but I think there is one relevant comment. In some particularly efficient organizations (such as those called "quality circles") the two areas overlap, because there is no hierarchy and responsibilities are shared. It's a well known fact that this is the most "intelligent" form of human cooperation and it can produce extraordinary results.

Such systems are basically strong, but they are exposed to damage. They can be warped by internal problems, such as stupidity factors or power syndromes. Or they can suffer from unexpected changes in the environment – or be disrupted by intervention from the outside which (deliberately or by mistake) upsets their delicate balance.

The observation of history, and of some specific situations in today's world, reveals that even in the most depressed periods or situations, and in the most degraded environments, there can be active nuclei of this kind. This confirms that intelligence, though rare, isn't an anomaly. It's a natural resource of human nature that can surface in any stage of evolution.

The demanding – but not unrealistic – task is to discover the existence, support the survival, encourage the development of these fruitful harmonies. And maybe help small sparks of light to become stronger sources of illumination.

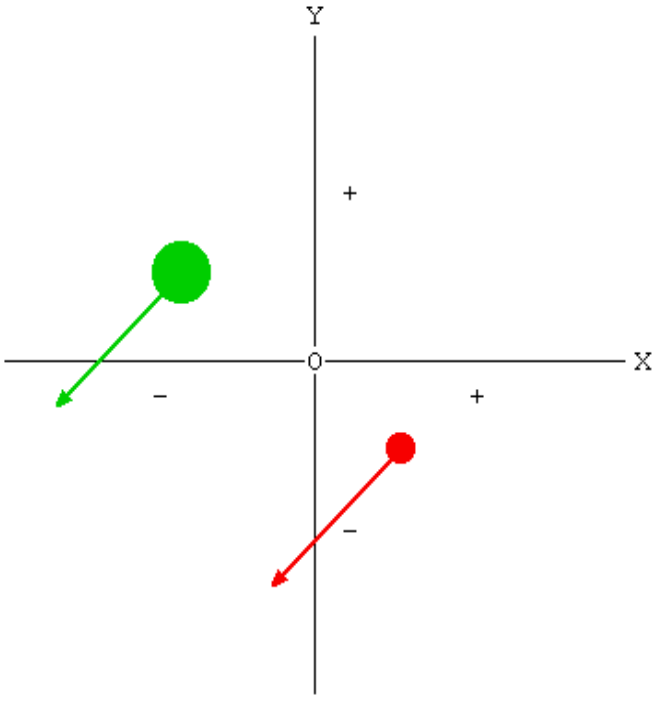
* * *

After this short digression on intelligence we must go back to the unfortunately overwhelming subject – stupidity. Let's take another look at history. We find that the stupidity of power doesn't have the same impact at different times or in different situations.

At times of decline and fall we can assume that the general percentage of stupid people remains a constant, but we find that there is, especially among people in power, a higher concentration of "bandits", who often tend to become stupid when the result of their behavior is evaluated considering the unbalance created by their role. While among people who are not in power there are more of those who, in this case, can be correctly called "helpless."

One of the consequences is that the destructive power of stupidity is increased – and the resulting situation goes from bad to worse.

In this case the position of those in power, and of the rest of the people, is placed as we see in the next diagram.

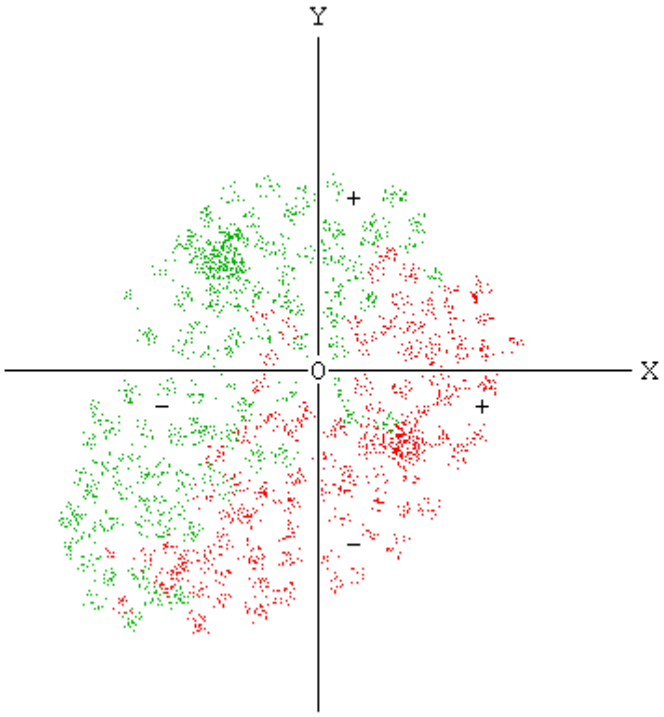


Behaviors and situations degrade, moving into
the "third quadrant", that is the area of stupidity.

It's hard to understand, in this type of situation, if the stupidity of power increases the effect of widespread stupidity – or vice versa. In most cases both contribute to a "vicious circle" and so the entire system deteriorates, as shown by the arrows in the graph.

Sometimes this trend can be reversed, but that requires a very special combination: the convergence of intelligent people that can gain power and a strong collective thrust for substantial change.

In the absence of such an "intelligent mutation", or of an outside influence that changes the basic criteria, over time the system tends to explode – that is, to disintegrate. As we see in the next (and last) graph.



If a "chaotic" situation occurs before there is irreparable damage to society as a whole, or to the entire ecosystem… almost anything can happen. A turbulent vortex generates countless openings for stupidity, but "intelligent" developments are not totally impossible. [3]

For the reasons that I have explained in chapter 3, comments here are only about the general criteria. We can all be free to apply them, as best they suit our purpose, to specific situations (from the general state of the planet to international communities or individual countries or any large or small organization.)

I just want to add that stupidity and intelligence, as other variables of human behavior, are not irreparably conditioned by genetic traits or cultural environments. They can change considerably with learning and experience.

We could draw all sorts of graphs or diagrams, or in any other way analyze facts and trends, not only to understand them better, but also to look for less stupid ways of coping with the problems. Not for the sake of dreaming (though, at times, it can be comforting) but to make real improvement. We know that it's difficult, but it's important to understand that it's possible.

Understanding the diagrams in this chapter needs to be based on the definition of the "stupidology graph" as explained in chapter 8. Only here (not in other parts of the book) they are used to help focus on some examples – for those readers who appreciate their use. On other subjects graphic "coordinates" are not particularly useful (and by mixing different criteria they can't be developed coherently.) In any case, for readers that find the diagrams boring or confusing, the concepts are fully developed in the text even when the graphs are not considered.

A summary of the book is online – stupidity.it

3 Some comments on this subject are at the end of the appendix *Simple Thoughts on Complexity*.

The Power of Stupidity

by Giancarlo Livraghi

Chapter 12
The Stupidity of Bureaucracy

On this subject, I must confess, it's difficult for me to avoid the influence of a personal grudge. I often feel incompetent, and I am always uncomfortable, when dealing with any bureaucratic procedure. Of course there are more serious problems than the exasperating stupidity of bureaucracy. But few are so irritating, boring and frustrating as the the everyday hindrance of bureaucratic nonsense. Franz Kafka gave us a dramatically depressing picture of this disease ninety years ago. But things aren't getting any better.

The chronic and obstinate stupidity of bureaucracy isn't only despairingly "kafkian." It's a particularly obnoxious case of the stupidity of power – with all the awful effects that we have seen in chapter 10, and some more nasty twists of its own. Sometimes it has very serious, even catastrophic consequences. But even when the damage is less disastrous, it's a hideous persecution that forces us to waste time and commitment in all sorts of useless, cumbersome and unreasonable chores.

The root of the problem is that bureaucracy is dedicated to satisfying its own idiotic needs at the expense of the service that it's supposed to provide. And it's extremely conservative. It tends to repeat its routines even when they are useless or harmful, ignoring any consideration of practicality or common sense. It behaves like those stupid parasites that continue to pursue their invasive growth even when by doing so they risk maiming or killing the host – and therefore themselves. [1]

[1] The "fable" of the scorpion and the frog explains how this sort of stupidity works. Some comments on this subject are online: gandalf.it/stupid/scorpion.htm

In other words – bureaucracy, when taken to its extreme consequences, is a terminal illness of any human society. But in many cases it cannot be radically removed, because such drastic surgery could hurt some healthy parts of the system, that unfortunately depend on bureaucracy for some part of their existence.

Like power, also bureaucracy cannot be totally eliminated. There is a need for someone to file, record, verify, as meticulously as necessary and also with an appropriate level of formality. But only small parts of the enormous resources employed by all sorts of bureaucratic systems are performing this task effectively.

Bureaucracy is generally perceived as a need (and a disease) of the "public sector." But it can be just as powerful, and harmful, in privately owned companies. When routine prevails on efficiency, and formality replaces humanity, the entire organization loses purpose and perspective.

There are also dangerous "side effects." When too many rules and regulations conflict with each other the result can be passive resignation – and a loss of discipline and commitment. *"Why should I bother to do a good job when I know that it will bevanified by routine?"* If, by following a rule, one violates another, the result is increasing disorder – and corruption.

People start, maybe, with "forgetting" a silly rule and hoping that they won't get caught. Once this becomes a habit, the basic concepts of integrity and good behavior can go to pot along with the bureaucratic nonsense. Over-regulated and formalistic societies, or organizations, often are also the most corrupt and dishonest – as well as incompetent and inefficient.

* * *

Not all bureaucrats are ignorant, arrogant, dumb or stupid. I have met people at all levels in bureaucracies – from counter attendants to heads of large government departments – who are bright, human, sensible, kind, even personally pleasant and with a sense of humor. But their observations on the systems in which they work have made me even more unhappy.

There is something heroic in people who do good work in spite of a frustrating environment. Such as teachers who really teach – in a school system driven by other priorities.

Strange as this may seem, bureaucracy can be used well. When rules are well conceived, clear and simple, and sensibly applied, they can help to make things clear, to soften conflicts, to find an effective balance of personal freedom and social commitment. The real problem isn't that bureaucracy exists, but that there is too much of it and it rarely works properly.

There should be some sort of therapy to replace bureaucratic stupidity with intelligence. In theory, it's simple. A strong dose of common sense, to be administered frequently for a long time, with regular injections of civil responsibility, practical discipline and true public service motivation, continued obstinately as long as it takes to achieve durable results.

But in practice it's very difficult. If one day a dedicated bunch of people will find a solution to this problem, they will deserve the gratitude of all humanity – or, at least, of that part of humanity that is lucky enough to live where their prescription is applied.

The Power of Stupidity

by Giancarlo Livraghi

Chapter 13 – Stupidity and Ignorance

A list of the allies, "relatives" or accomplices of stupidity could be very long. The daily observation of human behavior (our own as well as everyone else's) shows that a variety of attitudes and circumstances can contribute to making us stupid. But three, of those many possible factors, are particularly relevant: ignorance, fear and habit. They are the subjects of this and the two following chapters – and then we shall get to how all this is influenced by the confusing and contradictory effects of haste.

Obviously these attitudes and behaviors combine with each other (and with stupidity) in countless ways. The outcome isn't necessarily "exponential" – and it can't be effectively measured by any standard mathematical criteria. But the effect tends to multiply rather than just add.

There seems to be a mutual attraction. Fear can be bred by ignorance – and vice versa. Habit is often the nourishment (or the excuse) for ignorance and stupidity. It isn't unusual for all four to join forces. And it's quite obvious that they all can be (deliberately or not) exploited by whoever has the leverage to do so. It is often so in the case of power (chapter 10) but also other people can gain an advantage from someone else's ignorance, fear, habit or haste. In chapter 17 we shall see how stupidity is related with cunning. There are many ways of "interacting" with human weaknesses and many opportunities for deliberate or inconsiderate manipulation.

Maybe some readers will be disappointed when they notice that there are no diagrams here using Cartesian coordinates for the evaluation of stupidity – as in chapters 8 and 11. The reason is that the criteria can't be applied to different concepts which, if at all measurable, would need to be estimated in different ways – and it would be impossible to combine several unrelated yardsticks in any manageable or relevant coordinate system.

Of course not all ignorant people are stupid and not all stupid people are ignorant. Fear can be, depending on the situation, intelligent or stupid. And habits can be "healthy", or harmless, or dangerous. As all these factors are constantly mingled and interacting with each other, I shall try, for each one, to start with a brief definition of the subject.

Stupidity is often confused with ignorance. But they are very different (this is generally understood in any serious study of human culture.) And so are intelligence and knowledge. There can be very stupid people with lots of "notions" as there can be poorly informed, or scarcely educated, people with a high level of effective intelligence.

There is also a relevant difference between formal education level and actual "knowledge." A person can have spent several years at school without learning much – or anything at all, other than conventional "notions." While there are self-educated people with considerable depth of knowledge and understanding.

There is no direct and linear connection between ignorance and stupidity. But when they combine and interact the result can be awful.

One of the worst forms of ignorance is the assumption of knowledge. Just as people who never notice their own stupidity are very stupid, people who never understand that they don't know are desperately ignorant. Socrates used to say: *«The more I know, the more I know that I don't know.»* That's a good reason to believe that he was very intelligent – and much more knowledgeable than people who think they "know it all."

A person born and grown up in the depth of a cave could be awfully upset and confused by the sight of sunshine. We are all, in one way or another, in that sort of condition.

> It would be appropriate to consider, in this context, Francis Bacon's views about the "idols" that stand in the way of knowledge. But a discussion on the nature of perception, understanding and thinking – the cornerstone of philosophy – would go far beyond the limits of these short notes.
>
> There are also some interesting works of science fiction on this subject. Such as Isaac Asimov's masterpiece, *Nightfall*, in which the inhabitants of a planet with two suns, where night comes only once in ten thousand years, are thrown into a frenzy of terror when they see the stars (and this brings into the picture the problem of habit – see chapter 15.)
>
> There is remarkable depth in Neal Stephenson's bright observations on metaphors, that sometimes help us tounderstand, but can lead us into the artificiality of a distorted and deceitful "metaphoric world." As he explained in his brilliant novel *Snow Crash* (1990) and also in his intriguing essay *In the beginning was the command line* (1999) that I reviewed in May 2000 `gandalf.it/netmark/comline.htm` The whole text of this book is available for download in `cryptocomicon.com/beginning.html`

We keep telling ourselves that we are in the age of information, but the fact is that we are poorly informed. Because most of the information is deliberately manipulated. Because information management is often careless, repetitive and shallow – handled by people who are ignorant on the subject and don't bother to check their sources as thoroughly as they should. Or because our "mental filter", or instinctive laziness, makes us perceive and understand only what fits our usual beliefs and biases.

There is a mischievous reciprocity of ignorance (see also chapter 18 on the vicious circle of stupidity.) When people mutually adjust to other people's (real or assumed) ignorance, the level of dialogue spirals downwards. The amount and the quality of information exchanged tend to zero – or become negative, reinforcing false or distorted notions, increasing prejudice, commonplace and errors of perspective (there are more comments on these subjects in chapters 21, 24 and 30.)

To avoid the effort of thinking, we often fall back on "comfortable" misconceptions that find easy agreement (and, here again, we follow the path of habit – or we fear the danger of having to tackle a difference of opinion for which we might not be adequately prepared.)

There are many other unpleasant "friends" of stupidity and ignorance. Arrogance, presumption, egotism, selfishness, envy, carelessness, servility, imitation, gossip, prejudice, meanness, unwillingness to listen and to understand… etcetera… lurking almost everywhere in human behavior and communication

Another dangerous factor is the principle of "authority." As something is stated by someone who appears to be an "authoritative" (or "authorized") source, we are led to believe that it is unquestionably accurate and believable.

More often than not, it's true that someone knows more, about a specific subject, than we do. But assumed authority isn't necessarily real competence. The opinions of so-called "experts" are biased by their cultural or scientific perspectives. That's unavoidable and legitimate – as long as we understand that there is no such thing as a totally "objective" opinion. But they can also be influenced by constrictions or interests that aren't transparent.

Of course we can't verify everything – and it's often necessary to trust someone else's judgment. But it's better to keep our eyes open – and never miss an opportunity to understand and to look under the surface of appearances.

It isn't enough to learn what we are taught – or to know what we are told by the standardized machinery of the culture industry. Only active questioning, searching and understanding can really free us from ignorance.

The most important tool is insatiable curiosity. A desire to know and understand even when, at first glance, it seems unnecessary.

Albert Einstein said: *«I have no special talents. I am only passionately curious.»* And he explained: *«The important thing is to never stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing. One cannot help but be in awe when he contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality. It is enough if one tries merely to comprehend a little of this mystery every day. Never lose a holy curiosity.»*

Instinctive curiosity (along with an ability to listen) is a strong antidote to stupidity. A lively, amusing and pleasant friend of intelligence.

The Power of Stupidity

by Giancarlo Livraghi

Chapter 14 – Stupidity and Fear

The bravest people in the world teach us that it's healthy and useful to be afraid. Believing that there is nothing to be feared isn't courageous, it's stupid. When fear is awareness of dangers and risks, it's a form of intelligence. Of course this is not the sort of fear that can be an ally and an accomplice of stupidity. But there are widespread types of fear that have nothing to do with a real understanding of what can be dangerous or unsafe. People can be afraid of being, of thinking, of understanding, of knowing (fear of knowledge is a nasty form of ignorance.)

People are often scared of having their own opinion – it's more comfortable to follow mainstream bias and prejudice. There is fear of shadows and fantasies, of imaginary problems. Many people are also scared about revealing their feelings (this is not to be confused with shyness – being shy is often a symptom of sensitivity and intelligence.)

Are these rare or unusual situations? Cases of psychological disease, or exaggerations of small problems? Let's look around – and also look at ourselves. We shall find that unreasonable, unjustified fear is much more widespread than it may appear. And nobody is totally immune.

Quite often, by running away from something that we had no reason to fear, we fall into a real trap that we hadn't noticed.

One of the basic learnings in life is the control of fear. Knowing how to have steady nerves and a clear mind in the face of real danger. And getting rid of imaginary fears.

Many children, and some grownups, are afraid of darkness. This isn't totally unreasonable. It makes sense to move more carefully when we can't see where we are going or what we are doing. But that doesn't mean that we must be afraid of darkness per se. And there is darkness that isn't in the environment, but in some part of our mind that we don't understand – and this, of course, makes us uncomfortable and scared.

There is also fear of responsibility. It can be scary to take decisions, to have opinions of our own, to lead, to be held accountable. This is (intentionally or unconsciously) a form of cowardice. We find imitation more comfortable than choice, fashions and trends more reassuring than taste. We think it's safer to adjust to prevailing opinions than to have any thoughts of our own. We prefer to follow other people's authority than to accept responsibility. So when something doesn't work we can put the blame on someone else. It's pretty obvious that this type of fear is related to ignorance and habit – and leads to stupidity.

Strange as that may seem, there is also fear of knowledge. A conscious or subconscious desire to avoid knowing what may cause doubt or perplexity. To stay away from what we fear we might not understand. To remain in the shallow, but comfortable, shelter of commonplace and prejudice.

A way of keeping people in blind obedience is to generate fear of the unknown and to make appear as frightful whatever doesn't suit the wishes and whims of power. *«Here comes the bogey man»* is a perverted tool of authority – often used with grownups as well as children.

It can be quite difficult to realize how often we are influenced by such forms of bad education – sometimes deliberately set up and cultivated by those who want to undermine our freedom of thought and behavior, but also mindlessly nourished by an accumulation of commonplace and widespread habits (in chapter 15 we shall see how habit can combine with fear.)

A basic tool of intelligence is balancing two risks. At one extreme of the spectrum, the fear of being inadequate, and thus not doing what we can. At the other end, the delusion of being able to do what is beyond our ability and competence – or, in a particular circumstance, can't be done.

Finding the right balance in each specific case isn't easy. But we should keep trying. Giving up too soon or too easily is harmful to us and to other people – that is to say, stupid. But so is overestimating our talent, our judgment or our understanding of situations – or assuming that we never make mistakes.

Just as it's stupid to think that we are immune from stupidity, and ignorant to think that we know everything, courage isn't the delusion of never being afraid. Even the most reasonable and well-balanced person has some hidden and unjustified fears, some areas of insecurity – and those weaknesses are more harmful when we aren't aware of their presence.

It's interesting to notice how some people, who in ordinary life are easily scared, can suddenly reveal, in the face of real danger, or when they are helping someone else, unexpected and extraordinary courage.

It's impossible to eliminate fear. But we can be aware of it, control it, limit its damages. Understanding our fears, and those of other people, is a way of being less stupid. Above all, we should not be afraid of fear. This is often easier than it seems.

The Power of Stupidity

by Giancarlo Livraghi

Chapter 15 – Stupidity and Habit

Here again – let me start with a short definition. Not all habits are stupid. Some can be good, useful, efficient, comfortable and cozy. Though "changing for the sake of change" can be fun, things don't always improve by just changing. But the force of habit can be blinding, especially when it's combined with stupidity (or ignorance, or fear.) [1]

Habit is (or appears to be) reassuring. Behaving and thinking "as usual" gives us a feeling of false security. Habit is related to another source of stupidity: imitation. "Doing as others do" saves us the trouble of thinking, knowing, understanding, deciding, being responsible of our behavior.

Habit weakens curiosity, discourages the desire to explore, discover, learn, improve, change perspective. [2]

As we saw in chapter 14, habit is obviously related to fear. We are afraid of stepping out of the usual path. We are afraid of what is "usually" considered dangerous or improper – even when it's quite easy to find out that it isn't.

It can work also the other way round, when habit encourages us to rely on things, people or situations that aren't safe, reliable or reassuring just because they are "usual."

Small misunderstandings or large disasters, minor accidents or great catastrophes are often the result of a false sense of security induced by habit. This is a way of unleashing the awful destructive power of stupidity.

[1] See chapter 13 on ignorance, 14 on fear and 16 on haste.

[2] See chapter 21 on the problems of perspective and chapter 30 on curiosity as an antidote to stupidity

Deceit, fraud, arrogance, all sorts of lies and falsities, often use habit to gain trust that they don't deserve – or to obtain obedience for no justifiable reason.

It's pretty obvious that habit can relate to ignorance. Many "bad habits" are the result of lacking or inadequate information – or poor understanding of why and how something originally became a habit. Just as often, habit is the cause of ignorance, because we don't look behind appearances, we take things for granted, we accept "the usual" without trying to understand what it is or why it's supposed to make sense.

Obviously habit is an enemy of innovation. But this isn't as simple as it sounds. One of the "bad habits" is to assume that "new" is always "better." And to jump to new solutions or devices before we have had a chance to understand if they serve any useful purpose – or if that particular choice fits our specific needs.

The habit of chasing innovation for the sake of being "up to date" is just as bad a staying with old ways when they are no longer the fittest. And it relates quite closely to ignorance and stupidity – as well as to the fear of being, appearing or feeling "different", or "left behind" if we aren't following a trend.

Fear has been for many years a way of selling useless "innovation" – not only, but especially so, in information technology. *«If you don't buy this you will be left behind»* is the threat that led companies (as well as people and families) into buying lots of stuff that they didn't need and that they were not prepared to manage. The result isn't just a monumental waste of money, but also the cause of countless inefficiencies. [3]

There is ambiguity also in the concept of "good manners." Kindness and courtesy are good qualities (and closely related to intelligence.) When they are genuine and sincere, they can help us to understand other people, to listen, to learn, to share – and so to reduce ignorance, fear and stupidity.

Even formal "ceremony" or "protocol" isn't always useless or meaningless. And it's important, in any case, to respect the customs and manners of other people, even when we don't share or understand their lifestyle, so as to avoid dangerous and useless misunderstandings.

But when "manners" become a prison, prevent us from communicating and understanding, we should not be afraid of "breaking the rules." It's always better, in any case, to understand which "rules" we are following and why. To know when we believe in what we are doing and when we are just following conventional habits.

It isn't always necessary or useful to "break" habits or rules. But if we accept rules and habits too easily, without understanding their reason and meaning, we can be locked in a state of "blind obedience" that makes us ignorant, stupid and useless to ourselves and others.

Imagination, curiosity and a taste for diversity are nourishment for intelligence. Habit can keep us away from these vital resources. Habit can blur our vision when it prevents us from noticing signs that are around us and don't fall into the usual pattern.

[3] See chapter 19 on the stupidity of technologies.

It isn't easy to break or change habits. Our brain structure, as well as the cultural and social environment, tend to push us back into habit even when we have been able to break out of it.

One of the ways of breaking the "vicious circle" is to replace old habits with new ones. For instance, to get into the habit of being more curious, open and available, of noticing things that we weren't seeing because they didn't fit into our established perception framework.

Of course humor and irony are tools for intelligence. But many jokes are mere habit. This isn't just because old jokes are repeated endlessly. It's also a matter of cultural bias, reinforcement of conventional clichés. Humor opens new perspectives when it breaks away from convention and habit. And when we make fun of our own silliness (and habits.) Taking ourselves too seriously is a way of being stupid.

While I was working on these notes, a question was lingering in my mind. Is laziness stupid? The answer is yes, when it's mental laziness – lack of curiosity, unwillingness to learn, staying with habits. But there are behaviors that can appear "lazy" or "idle" while they are remarkably intelligent.

Staying away from unnecessary and confusing haste. Taking the time to think, to rest, to relax. Letting a problem lay in the back of our mind while we concentrate on something else (or we break away completely for a while, to do something that we enjoy) is often a way of finding the best solution.

Many great discoveries and improvements of thinking were perceived as "idle thoughts" by the prevailing culture at their time. In any case, they were made by people who could afford to be "idle", to be free from the burden of daily toil. But only a few could afford that privilege.

Now that, in modern society, leisure time is much more widely available, a lot of that time is wasted in repetitive behavior that we don't particularly enjoy, that doesn't open our minds to the pleasures of freedom, but keeps us in the slavery of routine and habit.

We should try, every day, to break a habit. Even a small one. Finding a new way of going to the same place (in the streets as well as in our mind) can bring refreshing surprises.

Mental exercise is not the endless repetition of the same calisthenics. It's looking constantly for something that we didn't know or we hadn't noticed. Or finding different ways of thinking about the same things.

As many intelligent behaviors, in addition to being useful it can be amusing and pleasant.

* * *

As noted at the beginning of chapter 13, a list of the "allies" and causes of stupidity could be endless. But I hope these short comments can contribute to understanding how stupidity, ignorance, fear and habit can combine in many unhealthy ways.

As in the case of stupidity, things get worse when these attitudes are shared. Ignorance spreads faster than knowledge. Prejudice and misinformation, as well as ridiculous nonsense, are often taken as "true" just because they are widely repeated.

Fear becomes catastrophical when it's shared by a "mass." Large numbers of people in a frenzy of fear (or anger) can be extremely dangerous.

Even in relatively small numbers fear can spread from one person to another when they have no reason to be afraid – or make things worse in a case of real danger. Social or group habits often become mindless obedience, mental slavery, with results ranging from boring monotony to harmful behavior or serious crime.

The combination of these forces can produce obnoxious results. But, on the other hand, breaking one, or reducing its impact, can help us to limit the effect of another.

When we find ways of being a bit less ignorant, less scared, less conditioned by habit, we have a better chance of being less stupid – and thus more helpful to other people, as well as more comfortable with ourselves.

* * *

A way of overcoming stupidity and its allies is explained in this bright little rhyme by Rudyard Kipling.

I keep six honest serving-men,
they taught me all I knew.
Their names are What and Why and When,
and How and Where and Who.

As I mentioned a few pages back (also in chapter 13) and I shall deliberately do again (chapters 28 and 30) and I will never be tired of repeating – curiosity is a talent that can, and should, be constantly developed and improved in many ways.

Curiosity is a habit (if we are lucky enough to have it) worth keeping, growing, cherishing with loving care. If we aren't driven often enough by never-ending, never satisfied curiosity we miss many opportunities to learn and understand. We also fall back into ignorance and stupid habits, as our perceptions become weaker, in narrower and more deceiving perspectives.

The Power of Stupidity

by Giancarlo Livraghi

Chapter 16 – Stupidity and Haste

We are in the habit of believing that "quick" means clever and "slow" stands for stupid. But it is also common knowledge that "haste makes waste" – being in a hurry can cause all sorts of mistakes. We have always been quite confused about the value of speed and the advantages of slowness. The hare and the tortoise were probably part of folklore three thousand years ago, even before that apologue became part of a Greek collection known as Aesop's fables.

So what's new? Haste mania – as an increasingly dangerous source of stupidity. More so now than at any other time in human history. Everybody seems to be always in a rush, though quite often it isn't at all clear where they think they are going – or why.

It's true that a bright person can understand before others catch up. But this is not the product of hasty thinking. It's the result of listening – and more effective focus on a subject or a situation. It doesn't necessarily take much time, but it's a state of mind that is basically different from "haste."

Intelligence doesn't have to be "fast" or "slow." A quick intuition can be refreshing – when it works. Sometimes fast action is necessary. But in many situations we would be less stupid if we didn't "jump to conclusions" and we spent a little time making sure that we have understood.

"Being in a hurry" has become a habit, regardless of any real need for speed. It causes unnecessary tension and anxiety. It's true that some things are happening faster, but not all and not always. Anyhow, even when they do, hysterical haste is not an effective way of coping with change (and even less so with unexpected circumstances.)

This doesn't mean that we can, or we should, go back to the "old ways", to the times when things were slow simply because they couldn't be any faster. Relaxing as that can be, when it's a choice, this isn't the same world as it was when going from here to there meant walking, or riding a horse – and communication took months or years to do what now happens in minutes.

A few generations are a relatively short time for humanity to adjust to the speed of transport and communication. There is more going on than we have had a chance to really understand. And we are making things worse by being obsessed with haste.

Just "being slow" doesn't solve the problem. This isn't a matter of how long it takes, but of how it's done.

It can be quite stupid to waste time, to hesitate, to miss an opportunity by dithering when it was the right time to act. But it is just as stupid to rush into doing something before we have had the time to think, to be in a hurry when it isn't necessary, and so to make mistakes that it will take longer to correct, causing a further state of haste, leading into a vicious circle that could have been avoided by getting it right in the beginning.

There is so much of that going on this we have lost sight of what was the purpose (or the problem) in the first place. So "the tail is wagging the dog" and the opportunities multiply for the power of stupidity to wipe out any trace of common sense that may be lingering in the mess.

Haste, when not dictated by a precise need, is nearly always stupid. Not only because it causes mistakes. It also makes us nervous, jumpy and uncomfortable, rushing ahead with no sense of direction, infecting other people with the same disease, chasing nobody knows what and going nobody knows where.

In Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* the Red Queen of Chess tells bewildered Alice that *«in this place it takes all the running you can do to keep in the same place.»* This is no longer a little girl's nightmare. It's an effective description of the anxiety-driven haste syndrome. [1]

The haste addicts seem to believe that everything is always in "constantly accelerated motion" – and the only way of "keeping up" is to "run faster to stay in the same place", otherwise one is "left behind." [2]

One of several things they don't understand is that "behind", more often than is generally understood, can be a favorable position. To let others rush ahead and see where they hit the pitfalls. Or to deliberately "step back" and gain a wider perspective and a better view of the environment. [3]

Of course there are ways of "slowness" that should, wherever possible, be eliminated or drastically reduced. As in the case of poorly organized services that make us waste a lot of time. Such as three hours in airport procedures and surface transport for a one-hour flight. Or the simplest matters being made absurdly complicated by the stupidity of bureaucracy (see chapter 12.)

[1] Biologist Leigh van Valen, in 1973, defined the "Red Queen Effect" as an evolutionary principle that *«regardless of how well a species adapts to its current environment, it must keep evolving to keep up with its competitors and enemies who are also evolving.»* It's pretty obvious that the same concept can be applied in human affairs. But this is no good reason for the haste mania, which does not generate successful competition, or positive evolution, but nearsighted and self-destructive neurosis.

[2] Anxious haste is often caused by fear. See chapter 14

[3] Hasty or superficial thinking can cause a warping of perspective, as we shall see in chapter 21.

Technologies, in spite of their claimed "speed", are increasingly wasting our time (and money) with inefficiency and malfunctioning, unnecessary complication and all sorts of uncomfortable messing around that could be easily eliminated if they were conceived to fit human needs and they were used with a bit of common sense. (See chapter 19.)

A list of things that are stupidly slow could be very long. And every day the inexhaustible resources human stupidity are coming up with a new one. Nobody seems to be doing anything seriously about this problem. While everybody is rushing around without knowing why.

The speed obsession is mostly at the workplace, but it has also invaded private life. Fast food, fast holidays, fast play, amusement and entertainment, fast (and thus often false)enthusiasm and disappointment, fast solutions that make the problems worse.

Fast information that, by being too quick, doesn't know what it's saying. Fast books that, by rushing to explain everything in a few pages, make us totally confused – or are written so hastily that the author had no time to understand what he or she was writing about. Fast chasing of practically anything, even though we don't know what it is.

In the superficial culture of appearances, even the pleasures of life, including sex, are pictured as "fast", run-of-the mill standardized commodities in easy-open packaging, to be "consumed" as quickly and carelessly as an ice cream cone.

To make good pasta sauce we don't need a cyclotron. It's enough to have simple tools and good ingredients. But it takes care, experience, intelligence, taste and patience. If we don't have the time, we can buy it in a jar or a box. But the taste will be awful if the manufacturer hasn't invested a great deal of time, expertise and attention into making it properly. It's nice when someone saves us time and effort and gives us a pleasant experience. But many do the opposite.

Wasting time isn't useful or amusing. But finding time is a basis for intelligence. It isn't only necessary, it is also pleasant, relaxing and rewarding. We can save a lot of time by avoiding messy consequences when we have had the time to understand what we were doing. Haste is often a result, but also a cause, of poor thinking and anxiety.

We don't do things faster by being in a hurry. An intelligent process is not only more effective, but also shorter, because it reduces the risk of having to go back and fix the mistakes caused by hasty decisions.

If we want to go somewhere in a shorter time, it is much more effective to plan an intelligent route than to go rushing with no clear direction.

A quick intuition can find a useful shortcut, or seize an unexpected opportunity. But we don't get to that "magic moment" unless our mind is properly trained, and we have developed, over time, the necessary resources of experience and knowhow.

There are situations in which crucial moves must be made in a very short time – but hasty decisions can be disastrous. It happens in all sorts of fields, from scientific experiments to applied technologies, in organization management as in everyday life.

A good example is competitive sport, that can appear always dominated by haste. A fraction of a second can make the difference between victory or defeat. In practically all disciplines there are moments in which extreme lucidity, as well as fitness, is needed in a very short time. But this is not haste – or improvisation. Behind that "instant" performance there are many long years of training, exercise, commitment, meticulous preparation.

Let's stop and think, right now, if only for a few minutes. That "we don't have the time" is nearly always a delusion – or a lack of perspective.

Reversing the obnoxious cycle of haste isn't easy. But, when we are able to do it, the results can be pleasantly surprising. Any interruption of this obsessive habit is a way of reducing the power of stupidity.

A description of the book
is online – stupidity.it

The Power of Stupidity

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Chapter 17 – Stupidity and Cunning

One of the reasons why stupidity is poorly understood is that "cunning" is often confused with intelligence. The perception is as simple as it's misleading. There are "smart" people and there are fools, who are there to be exploited – and that is supposed to be fun. The swindlers are praised for their cleverness, the victims are mocked for their gullibility.

From this point of view, widespread stupidity isn't a disease. It's a resource. Stupid people should be kept as stupid as possible, to provide rich hunting grounds for the exploiters.

There is an obvious ethical problem. When this way of thinking is accepted, humankind splits into two categories. The smart, that have a right to prevail, and the rest who are, and must remain, "inferior." That's awful, isn't it? But it's widely practiced, though rarely admitted – and it's creeping around in all sorts of disguises.

Without openly saying so, many applaud the "winners" and humiliate the "losers." It's an unfortunately widespread perception that, after all, that's how the world turns.

There's a lot of hypocrisy. When the "smart alecs" are caught and exposed, they are mocked and despised. But, as long as they appear to be winning, they are too easily forgiven. Far too often, they also praised and admired.

All this isn't only morally unacceptable. It's also stupid. It corrupts all values of human relations and societies, undermines trust, deteriorates commitment. When deception is perceived as the winner, the losers are quality, teamwork, loyalty, the wish to learn and improve.

If we measure stupidity only by "quantitative" criteria (as in the "stupidity diagram" – chapters 8 and 11) this sort of problem isn't directly perceivable. We can notice the effects of behavior, but the problem remains of understanding why.

It isn't enough to know that there is a lot of stupidity. We need to discover its many disguises – especially those that make it appear "smart."

It isn't always stupid, or malicious, to be a bit "cunning." Slightly devious approaches can be used for a good purpose. It can be intelligent to use an "indirect" approach to bypass prejudice or obstinate resistance to something that is quite useful and desirable, but not readily understood. But it's important to understand that such occasionally effective devices can turn into stupidity if they become a habit.

It can make sense to sweeten, as far as possible, a bitter remedy. As Mary Poppins used to say, *«just a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down»* – though that doesn't always happen *«in a most delightful way»*, sincerity doesn't need to be harsh.

But if we get into the habit of disguising all sorts of nasty things as "good" we open the way for the administration of poison. And those who nanny us are often trying to limit our freedom, blur our judgment and increase their power. In one way or another, they want to make us stupid. [1]

There can be "cunning" games and jokes. This can be harmless, as long as it's only playing and having fun. Or it can be intelligent, when humor helps us to be aware of trickery – or to understand what can be hidden behind a smokescreen of appearances, conjuring skills or playing with words. But it isn't always easy to tell where the game ends and the cheat begins.

A peculiar fact is that swindlers, cunning as they are, don't have much imagination. The "modern" frauds, applied with the latest technologies, are nearly always a repetition of old tricks. [2]

It isn't really surprising, but it's quite depressing, to see how many people are still falling into the same traps. Stupidity, as well as the wicked art of exploiting it, is as old as humankind.

The solution is not to "be cunning" and join the tricksters. This can be quite dangerous – and often self-destructive. One of the most successful frauds is (as it has always been) the confidence game, where the swindled think they are the swindlers.

It's important to be aware, to know the tricks and the human weaknesses that make them too easy. And also to realize that in many situations, even though no one is deliberately trying to cheat, everybody can get hurt because of misinformation or misunderstanding. What we need is intelligence, in both its meanings: better thinking and better information.

It isn't enough to despise the "cunning" and to stay away from their booby traps. It's necessary to understand how the trickery works and to unmask as many as possible of its maybe clever, but not "impenetrable" disguises.

[1] See *Nannies, bibs and gags* `gandalf.it/offline/nannies.htm`
That was ten years ago, things have been getting worse.

[2] It's quite stupid to be carried away with fashion and to go chasing whatever appears to be "new", especially in technical devices. See chapter 19 *The Stupidity of Technologies*.

The Power of Stupidity

by Giancarlo Livraghi

Chapter 18
The Vicious Circle of Stupidity

Another disturbing case of blundering stupidity is the unpleasantly widespread belief that people should be treated as stupid. This has nothing to do, of course, with the good practice of making things "foolproof." Not because everyone is a fool, but because the brightest people can be absent-minded – and making things practical, safe and easy to use is an advantage for everyone. [1]

But trying to exploit stupidity is a very different matter. It's too often said, and carelessly repeated, that "the public" (an audience, or a reader, or a customer, etcetera) has the brain of "a silly eleven year old." Quite apart from the fact that there are some very bright kids, there is something basically wrong with this stale and shabby theory – and its practice.

It does, unfortunately, happen that some results can be obtained in that manner. But it is also, unquestionably, proven by facts that better results can be obtained by treating people with respect, appealing to their intelligence, common sense and understanding.

Where stupidity prevails, the entire system becomes stupid. There are greater openings for fraud, lies and complacency. There is loss of quality, reliability, relationships and trust.

There is, of course, an easy objection. Why should an individual person, company or organization carry the burden of general well-being? Business ethics are unnecessarily expensive. It pays to be selfish. Let society as a whole (whatever that is) worry about what's right or wrong, intelligent or stupid, while each of its components pursues its own private advantage. If profits or other benefits can be gained by treating people as stupid, that's what is to be done.

[1] It isn't done as well, or as often, as it should. But that's another story – as we shall see in the next chapter, *The Stupidity of Technologies*.

The strategies based on stupidity and deceit are self-defeating. They spiral downwards in an endless vicious circle. There is no time to think, to plan, to look into the future. Everything is short term and hasty (see chapter 16.) When the effects of stupidity begin to be felt, new twists are found to blur the picture and do something even more stupid. As the old saying goes, "if you can't get it right screw it up so nobody else can."

The circuit of stupidity is self-destructive. When we treat other people as stupid, we are, or appear to be, as stupid as we think they are. Stupidity becomes a habit. There is a widespread perception that everything is silly, nothing really matters, thinking is a waste of time.

Even before it gets in the way of relations with the rest of the world, this attitude poisons the inside of a business – or any organization. Where short-term, nearsighted personal advantage is the only goal, why should anyone be concerned with the company's objectives, well-being and success? It's safer to stay entrenched in some bureaucratic hideout, avoid responsibility, indulge in gossip and worship intrigue.

This is even worse when the basic role of an organization is to provide information – or entertainment. In spite of hypocritical statements to the contrary, many people in the communication industry believe that the public is stupid. And that, therefore, their dumb audiences are to be lulled with banalities, cluttered with superficial news, pompous rhetoric and cheap sensationalism. [2]

It's true that there is a lot of stupidity. But this doesn't mean that it's to be encouraged, nurtured, celebrated, imitated or set as a standard for human behavior.

The exploitation of stupidity tends to backfire. Even the most superficial and gullible people have occasional sparks of lucidity – and so they notice that they are being treated as fools. So they get into the habit of thinking that information and entertainment are essentially stupid. Also power, that often seeks "spectacular" appearance, falls into the same pitfall.

In this vicious circle there is a sort of "reciprocity." Sometimes deliberately, more often not, the game is played on both sides. They are treating us as stupid, but we know that they are stupid, so let's see how we can be amused and entertained by stupidity, as the serious stuff isn't there – or, when it is, it's boring or depressing.

The merry-go-round is further complicated by the confusion of "being" and "appearing", as we shall see in chapter 21 – and by the sly, deceptive combination of stupidity and cunning that is explained in chapter 17.

One of the problems is "fame", or "celebrity." All sorts of people become "famous" – for reasons that sometimes are meaningful, often irrelevant. The results can be bizarre and devious. Such people can be admired for qualities that they don't have, imitated in any silly thing they do, offered as "authorities" on matters that they don't understand. And all sorts of stupid, sometimes awful, things can be done for the sake of being "popular" – or merely of being noticed.

[2] As Theodor Adorno noted *«The culture industry not so much adapts to the reactions of its customers as it counterfeits them.»*

Stupidity infects the "famous" as well as their followers. Even very bright people can be confused by celebrity. In a letter to Henrich Zangger, in December 1919, Albert Einstein wrote:*«With fame I become more and more stupid, which, of course, is a very common phenomenon. There is far too great a disproportion between what one is, and what others think one is, or at least what they say they think one is. But one has to take it all with good humor.»* [3] Ninety years later, with the expansion of broadcast media and the widening of the vicious circle, it's much worse.

It's a resource of intelligence to understand one's limits – and stupidity. With good humor, because nobody is immune, but when we understand it we can keep it under control.

It's always dangerous to underestimate the destructive power of stupidity. And it's unlikely that by treating everyone else as a fool one can remain immune from the treacherous contagion of foolishness. Stupidity isn't always defeated in intelligent minds, though it doesn't fit comfortably. It's like a clumsy, infectious parasite that drags the host into its own demise, especially when it's undetected.

Intelligent communication doesn't have to be pedantic, boring, difficult or complicated. The brightest thoughts can be made clear and interesting. With a healthy dose of humanity – and, when appropriate, with amusement and fun.

To communicate effectively it to explain things, even when they appear difficult or complicated, in a way that can be easily understood. But that doesn't mean "talking down" to people or feeling "superior" just because we happen to be in control of a communication tool. There can't be real intelligence without self-criticism, careful listening and a genuine respect for other people's opinions and perceptions. (See chapter 30 – pages 9-10 of the pdf online – on the importance of listening.)

Clear and simple doesn't mean banal, obvious, superficial or conventional. It's important to make sure that we understand what we are talking about before we can try to "make it simple." That's why it isn't easy, as we shall see in chapter 20.

Arrogance, pompousness and delusions of superiority aren't intelligent. They are ways of being stupid. There can be no real intelligence without honesty, a sense of humor and true respect for other people's attitudes, perceptions and opinions.

The dominance of stupidity is so overwhelming that there are increasing opportunities for going in the opposite direction. A single person or company that decides to treat people with greater respect can't, on its own, reverse the tide. But by doing so, for the very fact of being different, we can gain considerable advantage – in addition to making ourselves, and our environment, more intelligent – or, at least, less stupid. And we have a better chance of looking at ourselves in a mirror without despising what we are and what we are doing.

[3] Published by Helen Dukas and Banesh Hoffmann in an interesting book, *Albert Einstein, The Human Side*, Princeton University Press, 1979.

The Power of Stupidity

by Giancarlo Livraghi

Chapter 19
The Stupidity of Technologies

There is no human culture – or civilization – without technology. . From the remote origins of our species, "man is the toolmaker" (*homo faber*.) Knowing how to make, design and improve tools marks the difference between humanity and any other living organisms. Archaeologists continue to discover that "stone age" technologies were more refined than we used to think.

This hasn't been, and isn't, an evenly evolving process. There are phases of acceleration and times of decadence. Discoveries and technical solutions that were developed two thousand years ago were forgotten for many centuries, until new scientific approaches re-opened the path of knowledge. [1]

We are becoming skeptical about the notion that we are in a stage of great progress. However, to some extent, it's true. Scientific exploration is advancing beyond anything that we could imagine a hundred or even fifty years ago. Technology is developing in so many ways that it's difficult to understand which solutions fit where, when and how. But the turbulence of change is sometimes bewildering, always confusing.

[1] It isn't "exactly" true that there were computers in ancient Greece, but it's a fact that in the "hellenistic" culture there were remarkable scientific developments, and technical devices, some of which were only recently re-discovered – such as the *Antikythera Mechanism.* See *The Archimedes Computer* `gandalf.it/offline/archim.htm`

It's hard to tell what is a real improvement and what isn't. We are making useful progress in several areas, but lagging dangerously behind in some of the most important. We are making inconsiderate changes in things that would be better if we had left them as they were. "Progress" has never been coherent or homogeneous. It's important to understand that it's even more confused where we are now.

It would be easy to say that, as humanity is often stupid, so are its machines, to the same extent and in the same way. But it isn't so, because machines aren't people. They have a different role and work in a different way.

Alan Turing, who had an important role in the development of electronic computers, used to say that *«if a machine is supposed to be infallible, it cannot also be intelligent.»* The role of a machine is to perform, in a very precise manner, a strictly defined task. By doing so, it can't be intelligent – or stupid.

However we are afflicted, with increasing frequency, by all sorts of problems and mishaps due to the clumsy stupidity of technologies. The more functions are added, aggregated and complicated, the greater is the probability of malfunction or mishandling. The more they pretend to be "intelligent", the less we can trust their "infallibility" – or their reliability in performing a simple task without turning into a frustrating puzzle.

Complex machines are, more and more, part of our daily experience. It's hard to imagine a world in which there aren't motorcars and airplanes, home and office appliances, networks and computers – or where we can't communicate instantly with people, wherever they (or we) are. The basic functions of these technologies are generally sound and reliable. But they become fragile with fake "innovations" and clumsy "updates."

This doesn't happen only with the equipment that we are directly using. We are only vaguely aware of how our life is conditioned by the technologies that are used in the systems that run the world we live in.

A discussion on the messy stupidity of technologies, and its multiple effects, could fill thousands of pages. There are some interesting books on this subject. [2] The people who design and manage technologies aren't more (or less) stupid than the rest of humankind. But the reasons – and the consequences – of technical stupidity have some very specific peculiarities.

Technology multiplies stupidity. And so do some human behaviors – but in a different way. For instance the power syndrome actively enhances and complicates stupidity (as we saw in chapter 10 *The Stupidity of Power*) and this happens also with other ways of being and thinking that we have been discussing so far. [3]

[2] It is explained quite clearly in *The Inmates Are Running the Asylum* (1999) by Alan Cooper and *The Software Conspiracy* (2000) by Mark Minasi. Also in *Slaves of the Machine* (1998) by Gregory Rawlins and *In the beginning was the cpmmand line* (1999) by Neal Stephenson (see chapter 13 – and `gandalf.it/netmark/comline.htm`) There is a brightly sarcastic description of this disease in *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams about *The Sirius Cybernetics Corporation* – online `www.sput.nl/~rob/sirius.html`

[3] See also chapter 18 *The Vicious Circle of Stupidity* – and 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17. More on behaviors and attitudes that increase stupidity will be explained in following chapters.

Technology (unlike human behavior) is a neutral multiplier. An automatic mechanism that can reproduce nonsense in millions or billions of copies. An elaboration system that can start with some small human error and spread it into countless complexities, so that it becomes irretrievable – and the resulting mess leads to a "potentially infinite" expansion of stupidity, with effects that can range from disturbing to catastrophical.

One of many things that I wrote on this subject was an article published in March 1999. *Machines aren't "bad", but they are very stupid* (`gandalf.it/offline/stup.htm`).

This is how it started. *«Since the beginning of modern industrial technology, two centuries ago, literature (not only science fiction) has been painting all sorts of catastrophic scenarios. Machines, they imagine, will take over and reduce us in slavery. Also other attitudes appear to reflect an irrational fear of technical development. But the problems we are facing are quite different.»*

I added that *«we haven't seen, and it's unlikely that we shall ever see, "intelligent" self-replicating machines running the world and reducing human beings to cattle. The problem is that machines are essentially stupid – and more and more complicated. Often complexity makes them less reliable, maintenance and repairs are more difficult. One doesn't need to be using a computer to run every day into a mess caused by a poorly conceived, or badly applied, technology.»*

Are the machines to be blamed? Sometimes it seems so. But the cause of problems is always human error – or trickery. Machines carry out repetitive pre-defined tasks. When they don't do it properly the blame is on whoever designs them badly, manufactures them poorly, uses them in the wrong way or sells them promising things that they can't do.

What has changed in ten years? Nothing, except the fact that it's getting worse. Only occasionally some truth has been surfacing, as in the case of the automotive industry, as well as other manufacturing, where rushing ahead with inadequately tested technologies (especially electronics) caused some serious problems, and the way they are designed and applied needs to be radically reviewed. (See *The Stupidity of Technologies* – `gandalf.it/offline/stutech.htm` – May 2004.)

An unusually bright headline in an Italian newspaper, *La Repubblica*, on April 14, 2004, called it "the long night of electronics." For too many years we have been kept in that uncomfortable darkness – with more nightmares that we want or deserve. Time goes by, but we still don't seem, so far, to be waking up as actively as we should.

In well run industrial applications the prevailing trend is to proceed with efficiency objectives – and, when automatic production equipment doesn't live up to quality standards, good factory managers know how to step back to more reliable resources – while they continue to experiment with potentially better innovation. But, when it comes to information and communication technology, most companies find themselves stepping out of their areas of competence – and into a messy, confusing proliferation of available tools.

It's a proven fact that large investments in ICT technologies without precise objectives and a clear idea of process lead to an enormous waste of money – in addition to technical failures, all sorts of organizational problems and loss of quality.

Of course it's possible to make and use reliable devices, computers and networks. In most cases the navigation systems of airplanes, electronic equipment in surgery, and other applications that put human lives directly at risk, have good levels of efficiency (and adequate backup.) But there are many large systems that don't work as well as they should.

Even in elaborate scientific and technical pursuits, such as space exploration, there have been several surprising accidents due to poorly conceived or applied technologies.

A "clever bomb" is a very stupid machine. It uses its sophisticated navigation systems to reach a specific destination and then activates a device. It has no idea that by doing so it will self-destruct and blow to bits lots of things – including a number of human beings. It's up to who conceived it, as well as those who use it, to make sure that it achieves the largest possible result with the least possible "collateral damage."

In the daily use of electronics the consequences are much less dramatic, but they cause every day all sorts of problems that could be easily avoided if technologies were designed, applied and used to fit the needs of people and organizations.

We are strangely accustomed to this disease. We accept far too easily the ridiculous idea that the inefficiencies of computer and network technologies are unavoidable – or that, when things don't work, the blame is on the user.

An industrial robot works better than a human being when it performs with precision a repetitive task. But, when complex procedures are to be managed, technologies are much less reliable.

Most people today, unless they are totally incompetent in this field, no longer speak of computers as "electronic brains." But there is still a fairly widespread delusion that we can delegate thinking to machines. Or that, by nobody knows which esoteric influence, they can do some sort of thinking of their own. [4] It's important to understand and remember that machines are mindless. We should never expect them to be able to perform without human supervision.

The reason why so many devices work poorly, and tend to get worse, isn't a mischievous perversity of machines or of the abstruse codes that run them. It's the human stupidity of those who design, sell and apply clumsy and inefficient devices.

It isn't just nearsighted, but positively stupid, to develop technologies to fit the whims of programmers (or gee-whiz marketers) rather that the needs of all other people. And things get worse with the widespread habit of treating people as idiots, and forcing them into obedience, instead of encouraging (and helping) them to adjust technologies and procedures to fit their personal requirements, attitudes and behaviors.

[4] I must admit that, like several people I know, sometimes I get angry at a machine (especially a computer) when it isn't dong what I expect it to do or, even worse, it does things that I don't want. Of course I know that it isn't listening to my outburst. But, in addition to "letting off some steam", it helps me to focus on the problem and to be as obstinate as it takes to find a viable solution.

A machine works well, most of the time, when it's designed in the simplest possible way for a very specific purpose. Even a machine that does a variety of different things, such as a personal computer, would work much better if functions were kept separate and independent, with shared resources only when they are necessary – or really useful and convenient.

Many problems and irritating mishaps would be avoided if each person could install only those functions that he or she really needs – instead of being forced to operate in a clutter of unwanted, and often unknown, devices that interfere with each other and cause a lot of unnecessary trouble.

It happens also that a technology, per se, works, but the way it's used leads to mistakes, inefficiencies and bad habits (a widespread and obnoxious problem is *The Powerpoint Disease* – `gandalf.it/offline/pwp.htm` – but there are several other ways of being "carried away" with a technical resource and losing sight of why it's being used.)

Another enhancement of the power of stupidity is the absurd notion that everything is growing "exponentially."

There is a misconception originating from information technologies. It isn't actually true that "something" in data processing "doubles every two years." [5] But anyhow, regardless of what happens inside computers, no such concept can apply to the times and cycles of human evolution – or to all sorts of events that can be slower, or faster, depending on a variety of circumstances that it's stupid, and dangerous, to "generalize" in any imaginary standard. This myth didn't only cause all sorts of problems and failures in the use of technologies. It also contributed to the general haste syndrome that we discussed in chapter 16.

A silly notion, that now seems to be forgotten, was largely accepted at the end of the twentieth century. It said that with "new technologies" there was a new definition of time: "a year lasts three months." There have never been any facts to prove that ridiculous theory. But it was preached as "absolute truth" in conventions, seminars, management manuals, training sessions and universities. The results were grotesquely funny, but quite distressing for many who invested in hasty ventures.

Especially in communication systems, complications and inefficiencies are going from bad to worse.

A telephone is a very useful tool, but turning it into a multi-function machine has made it unreliable and difficult to use, while by being "too easily" accessible people and organizations build up defenses and interferences that make them practically unreachable.

The clutter and malfunctioning of automated "answering services" is the subject of many jokes, but it isn't funny when it stands in the way of finding answers or getting things done.

[5] That was originally known, in 1965, as "Moore's Law" *«the number of transistors that can be placed on an integrated circuit is increasing exponentially, doubling approximately every year.»* When, in following years, it was found that it wasn't happening, the "speed" was "downgraded" to eighteen months, and later to two years. But, even so, it's meaningless. Quite simply, there is no such "law." And, more importantly, the concept can not be extended, as some still do, to all sorts of unrelated developments. This is explained in `gandalf.it/stupid/moore.htm`

The technologies that were conceived forty years ago to run the internet, and twenty years ago for the world wide web, were basically efficient, reliable, open and transparent. They still are, and they still work.

But on those sound foundations too much stuff has been added. Clumsily conceived and hastily built cathedrals, fragile and often unsafe, that suffer from the same diseases as the most widespread operating system for personal computers, with all its cumbersome applications.

I haven't written, and I am not going to write, a separate book on this subject. But there are several comments on the use of communication technologies in three books that I published in Italian – and in many articles, some of which are online also in English. There is a list, with links, in `gandalf.it/techno/` The solution of all these messy problems is based on two simple concepts.

The most effective and reliable technology is the least elaborate, and the most thoroughly tested, that fits the purpose (and therefore it's the most intelligent – as we shall see in chapter 20.) And, basically, technologies must be designed to fit human needs, not to force people into unnatural, and often nonsensical, obedience to automatic devices.

To demolish the proliferation of useless clutter, irritating complications and unacceptable inefficiencies, we don't need a bulldozer or a weed killer. The best medicine is a strong dose of practically applied common sense. And a firm determination to put the machines in the service of people, not vice versa.

A description of the book
is online – stupidity.it

The Power of Stupidity

by Giancarlo Livraghi

Chapter 20
The Subtle Art of Simplicity

A "simpleton", they used to say, or a "simple" person, to mean someone stupid, or ignorant, or lacking common sense. It's still a widespread prejudice that stupidity is simple and intelligence is complicated. The opposite is often true. When intelligence appears complicated, or hard to understand, it's immature. To reach full bloom it must evolve toward simplicity.

It's easy to complicate, it's difficult to simplify. The greatest advancements in philosophy, science and culture can be explained in clear and simple concepts. Also in the everyday practice of work, or personal relations, the most effective solutions are often the simplest.

The exciting experience of a creative synthesis – or of an intuition that helps to solve a problem – leads us nearly always to discover that the solution (after we have found it) appears obvious, but we couldn't see it because our perceptions and our way of thinking were too complicated.

People have always been made miserable by all sorts of unnecessary complications. We are now in a state of turbulent transition that makes it even worse. Many things have become easier because of resources that we didn't have – or were available only to a few people. But we are producing too many new complications, caused by the clutter and inefficiency of communication, our own and other people's behavior – and a variety of distressing problems, including poorly conceived or badly used technologies – as we have seen in chapter 19.

These stupid complications are very different from the problem of complexity, as studied by the "Chaos Theory". On this subject there is a short note, at the end of this book, that (deliberately) oversimplifies the issue but (I hope) helps to understand some of its practical implications. *Simple Thoughts on Complexity* – gandalf.it/stupid/chaos.htm.

Many years ago, long before we got into today's mess, I had a sign hanging in my office that said KISS. It's common knowledge that it stands for *keep it simple, stupid*. But that wise principle is rarely practiced. Sometimes I would point to it when someone came up with a messy problem that didn't seem to have a simple solution. But, above all, I used it to remind myself to take a dose of my own medicine.

There is a great need for simplicity. While the prevailing trend continues to add complication, a perception that we should turn the tide has been spreading in recent years. One of several examples is a bright article published by Gerry McGovern on December 11, 2000: *In praise of simplicity*. [1]

He explains that *«we live in a world where change and complexity are forced on us at every turn. The world is hitting back. People are yearning for simplicity.»* Complexity, he says, is a curse. *«It is a type of intellectual pollution that smothers clear thought. Complexity is not a sign of intelligence, but rather a sign of a hyperactive mind gouging on more. True genius and great design is about turning something complex into a product that is simple to use and delivers a real benefit.»* That isn't only true of products or technologies. It is the same for information, communication, knowledge, organization and management.

The stupidity of power, as we saw in chapter 10, isn't caused mainly by complexity. But it often uses complication to become even more stupid – or exploits it deliberately to confuse issues, to blur understanding, to hide simple facts behind a curtain of elaborate appearances.

Not only bureaucracies, but also other oligarchies, power clusters and cliques often use a complicated jargon that most people can't understand, to increase their control and keep the rest of humanity subjugated. [2]

Academics and "intellectuals" often play the same game. They use obscure language to hide the fact that they don't know what they are talking about – while keeping "ordinary people" in awe and blind obedience, making them believe that they are stupid because they don't understand.

Intelligence is clarity and simplicity – not obscurity. When people don't understand, the blame of stupidity is on whoever isn't explaining things properly.

Of course we shouldn't confuse simplicity with superficiality. An apparently simple explanation can be just triviality, or silly commonplace, or a widespread but false notion. Or a deliberate attempt to hide the real depth of a fact or a debate.

In other words, complication is often stupid, but "simple" answers aren't always intelligent. The art of simplicity is as subtle and difficult as the use of intelligence. Both need dedication, commitment, patience, in depth analysis and insatiable curiosity – as well as a constant cultivation of doubt. When we find a clear and simple answer or solution, we should always consider that we may be overlooking another approach that can be even simpler and more effective.

It's an endless task. But, when we learn to enjoy its taste, it can be very pleasant – and amusing. Finding truly simple solutions is a happy, often exhilarating experience.

Simplicity isn't only an intellectual achievement, it's also an emotion. Finding the simple key to an apparently complex problem has intense aesthetic values. It gives us a clear and unique perception of beauty and harmony.

Being in love with simplicity can be quite delightful. And it breeds intelligence.

1 It's online in Gerry McGovern's interesting website:
gerrymcgovern.com/nt/2000/nt_2000_12_11_simplicity_praise.htm

2 On the use of confusing jargon as a tool for power see chapter 21 *Problems of Perspective*

The Power of Stupidity

by Giancarlo Livraghi

Chapter 21 – Problems of Perspective

We know that the Earth is round. But our daily perceptions tell us that it's flat. We know that the horizon is limited, we need to climb higher to see farther away. But, too often, we forget to do so in the perspectives of thought and curiosity. We remain confined, without even realizing it, in the restricted sphere of our point of view and our little circle of habits.

Perception studies indicate that we see things differently not only from the top of a mountain or the bottom of a valley, but also sitting or standing up – or moving a few steps in one direction or another. And the same object, or the same picture, can be understood quite differently depending on how we look at it.

"Witness" experiments show that, even a few minutes after having seen the same thing, each person reports it differently – not because he or she is intentionally lying, but because of differences in perception.

We know that understanding means "putting ourselves in someone else's shoes", looking at things from another person's point of view. It may seem obvious – but it's difficult, because we aren't in the habit of changing perspective.

I have been learning a lot from readers because they all read differently. Every time someone reads a book, a new book is born, that isn't what the author wrote, but what takes shape in the mind of the reader. It also happens that one reader's comments or doubts help me to understand another's. Two angles of view are better than one, three or more offer additional insight.

The large – and ever growing – variety of information and communication is a wonderful resource, but the abundance can be confusing – and it's sterile when narrow perspectives make dialogue dull and learning superficial.

It helps to perceive geography and look at maps. We can live quite happily without always remembering exactly the capital of Maybeland or the population of Whatistan. But we can have a much better idea of what is happening, and how people think and behave, if we understand where they are and how they live. [1]

This isn't just a matter of changing perspective when it's necessary, to free ourselves of shallow conventional perceptions or to understand someone else's point of view. It is always useful, whatever the subject, to look at it from different angles. It can be intriguing, sometimes surprising, often interesting, to deliberately change perspective.

It is also mind-opening to change language. Our perception can be different when we use another word for the same thing.

Knowing more than one language isn't only an obvious need for communicating with people who don't understand our "mother tongue." Language isn't just lexicon. It's also what philosophers call *Weltanschauung* – "view of the world."

Johann Goethe used to say: *«Those who know nothing of foreign languages know nothing of their own.»*

This isn't just a matter of how English can be different from Chinese (as a way of thinking as well as a language) – or of the many obscure, confusing jargons, such as politicese, legalese, bureaucratese, techniquese, businessese, financese, economicese, abstruse, scientese, literariese, fashionese, etcetera – that seem to be (and they often are) deliberately meant to confuse whoever doesn't belong to a particular clique.
The problem is also that people who share the same language can misunderstand each other when their ways of thinking are different.

Translations can be misleading. The same (or similar) words can have different meanings not only in different languages, but also in varying cultural contexts or situations. This can be frustrating, when we are not sure that what we read or hear makes sense in our way of understanding it. But it can be quite interesting when, by changing perspective, we can get a much better idea of what is really meaningful.

Of course there are differences not only in spoken or written language, but also in "non-verbal" communication. Understanding pictures, behaviors, "body language", tone and manner, can be confusing if we don't appreciate diversity. It's intriguing and interesting when we change our point of view.

It takes a fair amount of mental exercise to change our perspective on everything, perceive whatever we are looking at, or thinking about, from different angles. This isn't only a methodic discipline, that can be vitally necessary in serious and important matters. It's also a more general state of mind, an "openness" of perception that, with practice, can become a pleasant habit, an interesting way of life.

[1] There are some examples of "geographical" misperception online in *Perspective Errors* `gandalf.it/stupid/perspect.htm`

It's instinctive, to some extent unavoidable, sometimes right, to have an "egocentric" point of view. It is scientifically correct to set the "center of the visible universe" wherever the observer happens to be.[2] It's obvious that our perceptions are placed at a tiny and ever-changing point of contact between an "outside" and an "inside" world. But we need to understand that it's only one of infinite possible perspectives. If we don't learn to expand our horizon, our perceived "universe" shrinks into a dull mental cubicle of nearsighted boredom.

Fifty years ago a bright Italian writer, Vitaliano Brancati, explained why stupidity is dull. *«Fools are bored because they lack a subtle quality, discerning. An intelligent person discovers a thousand nuances in the same object, perceives the deep difference between two apparently similar facts. A fool doesn't distinguish, doesn't discern. He is proud of his power to think that different things are the same.»* [3]

Life can be very boring with the constant repetition of the same circumstances, the same conversations, the same exasperating clichés. "Looking from another point of view" as often as possible isn't the only way of getting out of the doldrums, but it's one of the most effective.

Improving perspective, thinking less conventionally, finding points of view that aren't the usual or the obvious, doesn't only make us more intelligent – or less stupid. It's also a lively, exciting experience, aesthetically pleasant even before it's useful. Changing perspective can be quite amusing. And it's often enlightening.

A description of the book
is online – stupidity.it

[2] It would be long and complicated to get into what we are learning from cosmology and particle physics – and I hope scientists will forgive me for this oversimplification. But it's a fact that what we call "universe" is what our instruments can "see" (though there are no limits to what imagination can conceive.) And, while Heisenberg's "uncertainty principle" applies specifically to quantum physics, it is widely true that we change things by observing them. That's why it takes more than one point of view to have a better idea of what we are trying to perceive.

[3] Published in *Diario Romano*, Bompiani, 1961, page 142.

The Power of Stupidity

by Giancarlo Livraghi

Chapter 22 – Idols and Icons

Are we falling, in the prevailing media environment, into a new form of idolatry? Umberto Eco (one of the few living Italian writers that are known internationally) asked that question in his weekly column in l'*Espresso* newsmagazine on May 20, 2004. The opportunity for his comments was offered by a single episode, but the subject has much wider implications.

Extended online debate had been generated by his criticism of a "historical" movie. [1] A worrying fact emerged in those discussions. People weren't perceiving the difference between what was "pictured" in the movie and real-life facts. They were reacting as though they couldn't tell that the actors weren't the characters in the story and that they were seeing fiction, not an impossible "documentary" of what had happened long before any camera could record it.

As a single case, this could be set aside as an unusual warping of perception. But, as Umberto Eco observed, it's a symptom of a widespread disease. One of his students commented: *«maybe we should revalue the iconoclasts.»*

* * *

The debate on "icon worship" goes a long way back in time. In the eighth century a.d. religious images were forbidden in the Byzantine Empire, while the Roman Catholic Church admitted them, "as long as they don't become idolatry" (which, in fact, they did and they still do – but that is benevolently "tolerated" as long as it doesn't interfere with doctrine.) There are many earlier and later examples, in several different cultures, of opposing or accepting image worship.

Modern "iconoclasts" are often people who use reasoning, not violence, to fight prejudice or question dogmatic "truth" – but there have been, and there still are, those who indulge in physically smashing or burning "idols" or whatever they think symbolizes something that they don't like. [2]

1 It was Mel Gibson's gory movie, *The Passion of the Christ.* But the problem, as we see it here, doesn't relate to that or any other specific case.

2 To this day, there are religions and ideologies that make extensive use of "icons" (or "avatars") while others think they are heathen or diabolical – and so they destroy or forbid whatever they consider "heretic" or evil in their own beliefs, and also someone else's religious or cultural symbols, as well as unrelated works of art and architecture.

This is a real problem now, as it was in history. We still see all sorts of behavior where an object (a statue, a picture, a symbol, an amulet, a talisman) is worshipped instead of what it's supposed to represent. But there is another syndrome that is worth considering, even when religion (or a variety of superstitions) isn't involved. Umberto Eco suggests *«careful consideration of modern man's attitude towards the media environment, that is no longer seen as the (accurate or distorted) representation of things, but as the Thing Itself. That is the secular form that idolatry takes today.»*

So reality fades or disappears, it's replaced by fiction. This problem is quite complicated, it deserves a few pages of additional comment.

Only a few of the things that exist or are happening can be perceived directly. And even when we "see with our own eyes" we can't always understand the meaning of what we think we are seeing. There is always large margin of interpretation – and for a large part of the things that "we think we know" we depend on what someone else is telling us.

It would be complicated to get into the subtleties of gnoseology or epistemology, but the problem of knowing and understanding is crucial in all philosophies, as well as in basic psychology. The plain fact in daily life is that we need to understand what things are, or what is happening, beyond the appearances and the different, often contrasting, ways in which we receive news or information. With the constant risk of misunderstanding – or confusing representation or reporting with actual facts.

It is, anyhow, a serious problem that our perceptions are influenced by habit, prejudice, clichés and banality. And that there is a "homogenization" of the dominating culture, where stupid or irrelevant ideas can prevail for no good reason, other than the fact that they are repeated too often. But that "images" replace facts is an added distortion.

* * *

There has always been, long before there were debates and conflicts on "iconography", a confusion of image and reality. A picture of a buffalo on a cave wall was a work of art, also a magic ritual and a totem. But no cave dweller confused the image with the living animal that was out there, within reach, as a threat or a prey.

Now the situation is very different. Not only because we "see" every day things that are happening in remote places or that, anyhow, we can't verify directly.

* * *

Even in a system where there is a lot of information or representation that we can't verify, there are tactile and environmental perceptions that help us to tell the difference. When we read a book or a newspaper, it's physically obvious that printed words are a means of knowing what someone has written. If there are pictures, we have a clear perception that they aren't "the real thing."

When we go to the theater or to the movies, there is a material separation of the audience from the actors on the stage or on the screen. We can be strongly involved with the story, but we know that we aren't "in" it. [3]

There was a change when we began to have "audiovisual" media at home. Everything seems to be "close." We started, with radio, to have confusing perceptions. "Soap operas" were quite deliberately designed to be more like eavesdropping than Shakespearean theater. (And now it's the same with television sitcoms – even worse with gossip or "peep" shows.)

3 In the case reported by Umberto Eco, people were confused while they were looking at a movie – or remembering what they had seen. This appears to indicate that the reality-fiction misperception can go so deep as to confuse people even in those circumstances.

Radio reporters did all they could to "make us feel that we are there." People were encouraged to call radio stations to discuss their personal problems or ask all sorts of questions – though only a few were involved, that added to a feeling of "closeness." Now "neighborhood" stations have a smaller share of the audience, but dialogue with listeners (real or fake) continues to be part of the radio environment.
And there was, of course, the famous story of Orson Welles's radio adaptation, in 1938, of Herbert George Wells's novel *The War of the Worlds*. Many listeners believed that there was an actual Martian invasion. Several were terrified, some fled their homes. (A real world war was in the making, but the aggressors didn't come from Mars.)
Obviously it's even more so with television. And it's gone to the extreme (or is someone going to dream up something worse?) with so-called "reality shows", that have nothing to do with "reality." [4]

It can also happen the other way round, when something "true" is perceived as "false." Forty years ago, in 1969, it was found that some people didn't believe that man had set foot on the moon. Television reporting of the moon landing was, necessarily, a mixture of direct viewing and simulation. This caused perceptive confusion. Especially with "underprivileged", or otherwise hostile, people there was a feeling that it was propaganda and what they were showing was a fake.

Even if we aren't overwhelmed by idolatry, totally reversing "being and appearing", we constantly run the risk of distorted perceptions that make us believe the unbelievable or disbelieve the obvious.

* * *

It may be necessary explain, at this point, that I have no grudge or prejudice against television. It can be used well and, when it is, it's a wonderful means of information and entertainment. Though it has been around for half a century, we have seen only the beginning of its development. Technical opportunities that have existed for years, but are only marginally used, could open the way for considerable innovation, with more selective and flexible programming.

But it's a fact that television is the biggest single source of warped perception, with image prevailing over reality. And that is a particularly serious disease for those (unfortunately large) parts of the population that scarcely use other media.

Our perceptive system is instinctively capable of handling metaphoric representation. A flat picture, ten inches high, on a screen, is "decoded" as a full-size, flesh-and-blood person (close-ups, typical of television syntax, help to enhance that perception.) [5] Television language is often construed so as to make us "feel" that those people are with us – or we are where we see them. Fake interaction, with a tame or nonexistent audience, is deliberately used to make us believe that "ordinary people" are actively involved. So we get into the habit of thinking that an artificial environment, designed for appearances in a TV studio, is the world we live in. [6]

Also in reporting the picture is warped. What happens every day, but we don't see, appears nonexistent. What is seen through the lens of a camera (and edited in several ways) is perceived as "true" as though we were there watching with our own eyes.

When we read a newspaper, we know that we aren't "seeing", what we get is someone's report of what happened or of what someone else had to say about it. In television, we are confused by the notion that "seeing is believing." Image becomes reality. What is on television is "real", everything else doesn't exist.

4 Dieter Hildebrandt, a German television author and presenter, said:
«We believe only what we see. So, with television, we believe everything.»

5 Some people think that it got worse when television changed from black-and-white to color. It could be actually true.

6 In a *New Yorker* cartoon, many years ago, a man was under the rain replacing a flat tire. His child son was looking at him through the car's window. And the father was saying *«no, we can't change channel.»*

"Icons" becoming "real" isn't a new notion. It's been part of legend, folklore and literature since the beginning of human history. The myth of Pygmalion, the picture of Dorian Gray, the Golem, Don Juan's "stone guest", the legend of Slappy Hooper, etcetera. But we know that those are myths, fairy tales or narrative fiction. [7]7

Our everyday familiarity with television confuses our perception to the point of making images more "true" than reality. And this happens also when what "we think we know" comes from other media, that are influenced by television and "homogenized" by ways of thinking that prevail even when they aren't deliberately forced by controlling power systems.

The idols are conditioned by idolatry as much as their followers and fans. Not only professional television personalities, but also people who "happen" to become "famous", lose touch with humanity. Almost everyone they meet is trying to relate to their "icon", not to whatever they are as human beings. They become prisoners of their "image." They feel quite comfortable in a cozy secluded cavern, visited only by other "celebrities" and their cronies – and they believe that it's the world where everyone else lives. There doesn't seem to be any effective treatment for this syndrome.

* * *

We don't need to become iconoclasts – or iconophobes – to solve the idolatry problem . Images, when used properly, have always been useful communication tools – even when they aren't great works of art. But it would be important to train people to understand what they see, read or hear.

I was lucky enough, when I was at school, to have some good teachers, who made me learn how to "see" art, how to understand history, and how to doubt my own thinking as well as everything else, no matter how loudly it is proclaimed or how "authoritative" may appear whoever is claiming to "tell the truth." But basic learning isn't enough. This is an endless process. Our mind needs daily exercise to stay as alert as it needs. A basic subject of education should be intensive training in how to read, listen and see, how to get behind the surface of mass media as well as neighborhood gossip.

A society dominated by passive, drowsy idolatry can be convenient for those who manage the idols, but a system based on ignorance and stupidity is self-destructive (see chapter 18 on the vicious circle of stupidity.)

I must admit that I feel an "iconoclastic" temptation, not only when I am watching television, but also when I see all sorts of image manipulation in newspapers – or the internet. Even when an image, per se, isn't misleading, there can be deliberate or "absentminded" confusion in the context.)

But obviously no form of expression is to be abolished, censored or repressed. Misunderstandings can be due to prejudice in the mind of the viewer (or reader) as often as they can be blamed on the author. And challenging every one of those absurdities would take more time and effort than any one of us can possibly afford.

What's important is to know how to tell the difference between repetitive nonsense and meaningful thinking. It's unlikely that anyone will be kind enough to teach us how. We must be obstinately self-educating and self-critical. And we should never forget that some "idols" may be lurking in our own mind (as we saw in chapter 13.)

7 There are also examples in movies, such as a character jumping out of the screen in Woody Allen's *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985) or a giant Anita Ekberg "materializing" from a billboard in Federico Fellini's episode in *Boccaccio 70* (1962) or the "Marshmallow Man" in *Ghostbusters* (1984) – and several other variations of the same idea. But these, too, are clearly dream or fiction, metaphoric symbols, that can't in any way be confused with "real life."

The Power of Stupidity

by Giancarlo Livraghi

In this pdf there are two chapters
on subjects that are obviously related
though they are not "the same"

Chapter 23 – The Power of Obscurantism

This is a "difficult word" – and a tricky subject. Over the years, I've been asked several times to look into the stupidity of "obscurantism" and "superstition." They can be seen as two ways of looking at the same problem, but I think it's better to deal with them separately, in this chapter and in the next.

What do we mean when we discuss "obscurantism" or "enlightenment"? Often it's as simple as it's meaningless. Whatever someone believes is "enlightening", everyone else's way of thinking is "dark" – wrong, or evil, or both. This can be the tool, or the origin, of all sorts of conflicts, ranging from maybe small, but insidious, misunderstanding to enormous, long-lasting and tragic persecution.

The contrast and the struggle, between the light of knowledge and the darkness of repression, have existed in all stages of human evolution, since the origin of our species. A complex and turbulent conflict that can be defined in many ways, but is basically the same at all times and in all cultures.

The arrogance of Prometheus or the risk of Pandora. The effort of Sisyphus or the threat of the Sphinx. All sorts of different myths and symbols, in every kind of human tradition, that may seem remote or removed, but reflect a reality that is as true today as it has ever been. With a crucial difference: the boundaries of knowledge have expanded so far, and so recently, that we are confused and bewildered.

We seek certainty and we can't find it. This is now, as it has always been, a treacherous opportunity for whoever wants to gain power and control by saying *«don't worry, let me do the thinking, just do as you are told and believe in what I am telling you.»*

An analysis of how these conflicts are rooted in many different cultures would be quite interesting, but obviously it goes far beyond what could be summarized in this chapter. Let's just say that the problem has always been there – and awareness is perceivable in folklore, tradition and "common sense", as well as in the thinking of the best philosophers of all time.

This isn't about religion (or any other "faith.") In one way or another, we all believe in something that can't be thoroughly verified by fact or experiment. Faith, by its own nature, is beyond discussion or doubt. Every person has a right to believe in whatever he or she finds suitable – even to worship Ras Tafari. [1]

There is a hideous problem when and where some form of organized belief is enforced – by physical violence, including weapons, wars and murder, by persecution of "heathens" or "heretics" (as is still happening in many parts of the world) or by less blatantly brutal, but equally oppressive, means. Such as habit, custom, manner, ritual, behavior, social standards – and fear.

This isn't only the case of dogmatic religions or ideologies, that don't accept any disagreement and aggressively repress dissent or doubt. It isn't practiced only by ecclesial hierarchies, oppressive sects or restrictive affiliations. There is a thread in all human cultures and at all times, still widespread even where it is less obvious, of "obscure" thought and practice that reduces people into blind obedience and mental slavery, obliterates freedom of thought and doesn't tolerate criticism.

We could look at this in many different environments, in apparently different ways, but let's pick one, with which we are more familiar in "western" cultures. The evolution in Europe from the late Middle Age to where we are today.

Of course we can't reduce a complex and turbulent millennium to simplistically defined "dark ages." But it's a fact that for several centuries Europe was plunged into an appalling depth of poverty, violence, ignorance and repression, while thinking was imprisoned by dogma and *ipse dixit* or hidden in the secrets of esoteric fraternities.

There was a crucial change that started much earlier than 1492. [2] "Vernacular", non-Latin written literature started in the eleventh century and expanded in the twelfth. At the same time there was the development of universities, as well as a wider re-discovery of classic (Greek and Latin) culture.

It was the beginning of the deep change that reached full bloom in the fifteenth century – we know it as "humanism" and it's quite appropriately called The Renaissance. A unique, extraordinary development not only in art, science and philosophy, but also in social change and in the practice of organized craftsmanship. ("Arts and crafts" is a very interesting definition that is worth bringing back to its best potential in the twentyfirst century.) [3]

The new evolution of manufacturing industry (though not yet using thermal energy) started in the fourteenth century.[4] Then there were new printing technologies (demanded by cultural development as much as they were made possible by technical resources) and oceanic sailing that opened new routes to remote places (for trade and war, conquest and piracy – but also for culture and knowledge.)

1 That religion actually exists. It's called Rastafarian (or "Rasta") in Jamaica. The messiah in that cult is Ras Tafari, Haile Selassie, Negus Neghesti ("king of kings") emperor of Ethiopia from 1930 to 1974. There is also a pseudo-religion called *pastafarian*, with a spaghetti god. Of course it's a joke, though it's carefully constructed to have the appearances of what could be formally defined as a church.

2 Some of the best historians believe that the "modern age" didn't start with Columbus crossing the Atlantic Ocean, but with the bankruptcy of the Peruzzi and Bardi bank in Florence in 1343, caused by default and refusal of debt by the King of England – that marked the end of medieval economy and the strengthening of national states. Other (and earlier) dates can be reasonably chosen, pointing to the fact that change was developing in the thirteenth and fourteenth century and had started in the eleventh and twelfth.

3 It's no coincidence that now we are feeling the need for a "Leonardo attitude", or the "Da Vinci Man." It wasn't just the genius of one person. There is a strongly felt, though scarcely fulfilled, need for a re-discovery of a deep blend of art and science, beauty and functionality, technique and philosophy, harmony and knowledge – that wasn't only the special talent of one "encyclopedic" mind, but the shared culture of the environment in which he lived.

4 There were advanced technical and engineering developments, used mostly for scientific and military purposes, in the classic Greek-Latin environment, especially in the "hellenistic" period, including the use of heat engines – though scarcely applied to "industrial" process. They were "forgotten" for a thousand years – and some discovered recently. (See The Archimedes Computer in note 1 – page 113.)

And then there was "Illuminism", "The Enlightenment", that appeared to be the final victory of Reason, *liberté egalité fraternité*, humanity at last and forever freed from prejudice, ignorance and oppression. [5]

So – where are we now?

After the social conflicts of the nineteenth century (mixed with high hopes of "progress" defeating "obscurantism") and after the scientific success and political catastrophes of the twentieth – are we getting close to the age of enlightenment? Obviously not – and in several ways it's getting worse.

We are drowning, again, in superstition. Believing in tricky numbers or lucky charms or unreliable forecasting would be relatively harmless entertainment if we didn't see so many people hopelessly ruined by gambling. (And this, of course, includes the stock exchange.) Equally absurd criteria are applied in all sorts of other circumstances. [6]

Believing in astrology could be just another silly game, but it's taken far too seriously by too many people – and, in several supposedly "civilized" countries, it's grotesquely supported by major media, including mainstream television and several newspapers and magazines that are supposed to be reliable. We shall get back to this in chapter 24, also looking into the appalling proliferation of soothsayers, wizards, sorcerers, necromancers, prophets, sects, pseudo-scientists, etcetera – and abominable "healers" promising to cure all sorts of diseases.

John Kenneth Gailbraith used to say: *«The only function of economic forecasting is to make astrology look respectable.»* But some things are predictable, if we know how to look at them in the right perspective. I have no way of knowing in what shape the world economy will be when this book will be read in coming months (or years.) But it's pretty clear that the expanding and contagious disease of speculative maneuvering could have been easily diagnosed twenty or thirty years ago, nothing was done to bring it under control, and eventually the manipulators were caught in their own trap. So great is the power of stupidity.

Obscurantism isn't only in the most obvious superstitions. There are all sorts of "beliefs" that have no base in reality. Or maybe they were meaningful when they started, but they no longer make any sense, while we continue with habits though we have forgotten their origin. And to those of tradition new prejudices are being added. Some may be relatively harmless (though they are, in any case, confusing) but several are quite dangerous.

We are horrified by reading of murders and suicides caused by satanic cults or other perverse rituals, but we don't always realize how many beliefs and delusions can lead to all sorts of persecution, suffering, violence and repression.

The progress of science is bewildering. It's been less than a century since we discovered that not only the copernican concept is correct beyond any reasonable doubt, but the size of the universe is enormously larger than we had ever been able to imagine. Our attitude, in spite of all evidence, remains ptolemaic. Our point of view, though we know that it isn't so, sets the Earth as the center – and even when we try to understand what is happening on our planet our perceptions are often subjective and unbalanced (see chapter 21 on problems of perspective.)

There is endless probing into the nature of matter and energy, the structure and origin of life, leading to discoveries and hypotheses that are fascinating, but also unfamiliar and puzzling. Science can not, and must not, try to offer any final and absolute certainty. It must be open to new explorations that can change and revise all theories.

5 Though this is known as the "French Revolution", "illuministic" ideas were brewing also in other European countries. And they were formalized, earlier than in any other place, in the rebellious colonies that became the United States of America.

6 See chapter 10 on the stupidity of power, 18 on the vicious circle of stupidity and 22 on idols and icons.

This is the beauty and the strength of our quest for knowledge. But it constantly challenges our habits and our assumptions. It's comfortable to believe, to rest on cozy commonplace. It's intriguing, but distressing, to learn, to look beyond the edge of our restricted horizon.

John Updike said: *«Astronomy is what we have now instead of theology. The terrors are less, but the comforts are nil.»* It is so in all developments of science. The ever-expanding explorations are fascinating, but also discomforting. The more we learn, the less we are sure.

It's a temptation to seek shelter in conventional, reassuring notions – and so fall prey to intentional deceits or absurd fantasies. [7]

We can have doubts about some parts of Darwin's theory, as it was originally defined, because knowledge has evolved since his first studies one hundred and fifty years ago. But there is obstinate spreading of quaint retrograde beliefs that, in spite of overwhelming evidence, deny the basic concept of evolution. With very worrying cultural, social and political consequences.

We are educated (in those parts of the world where there is a "decent" level of education) to believe that we have overcome racism. But there is a continuing proliferation, with all sorts of disguises, of ways of thinking and behaving that are based on the notion that some sorts of people are "superior" – and other "inferior."

There are, as awful today as they have ever been, situations of genocide, with the extermination of whoever is perceived as "different." When and where it isn't organized murder, it's slavery, persecution, exploitation, famine, disease and inhuman conditions – not only in (apparently) remote places, but also in some parts of so-called "advanced" economies and cultures. That isn't only cruel and horrible. It's also very stupid.

Witch hunts aren't extinct. Though we no longer see people burning at the stake, with applauding audiences, in the cities of Europe, and torture is (apparently) prohibited, as a tool for "saving souls" or extorting information, we still see persecution and "demonization" of attitudes or behaviors that are disliked by established power, by a domineering oligarchy or by some aggressive faction that wants to impose its absurd, and often delirious, worldview.

It's a widespread habit to believe what fits our mental grooves, our prejudice and bias, the conventional attitudes of our environment – or the bizarre manias of the information system in which we are entangled.

And we also tend to not perceive, or to refuse as false or irrelevant, whatever appears to be disturbing because it doesn't fit the pattern of preconceived banalities or narrow-minded cultural myopia.

Real progress – of a single person, an organization or mankind as a whole – is based on always doubting apparent certainties, always having an inexhaustible desire to learn, to evolve, to improve. We can learn something new, or understand something better, every day. But are we seeing, and listening, as well as we should? How often can we tell which tiny piece is the key to the solution of a big puzzle?

Scientific progress is extraordinary, but unfortunately it doesn't help us as much as we may wish, because it's fragmented into many restricted sectors, unable to find those broader syntheses that could nourish not only an evolution of our knowledge and understanding, but also an enrichment of our daily humanity.

But science, when it's free, has an advantage. It can never be satisfied with any of its achievements, it can't rest on its laurels, it must always explore new horizons and new perspectives – ceaselessly reconsidering every hypothesis, theory, method, system or cognitive process.

7 Fear is often a source of ignorance and stupidity. Because we run away from uncomfortable facts or knowledge. Or because we are manipulated by power, that often uses fear to scare people into obedience. See chapter 14.

There is a problem. It's difficult and complex. There is no sharply defined separation between knowledge and prejudice, light and darkness. There are obscurantisms in the most free and open cultures, as there can be surprising bits of wisdom and depth where we expect to find only ignorance and superstition. There are scientific and philosophical establishments that are supposed to be dedicated to the search of knowledge, while they are entrenched in the arrogant, myopic protection of cultural privilege. Or they are conditioned by power interests – economic, political or academic.

Enlightenment and obscurantism aren't neatly divided worlds. We don't have two opposed and disciplined armies, with uniforms and flags to make it clear who stands for what. They constantly mix in a tortuous, devious, contaminated, turbulent and ever-changing environment, where it's hard to tell the paths to clarity from the labyrinths of obscurity, the real quest for knowledge from the disguises of prejudice.

There is also a creeping notion that knowledge is not to be shared. It is true, of course, that specialized competence or dangerous tools need to be handled only by people who have the appropriate expertise and responsibility. But that notion is still today, as it was in "primitive" human societies, extended by all sorts of power-mongering, with self-appointed elites putting the rest of us to sleep with manipulated and confusing lullabies (or scaring us into obedience.)

Are we sinking in the quicksands of renewed and growing obscurantism? There are many symptoms of that disease. Some are extremely dramatic. Others may seem relatively harmless,but combine into an insidious cocktail of obnubilation that is the feeding ground for dangerous cultural infection.

We could be nostalgic about the times in our history when enlightenment was riding high, promising freedom and knowledge for all, affirming the "inalienable right" of all human beings to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." And rightly so. That the path to those ideals isn't easy or smooth is no good reason to stop trying. But it isn't as simple as it sounds.

At all times there has been, as there is now, a mixture of light and darkness. There never was such a luminous state of conscience as it may appear in hindsight (when we focus on the brightest ways of thinking, because those can inspire us now, as they did then, to look for a way ahead.)

The lessons of history are always useful, but it isn't easy to understand the complex and turbulent situation in which we are now. Many things have changed. In some there is real progress – with important results. But, if we fall into the delusion of assuming that we are "advanced" and aware, we lose the perception of our limitations. Complacency hinders the desire to learn, to discover, to improve.

If we realize how many things in today's world are obscure, and we try every day to understand something a bit better, we don't only push back the edge of the expanding power of obscurantism. We also enrich our humanity. It isn't easy to find a little spot of light in the darkness, like a far off beacon in the night. But, when it happens, it's a very pleasant experience.

Chapter 24 – Stupidity and Superstition

We generally agree that superstition is stupid. And, like stupidity, sometimes it's just silly, while in many ways it can be dangerous. But it isn't easy to understand what it is, because it's a vague, uncertain definition. It can be very subjective. What one person (or culture) sees as a foolish superstition can be something that others want to believe. And all people, of course, must be free to believe in whatever they choose.

It has happened in all cultures, at all times, that something was labeled as superstition, myth or witchcraft, and only later understood as progress in science and knowledge. And vice versa. We may believe that now we are more "enlightened", but things of that sort are still happening. And we may have tomorrow unexpected scientific validation of something that we are perceiving as a quaint theory.

To get to the core of the subject we must stay away (as we did in chapter 23) from consideration of faith – religious, political, ideological or of any other sort. Though the separating line is often uncomfortably thin.

One can, for instance, be a true Christian without believing in the miraculous power of a relic, a token or an image, the countless apparitions of angels, saints or devils – and the proliferation of weeping or bleeding statues and simulacra. Just as many people can "believe" in such things without having any deep religious faith.

In another perspective, it can be exaggerated to label as "superstition" some small fetish, that sometimes is a harmless habit also for non "credulous" people (such as "touching wood" – or whatever is considered lucky – without believing that it really matters.)

For instance in sailing there are omens and auspices that nobody really believes, though it's quite often avoided, if only jokingly, to unnecessarily invoke "bad luck." One of these is that green is an unlucky color (when it isn't a semaphore, a position light or part of a flag.)

One of many episodes that could be quoted was in the preliminary races of the 2000 America's Cup. One of the strongest teams decided to defy the legend by hoisting green spinnakers. The tearing of many of those sails was one of the reasons why it didn't win. Was that because of the untested chemistry of some rarely used dye? Or a mistake by a sailmaker that was uneasy with the color? Or poor coordination in a crew made nervous by the ill-omened green? It's hard to tell. But I must admit that I wouldn't feel very comfortable at sea on a boat with green sails. [8]

We can all, occasionally and jokingly, treat as omen prevention what is simply common sense, being prepared for unexpected problems. As in the case of Murphy's Law (see chapter 4.)

We can draw the line, where we feel it's most appropriate, between gullibility and belief – or between perverse credulities and harmless habits, such as wearing or carrying a small "lucky charm." [9] In between, though it isn't easy to define its boundaries, lies the insidious power of superstition.

8 Years later, in the 2007 America's Cup selections in Valencia, the superstition was effectively dispelled by the good performance of the Spanish team with a green hull. But an obstinate believer in the bad spell could argue that, in spite of some lucky episodes, they didn't get to the finals. And after that event the whole America's Cup organization was plagued by bickering, polemic and intrigue, to the point of making its survival uncertain.

9 This, sometimes, can actually work, but it doesn't need to be magic. Wearing or touching something that reminds us of somebody, or in any way gives us a pleasant feeling, can improve our state of mind, reduce tension, make us more relaxed, comfortable and aware.

It's quite surprising to discover that people, who are not foolish or ignorant, can "believe" bizarre absurdities without even trying to understand which may have been the origin of habits, fears or prejudices.

With a bit of research we can find that walking under a ladder may have had esoteric meanings, but it was (and still may be) dangerous if someone working on top of the ladder drops a tool. The fear of black cats may have been originated by associating them with witchcraft – but something dark moving unexpectedly in the night could scare a horse.

In the seventeenth or eighteenth century, when the idea was born that we should never put a hat on a bed, it wasn't healthy to place, where people slept, a container of dirt, ointments and lice that proliferated in wigs and headwear.

Mirrors were rare and traditionally associated with magic. The problem was also that replacing a broken mirror was quite expensive and could take a long time (though not seven years.)

A list of examples could be very long. Some superstitions relate somehow to potential real problems, most are based only on old beliefs and fears that now are forgotten, but the habits are still followed without knowing why.

They are not as harmless as some may seem. If we fall into the habit, even in small things, of believing the unbelievable, we can slide into dangerous delusions. We can hurt ourselves, or the people we care for, by using, for illness or other problems, the wrong remedy or protection. We can become prisoners of behaviors that go beyond the limits of "harmless little whims" and become haunting obsessions.

It's made even worse by exploitation. Superstitions are often the tool of those who use them to gain power and influence over others. To steal some money – or to cause much greater damage. Such as exploiting disease, pain, unhappiness or fear to offer bad remedies or unlikely luck – and so make things much worse for people who are already in trouble.

There is also a perplexing behavior of mainstream media in too many countries. They publish horoscopes – and report prophecies (rarely going back, after the fact, to find that whatever was predicted didn't happen.) They offer much more space than they deserve to soothsayers, healers, wizards and necromancers. They insouciantly report that someone belongs to this or that astrological sign. Etcetera. [10]

The excuse is clumsy. *«If that is what people want, that we must give them.»* That's ridiculous. Media can be popular, amusing, relaxing, without spreading false beliefs. There is no proof whatsoever that a newspaper or a magazine ever lost readers, or a television show viewers, by staying away from superstition.

And even if they had to get into those subjects, a touch of irony and humor would help to put them in the right perspective. In a not-so-remote past astronomy and astrology were relatively close. If anyone assumed that astronomical events could have an influence on human affairs (which, of course, is possible) the way of trying to guess was based on astronomy as it was perceived. Now we know that even Copernicus had a very limited perception of the universe and the movements of planets and stars. If anyone really wanted to look into possible relations between human events and outer space, they should do so by starting from scratch in a completely different perspective.

It may be too much (and probably counterproductive) to put a warning on horoscopes (and other wizardries) like the ones on cigarette packs: "scientifically meaningless and may cause mental disorientation." But it would help if mainstream information didn't continue to support all sorts of prejudice – and so spin the vicious circle of stupidity (see chapter 18.)

10 Even scientific information is distorted. As in the case of the new Cern particle accelerator supposedly causing he Earth to be swallowed by a black hole in October, 2008 (when the system wasn't even tested for any application – as confirmed by the fact that it needed re-engineering to become functional several months later.) This is only one of many such absurdities. One of then the unfortunate effects of misinformation is that it makes people skeptical about dangers that can be real.

Of course astrology is only one of many examples. There are all sorts of things that we are in the habit of believing – or that we like to believe for a variety of reasons, from the desire to be comforted to the fear of what we don't understand (see chapter 14.) The remedy isn't a hypothetical (and often debatable) "absolute rationality." Emotions, feelings, intuitions, imagination are essential for the completeness and balance of human nature.

They are as necessary in the development of knowledge as the methodic use of reason. But we can pleasantly read a fairy tale without fearing that we will be devoured by an ogre or hoping that we can be helped out of trouble by a whim of a benevolent genie.

We can dream, asleep or awake, of riding a gryphon or floating above the clouds on a flying carpet. But when we wake up, or maybe after some relaxing daydreaming, we must get back to a world where, if we want to fly, we need an airplane – or, at least, a parachute.

We can study and enjoy an old myth or legend, discovering its meanings and values (often deep and fascinating) without literally accepting the reality of the story. We can heed the warnings of Hamlet's father without believing in ghosts. [11]

Difficult as it may be to draw the line between bewildering possibilities and ridiculous beliefs, or to separate harmless habits from mischievous delusions, the fact remains that superstition is a dangerous form of stupidity. We can be tricked by hucksters who steal our money – or, much worse, we can be exploited and enslaved. And even when nobody else is trying to deceive us we can hurt ourselves for all sorts of absurd reasons.

* * *

A particular form of obnubilation is called "fundamentalism." We are aware of its extreme consequences in crime and violence, oppression and slavery, murder and exploitation, war and genocide. But it's lurking in many other ways. Not only in religion or ideology. There is fundamentalism in politics, sports, society, economy, corporations, professions, all sorts of groups and communities – even in family feuds and neighborhood conflicts.

It can also be called integralism, dogmatism, absolutism, extremism, fanaticism – and of course it relates to obscurantism and superstition.

In this era, that we hoped would be a time of civilization and freedom, enlightening and awareness, there is an awful resurgence of intolerance. Not only in remote places or repressive cultures, but also close to home, wherever we are.

We can be fans without being fanatics, enjoy spectator sports without becoming hooligans, disagree without fighting, have fun without humiliating or hurting anyone, etcetera. But we are still living in a dark eclipse of good sense and civility. One more proof of the fact that stupidity can hide in all sorts of disguises and prevail in many insidious ways.

A description of the book
is online – stupidity.it

11 Of course the most widely quoted statement is not in what his father's ghost said, but in Hamlet's comment to his friend: *«There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.»* (William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 5.)

The Power of Stupidity

by Giancarlo Livraghi

Chapter 25 – Is Stupidity Growing?

That can be a silly question. And there are some silly answers. I don't know who started spreading the idea that *«the sum of intelligence on the planet is a constant, while the population is growing»* – but the fact is that it's being repeated here and there. And, quite surprisingly, it isn't meant to be just a joke. It has also become a dogma of self-appointed groups of (so they say) "super intelligent" people.

While we can reasonably assume (though we have no way of "proving" it as a fact) that the "percentage of stupidity" is a constant (as discussed in chapters 1, 7, 9, 10 and 11) it is nonsensical (as well as grossly arrogant) to believe or suggest that a small (and proportionally decreasing) number of people has a monopoly of intelligence – and everyone else is stupid.

This peculiar way of thinking has not, so far, become the tool of a dominating oligarchy, but it's a widespread habit of people in power to assume (or pretend) that they have some sort of superior intelligence – and it's even worse when the rest of the people are lulled into believing that it might be true. [1]

In Cyril Kornbluth's science fiction story *The Marching Morons* (1951) a sleazy character is unfrozen from "cryogenic storage" in a future populated by a vast majority of idiots. He becomes a leader of the "intelligent minority." When faced with the problem of moron overpopulation, he sets up a network of tour operators offering wonderful holidays on Venus and embarking masses of "inferior" people on ships to be lost in space. At the end of the story he becomes a victim of his own scheme. It's unlikely that we are heading for any such future, but we are facing some very serious problems caused by human stupidity.

[1] Chapter 10 *The Stupidity of Power* is also online `gandalf.it/stupid/chap10.pdf`

It is just as silly to ask if human intelligence is growing – though some so-called "scientific" studies say that it is. We have no reliable way of "measuring" or comparing intelligence. This isn't just because there is no clear definition of what it is, and "IQ" standards are questionable – if not totally meaningless.

Even if we had a reliable and comparable yardstick (that we don't have) no such analysis is wide enough, by length of time, number of people and variety of culture, to be more than a fruitless academic exercise or a subjective and vague opinion. [2]

So can we set all this aside as pointless? Not quite. It's worth some comment.

Anthropology, in one way or another, defines "intelligence" as a "characteristic" of a "human being." But, even before we chose the arrogant definition *sapiens* to separate our species from other "humanoids", there have always been doubts about the actual "sapience" of our kin – and our ability to understand, learn and improve. We made it worse when we doubled the definition, calling *sapiens sapiens* our particular breed, as separate from other "humans" who, as far as we can tell by tracing their behavior, weren't necessarily more stupid than we are.

It's a fact that science, especially in the last four centuries, and even more so in recent years, has largely expanded the frontiers of knowledge. It's as fascinating as it is bewildering.

Our perceptions are potentially more advanced than they have ever been, but perspectives are often biased. [3]

It's hard to tell if, when and how this is making us more intelligent (or more confused – and therefore more stupid.)

On the other hand, large and small events confirm, every day, the dismal effects of human stupidity. Many problems are going from bad to worse. But what we may perceive as "the good old times" wasn't as good as nostalgia, sometimes, is dreaming. Simplistic as this is, it's reasonably practical to assume that we are as stupid as we have ever been. The sheer fact that our species has, so far, survived and expanded, in spite of its appalling mistakes, proves that we are not completely stupid. But it's painfully obvious that our resources aren't good enough for the state of evolution in which we are now.

The problem is in the environment. The number of people has increased much faster than it ever did in past history. Wider an faster transport and communication have made us more invasive, while we haven't had the time (or the vision) to adjust to these circumstances.

Human development has always changed the environment. But, as long as people were few and far apart, when resources were exploited, destroyed or poisoned they could just move to somewhere else. Now we can no longer depend on such nearsighted behavior.

[2] Getting into the details of those studies would be as boring as it is irrelevant. It's pretty obvious that if we try to measure what "was" a level of "intelligence" by criteria based on today's environment, we will automatically find that the average was "lower." As the criteria are basically influenced by educational standards, ironically a country with a higher level of literacy ten or twenty years ago has a relatively poor "improvement" score. Such ridiculous mistakes have actually happened.

[3] See chapter 21– also online `gandalf.it/stupid/chap21.pdf`

Of course there are problems of cultural environment that are as serious as the physical state of the thin layer on the surface of our planet that is the world where we live.

Some people are nostalgic about stupidity. Thirty years ago an ironic – but seriously critical – Italian writer, Leonardo Sciascia, wrote: *«A sort of melancholy, and regret, seizes us every time we meet a sophisticated, adulterated idiot. Oh the nice fools of yestertime! Genuine, natural. Like homemade bread.»* [4]

Strangely enough, there are other writers, in recent years, saying the same sort of thing. Of course they are joking, but there is a fairly widespread feeling that stupidity is becoming more devious. This isn't really changing – it has always been so. But the abundance of information is making it more obvious.

It's becoming obsessively irritating that we are so often inundated by a growing tide of arrogant stupidity. Four hundred years earlier, Michel de Montaigne had summarized the problem quite clearly. *«Nobody is exempt from saying stupid things, the harm is to do it presumptuously.»*

There is nothing new in the abundance of presumptuous idiots. We are just more often aware of their presence (and the results of what they are doing, not only saying.) [5]

Confusing cunning with intelligence (chapter 17) is another way of multiplying the power of stupidity. As Francis Bacon said, *«There is nothing more damaging to a country than shrewd people passing themselves off as being intelligent.»* It's even worse when this delusion is shared on a large scale.

There is a real danger that so frequent evidence of how people who are supposed to be bright and wise are awfully stupid can lead us to resignation and selfishness. But it doesn't work. The tide of stupidity will catch up with our little raft no matter where we think it's drifting.

The appalling size of "globalized" stupidity is particularly obnoxious in the case of problems that were quite obvious, but were allowed to grow, and now are so entangled that it's much more difficult to find a solution (as explained in chapter 3.)

The most visible, but not the only one, is the financial crisis, that was a serious and easily diagnosed infection twenty years ago, but was allowed – actually encouraged – to spread until it became a catastrophical epidemic. It will take years to understand if the world's leaders and opinion makers will be able to learn from this experience or will again do more of the same. Or, maybe, plunge into some other disastrous blunder.

* * *

[4] In *Nero su Nero*, 1979. Included in *Opere*, Bompiani, 1989.

[5] See chapter 26 *Stupidity isn't Harmless* – online `gandalf.it/stupid/chap26.pdf` for some interesting comments on glorified stupidity by another bright Italian writer, Ennio Flaiano. The "pompous ass", of course, has always been a well known character, as we learn from comedy and tragedy, history and irony, thousands of years ago. But the fast contact that we now have with remote environments, while it's basically an interesting and stimulating resource, can make it more difficult to tell the difference between meaningful culture and unfamiliar nonsense.

For lack of any better criterion, let's stay with the simple "postulate" that the stupidity factor is a constant in humankind. So human stupidity is growing because there are more of us. And, just as infectious diseases and destructive pests travel on airplanes, the contagion of stupidity rides the fast waves of worldwide communication.

In other words, we are not becoming more (or less) stupid, but the power of stupidity is increasing. The problem is in the vastness of the consequences, that has never been so large – and in the speed of their multiplication. We can't uproot stupidity. But, the more we understand it, the closer we can get to reducing its impact. And that is what this book is all about.

A description of the book
is online – stupidity.it

26 – Stupidity Isn't Harmless

Though I am always trying, as best I can, to avoid the influence of personal bias, I must admit that I was quite surprised when I bumped into the notion that stupidity can be perceived as "harmless". My belief has always been that it's quite dangerous – and so it's seen by practically everyone I know, as well as in comments by readers. Maybe people who think that way never read this book (or stop after a few pages, as soon as they realize that it isn't just a collection of funny anecdotes.)

Then, one day, I was reading a book by Ennio Flaiano, a bright Italian writer who never published any specific work on stupidity, but was quite aware of the problem. And I found that he was arguing against someone else believing that we shouldn't worry, because it does no harm. Stupid people, that character said, are so stupid that they never achieve anything, good or bad, so it's enough to ignore them or to laugh about their miseries.

So I started thinking about it and looking around – and, much to my dismay, I realized that this can be a serious problem. Probably a reason why stupidity is so poorly studied or understood is that too many people think it's irrelevant. (Or believe that it's a blessing in disguise for non-stupid people who can have an advantage – or even deliberately exploit it, as we saw in chapter 17 on *Stupidity and Cunning.*)

It can be actually comforting to contemplate other people's stupidity. When we see, or hear about, someone who is (or appears to be) more stupid than we are, that makes us feel clever. This is probably why so many people enjoy gossip (that I generally find boring) and some (often silly) bestsellers are about the human weaknesses of the famous, the rich, the powerful and whoever else is envied or admired.

I am not aware of any survey trying to measure how many people think that stupidity is harmless – or dangerous – and why. If it existed, I wouldn't trust it, because I know how surveys work. [1]. So let's forget numbers and stay with the fact that such attitudes are more widely shared than it would be reasonable to expect.

As far as I can see, this isn't a clearly defined perception in anyone's mind. Most people simply don't think about it. And (though they don't consciously think about that, either) they believe that the fool is aways someone else. I am not trying to say that whoever ignores the problem is necessarily stupid. But he or she is, to say the least, absentminded – and, by ignoring the problem, unwittingly helps to make it worse.

Seneca used to say: *«sometimes it's pleasant to be stupid.»* Maybe he was right, but we shouldn't make it a habit.

[1] This is explained very well in Darrell Huff's brilliant book, *How to Lie with Statistics*. I am pleased that I was asked to add some comments in the Italian edition that was published by Monti & Ambrosini in 2007.

In Flaiano's observations there is an additional comment. *«I must explain* – he says – *that stupidity can be attractive, we can even say that it's comforting. So it happens that the most foolish books are those that most attract us, that most tempt us and overcome our defenses. Daily experience leads us to believe that stupidity is the perfect, originary state of man, who seizes every opportunity to return to that happy condition. Intelligence is an added layer, later superimposed, and only to that original status of the spirit we are driven by gravity and convenience.»* [2]

So stupidity isn't only perceived as harmless, it can also be restful and comfortable? Unfortunately there is some truth in this observation. There is inertia, almost connivance, that helps to increase the mischievous power of stupidity.

Ennio Flaiano goes on to say that *«There is only one relieving thought. It is generally believed that fools solidarize. They don't. Nobody hates a fool more that another fool. If they did...»*

That doesn't really help. It may be true that stupid people don't deliberately "solidarize" – or aren't aware of how they aggregate – because they don't know that they are stupid. But it's a fact that stupidity is contagious. And, as the infected people aren't aware of their disease, it's very difficult to control the epidemic.

In a later article Flaiano observed that *«Stupidity has made enormous progress. It's a sun so shining that we can no longer look at it directly. Thanks to communication media, it's no longer the same, it's nourished by other myths, it sells extremely well, it has ridiculed good sense and it's spreading its terrifying power»*. [3] That was forty years ago. Things aren't getting any better.

I don't think that power systems, and especially the selfish aristocracies of communication, are fully aware of how much they are doing to spread stupidity – and, at the same time, to make it seem "harmless". They are dominated by the arrogant and naïve assumption that they have a monopoly if intelligence and therefore they can (or must) treat everybody else as stupid.

They don't understand that, by doing so, they increase the already overwhelming power of stupidity. (See chapter 18 on this vicious circle.)

In a way, this is quite funny. But it's no joke. Humor and irony (especially self-irony) can be effective remedies against stupidity. As long as we don't forget that it's a serious and dangerous problem and we can't understand it by just laughing about it.

* * *

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[2] This comment by Ennio Flaiano is in *La saggezza di Pickwick*, one of the articles in *Diario Notturno* published by Bompiani in 1956. I am translating from the 1994 Adelphi edition, page 100.

[3] *Corriere sella Sera*, March 15, 1969. Published in *La solitudine del satiro*, Adelphi, 1996, page 310.

On the other hand – we shouldn't be scared. Mischievous as it is, stupidity isn't a devouring monster. We can, indeed we should, feel "at war" against its invasion. But we are not going to win by being "belligerent." (See chapter 28 *Embarrassing or Obsessive?*)

As Sun Tzu explained in *The Art of War*, it's better to prevail in another way. *«To win a hundred battles is not supreme excellence. Supreme excellence is to defeat the enemy without fighting.»*

While we can't hope for a total and final victory against stupidity, there is a lot of ground that we can gain by understanding it.

A description of the book
is online – stupidity.it

The Power of Stupidity

by Giancarlo Livraghi

Chapter 28
Embarrassing – or Obsessive?

Most of the history of literature on human stupidity (with rare exceptions, as those quoted in this book) can be reduced to the monotonous repetition of two superficial attitudes – that don't help to understand the problem, but are very effective in avoiding the unpleasant experience of trying to face it.

One is to simply despise the fool – always seen as someone else. It's often convenient to label as stupid whoever has opinions that don't fit with those of an author that defines himself as "wise" (or as an "authority" in whatever is the subject.) That's an easy way of avoiding the trouble, and the risk, of debate or dialogue. It was widely practiced thousands of years ago and it's still a very common disease.

The other is mockery. Stupid people are funny. They are the subject of laughter, jeer, scorn, jokes, pranks, hoaxes and mobbing. That's another way of avoiding the problem – and unloading on someone else the burden not only of stupidity, but also of diversity, disagreement or misunderstanding.

Whoever doesn't think or behave like we do is stupid. Why should we waste time trying to understand people, when it's enough to ridicule them as clumsy and awkward?

Since the remote origin of human culture we have been removing the problem of stupidity, trying to exorcise it by pretending to be immune, seeking all possible ways of avoiding the issue. This isn't only a stupid behavior, it's also a symptom of the fact that stupidity is embarrassing. And this is one of the reasons why we are afraid of it.

There are, in this depressing context, two interesting exceptions. One is the wise attitude of some tribal cultures (but to be found also in historically more evolved situations) that, instead of rejecting people showing unusual behavior, or isolating them as "foolish" or "mad", treat them as having a special gift or talent. It's worth noting that, in many cases, this isn't only a way of making diversity socially acceptable, but also of appreciating people who actually have some special talent or unusual perceptivity.

The other is the extraordinary invention of the court jester, that dates back to prehistoric times and was successfully practiced for millennia (in other guises and with other definitions, it can still be quite effective.)

This is someone who has no social rank or institutional "wisdom", but a talent for irony and humor. He is encouraged to behave as "the fool", or the "jolly joker" – so that his irreverent bizarreness can be accepted without embarrassment and avoiding the severe punishment that would be inflicted on any ranking courtesan or ordinary person who dared to criticize power.

William Shakespeare – who was quite familiar with the theatrical role of jesters – described this character as "wise enough to play the fool." [1]

There are many examples, in literature, tradition and folklore in several cultures, of clever people successfully "playing the fool." [2] Of course they actually existed, everywhere and at all times – and they are still around, though really good jesters are rare.

There is another way of apparently silly people behaving intelligently – "by chance." In different sorts of legend, myth or narrative, from the Princes of Serendip [3] to Forrest Gump. Sometimes this can actually happen in real life, but it's rarely as thorough and consistent as it appears in fiction.

Irony and humor, sarcasm and satire, can still be sharp tools. When used effectively, they can help to make a few dents in the shining armor of stupidity. But monotony and habit, commonplace and complacency, often fall into the category of pointless and evasive futility.

The problem is that stupidity is embarrassing. As long as we can laugh about it, we are comfortable. But trying to understand it is unpleasant. Even people with a healthy dose of self criticism, and heartily open to irony, often feel uncomfortable when it comes to stupidity. It isn't easy to accept the fact that we are all, to some extent, stupid.

Silly, maybe, sometimes. A bit crazy, why not. Because we accept the notion that geniuses have traits of lunacy (and this is often true, especially when something is called madness because other people don't understand it – or it doesn't fit with conventional culture.) People who have no claim to genius can be pleasantly amusing with some mild, harmless craziness.

[1] In *Twelfth Night*, Act 3, Scene 1. There is no clear attribution to Shakespeare (or Chaucer) of the proverbial phrase *«Many a true word is spoken in jest.»*

[2] A classic in Italian literature, partly based on medieval sources, is *Le sottilissime astutie di Bertoldo* (1606) by Giulio Cesare Croce, followed (1608) by *Le piacevoli et ridicolose simplicità di Bertoldino* (Bertoldo's son) – and a third story, *Novella di Cacasenno, figliuolo del semplice Bertoldino*, was added by Adriano Banchieri in 1620. Three movies on this subject were produced in 1936, 1954 and 1984. "Bertoldo" and related characters have also been developed by other authors and in other languages.

[3] A Persian fable that inspired Horace Walpole to coin the word *serendipity*. There are several other stories, of different origin, with a similar meaning – such as the Talmudic apologue of "a camel blind in one eye." A recent addition (2008) is *The Enchantress of Florence* by Salman Rushdie.

But stupidity? That's awful. We can, maybe, play stupid to avoid answering an embarrassing question or accepting undesired responsibility. But admitting that we are… is terrifying.

That stupidity is embarrassing is explained quite clearly by James Welles in his interesting book, *Understanding Stupidity*, that I had quoted in chapter 1.

«Whenever I had occasion to tell someone I was writing a book on stupidity, the reaction was invariably the same – a delayed smile topped off by a slightly nervous laugh. This provided nearly daily confirmation that I was dealing with a taboo topic. There is something shameful about stupidity, and mentioning it in polite company in an inoffensive way was commonly regarded as an awkward form of comic relief. Beyond that, there was often an expression of amused interest that such an off-color topic would merit serious attention.»

«Originally, the attention wasn't supposed to be so serious. The book was to be light and jocular. It took on more of a serious tone as I came to realize how incredibly important stupidity is. It can be amusing; it certainly is interesting; but whether or not we can afford to continue indulging in our traditional blundering ways is very much in doubt. Stupidity is simply too important to be dismissed as some tragicomic source of humor.» [4]

The first, necessary step in any effective stupidology is not only to accept that stupidity exists, and there is more of it than we usually think, but also to come to grips with the embarrassing fact that stupidity is an essential part of human nature. And that we are all, to some extent, stupid – generally more than we know, if we haven't been careful and thorough enough in understanding our own stupidity. (This is a basic, and too often overlooked, concept – as explained in the "First Corollary" in chapter 9.)

Contemplating stupidity isn't pleasant. But it isn't Medusa the Gorgon. By looking at it we aren't turned into stone. Quite to the contrary, it doesn't like to be seen, it prefers to hide behind us, or in some corner that escapes our attention. It thrives in shade, haze and darkness – fears light and clarity. To see it, face it, know it is the beginning of understanding how we can reduce its insidious power.

* * *

While ignoring or underestimating stupidity is dangerous, at the other end of the spectrum there is obsession. When we understand the power of stupidity to its full extent, it can be bewildering. But if it becomes a nightmare we are overwhelmed and hopeless.

Biographers tell us that Gustave Flaubert was obsessed with human stupidity. For many years he collected thousands of examples, hoping that he would be able to put them together in an *Encyclopédie de la bêtise*. But he was defeated by the immensity of the task. Later he tried to deal with this subject in a novel, *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, but it remained unfinished (it was published incomplete, after his death, in 1881.) His concern and dismay with "cultural stupidity" is a thread also in other books, including the gallery of mean and dumb characters that lead Emma Bovary to despair.

[4] James F. Welles, *Understanding Stupidity*, Mount Pleasant Press, ninth printing 2003 – see note 6 in chapter 1 and `gandalf.it/stupid/welles.htm` – online `stupidity.net/story2/preface.htm`

A few fragments of Flaubert's collection were published posthumously in a short *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*. This is a comment in Rodolfo Wilcock's introduction to an Italian edition. [5]

«Throughout Flaubert's life, the image of Stupidity, carried by the powerful tide of the times, continued to grow in his eyes, not only ineradicable attribute of the human species, but Cosmic Power, the ether that surrounded every word spoken, the gossip of busybodies and the lectures of academics, the appeals of politicians and the precepts of pharmacists, the similitudes of poets and the protocols of scientists.»

There are several other cases (I mentioned some in chapter 1) of writers and philosophers being intensely aware of the problem, but dismayed by its size and complexity. It can happen to all sorts of people – and this is another reason why stupidity is an unpopular subject. One of its consequences is the discomfort that it causes when we realize how it's creeping everywhere, including our own mind and behavior.

If not obsession, it can become depression or complacency. Or a feeling of loneliness, when we realize that other people don't understand the problem or are embarrassed by the subject. In those happy moments when we are free from our stupidity, while we feel that we are grasping some interesting stimulus, we can be dismayed by the surrounding emptiness. As we move out of crowded stupidland, we are lost in lonely places, away from the relaxing habits of conventional wisdom and dominant stereotypes.

«But» – as Albert Einstein said – *«one has to take it all with good humor»* [6] We need to understand that, when we are aware of stupidity, we are beginning to improve our chances of untangling its messy muddles.

It can be relaxing to simply give up. When we adjust to habit and prejudice, fashion and commonplace, it's comforting to be in such wide and jolly company. But it isn't healthy, because the world is full of people who want to exploit our gullibility. Even when they don't, we suffer the consequences of our unawareness. And in any case, if we don't become completely stupid, the uneasiness remains.

There is no good reason why we should give in to the ubiquitous power of stupidity. Curiosity is a wonderful tool. Depressing as the general monotony can be, there is always something different that we can find.

With a taste for the unusual and the unpredictable, we can cross the desert and discover a pleasant oasis – that, in some unexplored wilderness of thought and culture, can appear unexpectedly where we weren't looking. Good humor, indeed. It's an enjoyable and encouraging experience.

And there is a strong emotion called passion. Unlike obsession or anxiety, it's a powerful, lively resource.

There are risks. We can make fools of ourselves when we are carried away by enthusiasm. But it's much more stupid to be passive, indifferent, apathetic, careless or callous. We can be genuinely passionate about great ideas or small hobbies, people we love or things we cherish, major tasks or apparently small details. On any scale, it's an essential way of being human. Pleasantly exciting and intensely motivating.

[5] *Dizionario dei luoghi comuni*, Adelphi, 1980.

[6] See Albert Einstein's comments, quoted in chapter 18, on fame making people stupid.

The Power of Stupidity

by Giancarlo Livraghi

Chapter 29 – *Errare Humanum*

There is some wisdom in the old saying, "to err is human." It would be stupid to believe that it is possible to never make any mistakes. Even the most effective combination of intelligence, experience, knowledge, care and discipline can't be infallible. No solution, decision or behavior can be perfect every time. Mistakes aren't always stupid. When the advantage of learning from errors is greater than the damage that they cause, the result is in the intelligence quadrant of the "stupidology graph" (chapter 8.) Making mistakes and understanding why is an essential part of any learning process – just as being prepared for unexpected mishaps is a necessary element in effective planning (as explained in chapter 4 about Murphy's Law.)

Quite often a mistake or misfunction reveals some fault in behavior, process or thinking. If we don't just fix whatever went wrong, but we also understand how and why, that can lead to a more intelligent solution.

If we placed a newborn baby to grow in a perfectly aseptic environment, when later exposed to the outside world the child would probably die, for lack of an effective immune system. It's equally dangerous to believe that we never make mistakes. The delusion of infallibility is arrogantly stupid.

If we fall into the habit (chapter 15) of repeating the same behavior that, in past experiences, had achieved good results, the problem isn't only that we stop learning. It's also that situations and circumstances are never exactly the same. With habit and routine we become less perceptive, over time we lose touch with reality.

A widespread form of stupidity is to be unable, or unwilling, to admit mistakes. Not only to other people, but also to oneself. The courage to say, or think, "I was wrong" isn't only honest. It's also an intelligent way of reducing the power of stupidity.

It's important also to know how to handle other people's mistakes. Arguing and scolding are seldom the right way. It's more civilized to forgive, but it isn't enough. We need to understand if, how and why something that we have done (or failed to do) caused someone else to be mistaken.

We must also try to understand if that person is irremediably stupid (or maybe just inept in a specific role) and, in that case, find a way of removing the problem. But, more often, there is another solution: we can help that person to understand the origin of the mistake – and so reduce the probability of it being repeated.

Is this obvious? Yes, in theory. But in practice it's more common to try to "pass the buck" – or look for a scapegoat to shift the blame – instead of learning from mistakes.

In an open, fair, dynamic environment, where responsibilities are shared and there is a genuine sense of community, it can be very effective to be together in understanding mistakes, from the origin to the consequences. Not to dilute responsibilities, weep on each other's shoulder or cry over spilt milk, but to enrich the shared resources of experience.

This is rarely achieved with formal meetings or bureaucratic procedures. As Paul Foley said, *«Large meetings are often used to share the blame.»* [1] It takes genuine cooperation and lively teamwork to share the experience and jointly learn from mistakes.

It's an old notion that mistakes are a source of learning. There are lots of possible quotations. Here are three, from different angles. *«A man's errors are his portals of discovery»*, James Joyce. *«All men make mistakes, but only wise men learn from their mistakes»*, Winston Churchill. *«Anyone who has never made a mistake has never tried anything new»*, Albert Einstein.

We can do much more, and much better, than simply "learn from mistakes." As explained by Karl Popper's metaphor "Einstein and the ameba" (in *Of Clouds and Clocks*, 1966) both the ameba and Einstein solve their problems by trial and error, but they do it very differently. The ameba does not realize the process, its errors are eliminated through the elimination of the ameba itself. On the other hand Einstein deliberately uses errors to test his theories and improve his knowledge.

In other words, it's not enough to learn from mistakes when they happen. It's useful to deliberately test ideas, behaviors, methods and solutions to understand which lead to mistakes – and how. This isn't only a basic concept of scientific research, education and technical experiment. It's a valuable tool in all sorts of endeavors and in the experience of daily life.

What is really stupid isn't making mistakes, but not understanding (or admitting) that we do – and not knowing how to use them as a source of improvement.

A commonsense notion, and a sound management criterion, is a "calculated risk." We can find (or deliberately set up as an experimental field) a situation where it's possible to make mistakes with less worrying consequences – and so learn how to avoid, or cope with, more serious or unexpected problems.

It has been said, and practiced, by the most inspiring leaders, that "the biggest risk is to take no risks." Taking no risks, or making no mistakes, is impossible. It's much more effective (and interesting) to understand which risks we are taking – and to be aware of our mistakes, even when it's embarrassing.

The stupidest (and most dangerous) fools are people who don't realize that they are stupid – and so are those who think that they never make mistakes. But it does no good to fall into an opposite pitfall. One can be so obsessed with the fear of being mistaken that the anxiety becomes pedantic, meticulous routine. A formalistic attitude that often causes more problems than it can solve or prevent. (We discussed the stupidity of bureaucracy in chapter 12.)

Charles de Talleyrand was a treacherous power-monger. But he wasn't stupid. He taught his disciples: *«Surtout pas trop de zêle.»* Discipline, dedication, care in every detail are intelligent and can substantially reduce the power of stupidity. But being overzealous isn't only boring and irritating. It can also lead to embarrassing mistakes.

To err is human, to persevere isn't "devilish" – it's just stupid. This was understood over two thousand years ago, when Cicero wrote: *«Cujusvis hominis est errare, nullius nisi insipientis in errore perseverare.»* [2]

1 See his *Adages* (`gandalf.it/m/foley2.htm`) where he also wrote *«It's easy to get a unanimous vote for doing nothing.»*

2 *«To err is human, to persevere in error is only the act of a fool»* (Marcus Tullius Cicero, Phillippics, XII, 2.)

It has been repeated many times in different words, summarized as a proverb from a statement attributed to Seneca: *«Errare humanum est, perseverare autem diabolicum.»* Somber as it sounds, when it's said that way it becomes an awkward approach. We shouldn't be afraid of errors, or get nervous when they happen. We should learn to understand them. Intelligent management of errors is one of the effective antidotes to stupidity.

* * *

Could "to err" be not only human? This idea has been around for millennia. Not only the gods of Olympus, with all their surrounding demigods and other mythological creatures, often reflect the weaknesses of human nature. Also in several other traditions there are divinities, and other "supernatural" entities, that behave in bizarre and capricious ways.

There are also examples in recent literature. It's interesting to note that in some of the best science fiction stories there are intriguing suggestions of how stupidity can be found in a variety of hypothetical worlds and "extraterrestrial" environments.

For instance (in addition to those quoted in chapter 13) there is Isaac Asimov's brilliant novel *The Gods Themselves* (1972) where he develops a complex interaction with remote alien entities and, starting with the titles of the book's three parts (*Against Stupidity… The Gods Themselves… Contend in Vain?*) he explores the possibility that the power of stupidity may extend beyond human dimensions. This concept is inspired by Friedrich Schiller *«Mit der Dummheit kämpfen Götter selbst vergebens.»* [3]

3 *Friedrich Schiller, Die Jungfrau von Orleans (1801) III, 6.*

The Power of Stupidity

by Giancarlo Livraghi

Chapter 30 – Antidotes and Prevention

There is no definitive therapy for stupidity. It can't be totally defeated. But this doesn't mean that we must accept it. There are effective ways of limiting its power and reducing its consequences. Of course I am not trying to write a prescription or a "how to" manual – and it would be silly to think that all the ways of overcoming stupidity can be included in a few pages (or even in a whole book.)

But I think it's useful to look at some of the attitudes and resources that can help to prevent, avoid or correct the effects of stupid thinking, conventional prejudice or awkward behavior.

Stupidity, as we are discussing it in this book, isn't an illness. Unlike many medical treatments, remedies don't have to be boring or unpleasant. They need a dose of commitment and consistency, but quite often they are intriguing, interesting and fun.

Intelligence – what is it?

A strong antidote to stupidity is intelligence. This isn't as obvious as it sounds. It includes different meanings of the word. The more we have and understand information, experience and knowhow, the better we can prevent stupidity or reduce its effects. And this isn't only specific to what we are doing or to a particular environment. Facts, knowledge and insight that, at first glance, seem "unrelated" can be unexpectedly useful in all sorts of circumstances.

Restricted, confined intelligence lacks perspective. [1] We don't need to be Leonardo da Vinci to have an extended, cross-cultural perception and attitude. All we need is an insatiable desire to expand our knowledge beyond the limits of habit or culture, to understand what at the moment may appear to be irrelevant or uninteresting, but when combined with other things that we know, or can discover, will fit surprisingly into a new pattern – or reveal how a familiar perspective could work in a different context.

1 An often quoted comment by Niels Bohr: *«An expert is a man who has made all the mistakes which can be made in a very narrow field.»*

Milan Kundera said: *«Stupidity comes from having an answer to everything. Wisdom comes from having a question for everything.»* We can never know where we can find an answer – even when we are not asking a question. The desire to understand, in its deepest and most intense quality, doesn't ask itself what it's trying to know. It seizes every opportunity to learn something new or different – or to correct some unfocused perception – or to understand better something that we already knew, but takes a new shape in a different perspective.

By doing so, we can spread little dots of light in the darkness, seeds in our reservoir of knowledge, experience and perceptions, without knowing how useful they will be until we unexpectedly discover where and how they will blossom. It can happen minutes or years later. In the meantime, the more tiny shiny dots we have, the more we improve the lighting in our mental environment. This hinders stupidity and helps intelligence.

Curiosity – about everything

It's pretty clear that a very effective antidote to stupidity is curiosity (as mentioned in chapter 13.) Of course there is a lot of gossipy, petty curiosity that doesn't widen our mind because it uselessly repeats irrelevant hearsay.

What makes us less stupid is genuine, keen curiosity, the instinctive and never fulfilled yearning for discovery, that knows how to find apparently small or irrelevant details, from which we can learn much more than is superficially obvious.

We can call it serendipity. Yes, it happens, it's often intriguing and it can be surprisingly useful. But it isn't good enough to stumble into learning. We can, and we should, deliberately seek what looks remote or unfamiliar – or maybe hides only a few steps away, around the corner from where we are usually looking.

Curiosity and listening (see pages 9 and 10 in this chapter) are probably the two strongest antidotes against stupidity. When combined, they are remarkably powerful.

Intuition – it doesn't just happen

Another effective antidote is intuition. It's mentioned in chapter 2 (also 16, 20, 24) and in the appendix about complexity – but it's worth repeating here that the most effective and enlightening paths are often those that may appear less logical.

Of course there can be no replacement for rational, disciplined thinking. But an intuitive spark can go a long way.

A frequently quoted comment is Thomas Edison's *«Genius is one percent inspiration, 99 percent perspiration.»* It can be read both ways. It takes a lot of work and patience to turn an intuition into organized thinking or practical results. On the other hand, an apparently sudden inspiration, when it's really meaningful, doesn't just pop up out of nowhere. It is the result of an extended build up of feeling, thinking, learning and caring – though we may be unaware of how this process has been naturally evolving inside us. [2]

While great intuitions are generally the achievement of particularly gifted people, we don't need to be a genius to have such a pleasant ability. In many situations a bright touch of sensitivity, small as it may seem, can be more effective than lots of planning or elaborate strategies to try to prevent an error or avoid a misunderstanding.

2 One could argue that small children can be remarkably intuitive, while they haven't had many years to develop experience. It's true. But adults don't realize, or don't remember, the enormous amount of intensive listening and learning that goes into being a child. And unfortunately a lot of what we are taught in later years works against spontaneity and intuition.

Creativity – an overused word, an unusual talent

This is one of the most misused words in today's vocabulary. So we'd better make sure that we know what we mean when we talk about creativity. At its best, it can lead to surprisingly effective and beautifully simple solutions. But it needs to be a genuine, unusual synthesis – not one of those repetitive mannerisms that are too often labeled "creative" though they have no such quality. [3]

This particular talent is a pretty rare gift. And, even when some genuinely "creative" people are involved, truly relevant solutions can't be found as often as it would be desirable. An occasionally enlightening change of perspective can be very useful. But we must count also on more humble, and much more consistent, behavior and attitudes if we want to make continuing progress in the daily strife against stupidity.

Meticulous – when and how

Fastidious, meticulous precision can be seen as the opposite of intuition, creativity and intelligence. Quite often it is (see chapter 12 on the stupidity of bureaucracy.) But there are ways of being careful and precise in every detail that are essential for successful results and relevant understanding.

The greatest works of art can give us an instant, spontaneous emotion. But when we understand how they were produced we realize that it took a great deal of meticulous care. There is no art without precise craft.

We are right when we get bored with zealots (see chapter 29) fussing uselessly about irrelevant details. But exacting care, painstaking as it can be, is a resource of intelligence and an essential tool against stupidity.

There are many examples of how the most brilliant idea or the brightest project can fail because a small detail is overlooked. On the other hand, all the history of human development shows how tiny perceptions can lead to great discoveries, depth of understanding or big steps ahead in knowledge. It can be difficult to understand which small piece of a puzzle is the key to the solution. But with disciplined practice, well trained intuition, and lots of curiosity, that can become a useful, and pleasantly enlightening, habit.

Experience – learning how to use it

A common cause of stupidity is not learning well enough from experience. We all have, to some extent, this problem. Even when we don't forget (we often do) we are rarely as good as we could be in understanding what we had an opportunity to learn from past mishaps or achievements. See some comments on this subject in chapters 2 and 29.

We would be considerably less stupid if we spent a little more time understanding what we can learn from results of what we have been doing. From failure as well as success, from unpleasant and embarrassing experiences or those that were enjoyable and amusing.

3 It's a stupidly widespread habit to use words such as "creativity" or "creative" for tasks and roles that have little, if anything, to do with those rare points of discontinuity that change patterns and perceptions and really "create" something new – or a new way of understanding things by seeing them in a different perspective. With this confusing terminology it's hard to tell, or to explain, what real creativity is. But it does exist – and when it happens it does make a real difference. Being involved in such a special event (that nearly always finds a simple answer to what appeared to be a difficult or impossible question) in an intensely pleasant emotion. While it can appear to be the achievement of a single person, it is rarely so. Most breakthrough intuitions and inventions are the result of gradual and extended cultural evolution, as well as a favorable environment. They aren't always recognized at the time of their birth. They can be opposed by a conservative establishment. Some are forgotten and have to be re-invented, years or centuries later.

We are also, too often, inadequate in learning from other people's experience. It isn't enough to admire or applaud, to criticize or despise. We can learn a lot from those who are more competent than we are, in any wide or narrow field. But it can be equally educational to observe the errors, that we often see, but rarely we analyze as carefully as we should to understand what they can teach us.

A not too superficial analysis of all sorts of episodes, large or small, recent or old, close or remote, can show which human behaviors increase the power of stupidity – and which (more rarely) help to reduce it.

We can also construct experience fields, as learning tools. Continuing experimentation isn't only a need in scientific method. Testing can be done by organizations in an organized scale – or by any one of us in many small ways, whenever we have an opportunity. Everything in life can be a laboratory (on trial-and-error see "Einstein and the ameba" in chapter 29.)

There are infinite situations in which we can test our way of thinking, of being, of behaving. When they "happen", let's seize the opportunity to learn in a "low risk" environment what can be useful in facing more taxing tasks. And, when they are not offered by chance, it isn't difficult to make them happen. Maybe as a joke or a game. Not only in childhood, playing is a jolly good learning tool.

Experience doesn't grow automatically with age. Some people live long lives without ever learning anything, other than a few stereotypes rooted their shallow education. Learning is an active attitude, a never-ending task. And curiosity helps. Quite often, while we are trying to understand something in one field, we can discover an interesting lesson that applies to something quite different.

History – too easily forgotten

Experience isn't only what we learn in our lifetime. We are lucky to have a large reservoir. It's called history. And it goes back to long before there was written history, further enhanced by the growing discoveries of anthropology and our increasing understanding of evolution.

It's distressing to realize how poorly we are using those resources. As Aldous Huxley said: *«That men do not learn very much from the lessons of history is the most important of all the lessons of history.»* And he added: *«The charm of history and its enigmatic lesson consist in the fact that, from age to age, nothing changes and yet everything is completely different.»*

This is a basic concept in understanding not only recent or remote history, but also daily news from different environments.

Things do change, sometimes more than is apparently obvious, often less. It can be surprisingly easy to learn from facts or stories that may seem unfamiliar, but grow from the unchanging roots of human nature. Not only in history, but also in everyday life, we never learn enough from experience.

Simplicity – wonderful, but not easy

There are four pages on this subject in chapter 20. [4] Let me just repeat here that true simplicity is a great achievement, but finding simple answers to complicated questions, or simple solutions to thorny problems, isn't easy. It takes a lot of effort, as well as strong intuition and imagination.

4 For online readers, there is an article on *The Art of Simplicity* in `gandalf.it/stupid/simple.htm`

Real simplicity is very different from superficial banality. We are very lucky when we can actually find such a crucial step in understanding – or in making things happen much more effectively. It's also a wonderful, exciting experience. That we can truly, if we so choose, call "creative."

Unfortunately, it doesn't happen very often. But even when we are not enjoying such delightful harmony, we should at least avoid the frequent risk of making simple things unnecessarily complicated.

Humor and irony – when they are the right sort

Stupidity is a serious problem, but humor and irony can be very useful. When they aren't superficial derision or mockery, stale mannerisms or banalities, but a genuine and sincere ability to laugh, or smile, about our weaknesses and mistakes.

A very stupid way of exorcising the embarrassment of stupidity is to poke fun at fools – always assuming that they are someone else, and often using that label to dispose of any disagreement or uncomfortable opinion.

It takes a totally different perspective to use irony, humor, amusement and laughter as effective tools against stupidity.

The war against stupidity isn't grim or fearsome. Insidious as it is, we can have fun in fighting it. The more stupid people are, the less they know how to laugh at themselves. We are right to be merry when we find our stupidity amusing. Because this means that we aren't completely stupid – and we are making a step forward in becoming even less so.

Doubt – always

An intelligent and indispensable tool is doubt. In life we need to act and decide – and we don't always have the time to think. But this doesn't mean that we can rest on false certainties. Without falling into the anguish of hesitation and insecurity, we must learn to live serenely with doubt – as a constant scrutiny of everything we think and do.

Doubt is the source of philosophy and science. The widely quoted comment *«Cogito ergo sum»* isn't where René Descartes started. A slightly more relevant quotation (though it isn't exactly the way he wrote it) is *«I doubt, therefore I think, I think, therefore I am.»* If we aren't thinking, we don't know anything – and we can't be even sure that we exist. If we aren't doubting, we aren't really thinking.

Even Dante Alighieri, though his philosophy was rather dogmatic, wrote: *«Doubting charms me not less than knowledge.»* [5]

But it isn't only in the beginning. When one doubt is solved (or at least we have identified a manageable assumption, or a thinking process, that allows us to move further) there will be more along the road, at all stages of development.

If we believe that there are no doubts, the problem is that we can't see them. And that is very dangerous.

Where there is no doubt, there is no thinking. Where certainty prevails, there is dogmatism and ignorance. When perceptions never change, there is no progress – actually it's even worse than that, because as things evolve ahead of us we are left back in the darkness of ignorance and prejudice.

So let's be fond of doubt. Not just learn to live with it, but enjoy it a stimulating source of improvement and discovery. Life would be quite boring if we didn't have a chance to learn something new every day. If we have no doubts, we don't.

5 *«Non meno che saper, dubbiar m'aggrada»*, Dante Alighieri, *Divine Comedy*, Inferno, XI, 115

Learning from mistakes – deliberately

The use of error as a method is explained in chapter 29 – where we also discussed the usefulness of analyzing mistakes after they have happened. Some call it *post mortem*. But it isn't an autopsy. If the mistake didn't kill us, even if that particular project or action failed we are here to learn from it and do better the next time.

It's useful also to check in hindsight what happened in successful circumstances. Nothing is ever perfect, there is always room for improvement even in the best experiences – if only finding shortcuts that can lead to good results in a shorter time and with less effort.

There are analyses that can be performed only when a cycle is completed and we can examine, coldly and severely, the result of what was much more difficult to understand before or during its development. The outcome may be positive, or negative, or somewhere in between, but it's very likely that it isn't the same as, in the beginning, we expected or we had set as our objective.

It's unrealistic to hope that we shall never make the same mistake twice. But it isn't enough to know that "to err is human" and just move on to the next opportunity for error. Mistakes are a source of learning that it would be stupid to waste.

It also happens that mistakes lead to unexpected success. But it isn't enough to just be lucky. There is a lot that we can learn by understanding how "chance" may be pointing to an unexplored direction. As in an oversimplified, but I hope clear, example at the end of the appendix on chaos and complexity. [6]

Is stupidity a scar?

On how stupidity relates to fear, as we discussed in chapter 14, there is an interesting hypothesis: that fear may be the source of stupidity – in the general evolution of life as well as in human behavior, in the initial stages of learning as in the development of culture. It's explained by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in *The Genesis of Stupidity* at the end of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. [7]

They observe that intelligence develops in relation to curiosity, as the ability to explore and understand. *«The true symbol of intelligence is the snail's horn with which it feels and smells its way. The horn recoils instantly before an obstacle, seeking asylum in the protective shell and again becoming one with the whole. Only tentatively does it re-emerge to assert its independence. If the danger is still present it vanishes once more, now hesitating longer before renewing the attempt.»*

In other words, the origin of intelligence is curiosity, but curiosity is timid. The antenna of knowledge withdraws when it meets an obstacle – or if it's scared. *«In its early stages the life of the mind is infinitely fragile. The snail's senses depend on its muscles, and muscles become feebler with every hindrance to their play. Physical injury cripples the body, fear the mind. At the start the two are inseparable.»*

Therefore curiosity is a risk – and risk causes fear. But without overtaking that fear there can be no development of intelligence. The temptation is to withdraw, to seek refuge in the shell, to abandon every attempt of learning – and so to degrade into increasingly torpid and demeaning stupidity.

6 It's also online `gandalf.it/stupid/chaos.htm`

7 *Dialektic der Aufklärung* was written during World War Two and was published in 1947.
I am quoting from the English edition, Verso Classics, 1997, translation by John Cummings, pages 256-258.

«Stupidity» – said Horkheimer and Adorno – *«is a scar. It can stem from one of many activities – physical or mental – or from all. Every partial stupidity of a man denotes a spot where the play of stirring muscles was thwarted instead of encouraged. In the presence of the obstacle the futile repetition of disorganized, groping attempts is set in motion.»* Curiosity dies out, experience becomes repetitive. "Partial" stupidity becomes general obtusity.

«An imperceptible scar, a tiny calloused area of insensitivity, is apt to form at the spot where the urge was stifled. Such scars lead to deformities. They can build hard and able characters; they can breed stupidity – as a symptom of pathological deficiency, of blindness and impotency, if they are quiescent; in the form of malice, spite, and fanaticism, if they produce a cancer within. The coercion suffered turns good will into bad. And not only tabooed questioning but forbidden mimicry, forbidden tears, and forbidden rashness in play can leave such scars.»

The stupidity of power, because of fear and deliberately inflicted ignorance, can cause the stupidity of the powerless. The victims are scared and obnubilated into becoming unaware accomplices of the persecutors.

There can be many different ways of stupidity being caused by the inability or unwillingness to understand, to explore, to break out of the choking shell of mental idleness – that often becomes presumption of knowing, or sclerotizing prejudice.

A "callous area of insensitivity" is a source of stupidity. And that, in turn, can cause more callousness, cowardice, fear or selfish indifference – and so multiply stupid perceptions, attitudes and behavior. The discomfort of the original "tiny scar" leads to crippling rigidity, that can become aggressively arrogant, or nervously defensive, or blandly unaware. But, in any case, it's dangerously stifling.

Uncomfortable – but exciting

Is understanding stupidity uncomfortable? Yes, it is. Especially when we aren't familiar with the problem – or we are still in the early stages of trying to overcome the embarrassment (see chapter 28) and realizing how powerful a force we are facing.

Curiosity, the endless yearning for discovery and learning, the passion for understanding, is intriguing, amusing, exciting. But it isn't easy – or comfortable. It can be pleasantly surprising or annoyingly disconcerting. It is quite stimulating to find new opportunities, but it's disturbing to discover that we had wrong ideas or perceptions, to realize that we didn't understand our mistakes and their consequences.

Knowledge can nurture hope, but in the process we need to face the fact that many things are ugly, difficult, unpleasant – or worse. This is why it's easy to fall into the "fear of knowing" and seek refuge in the comfort of some false certainty.

This sad "wound" of experience, the fear of learning and exploring, isn't the only origin of stupidity. But it's one of the most worrying. And it's a disease that tends to propagate.

When one of our antennae retracts – because of an injury or a scar – it happens that also other feelers suffer the same discomfort, the same laziness, the same atrophy.

Continued learning – while it's a pleasant, often exciting, experience – can also be uncomfortable. And scary, because we don't always like what we learn. But it's necessary, if we don't want to fall into the only alternative: increasing stupidity.

Commonplace and prejudice

Another problem is commonplace, as discussed in chapter 13. There are many things that "we think we know" but aren't so. They can be inherited from long tradition or generated by recent misinformation. They can be whispered in petty hearsay or loudly proclaimed by mass media. There are always more than we think.

Some "false notions", even if widely spread, can be relatively harmless. In the infinite multitude of gobbledygook, not all nonsense seriously damages our ability to understand.

It may not be necessary, when we are not studying history, to know that Nero didn't burn down Rome. We can understand the metaphor of changing color even if we know that other animals, not chameleons, do so to blend with the environment. It's pretty obvious (but how often do we stop for a minute to think?) that ostriches don't bury their heads in the sand – and any imitation of that imaginary behavior is very stupid. But how many people (even when they know that it's foolish) choose to pretend that they can't see?

We can amuse ourselves with the anecdotic game of stereotypes, even when they don't directly concern our life or our culture. But it's more interesting (though it can be disconcerting) to understand problems in a wider perspective. This is often necessary, always useful, if we want to avoid falling continually into mistakes and misconceptions caused by all sorts of unfounded hearsay.

Of course not all commonplace (or common sense) is wrong. Some conventional wisdom, or traditional knowhow, is believable and useful. But it isn't always easy to tell which. Like habits (chapter 15) also the things that "we think we know" or appear "usually" reasonable can give us a falsely comfortable feeling, the delusion that we have nothing to learn, the risk of not knowing (or forgetting) how to find more interesting thoughts, perspectives, resources and solutions.

More doubting

In addition to the general doubt that is a key tool for knowledge, we need more doubting in the pursuit of reducing stupidity. One of the basic notions in this book (as well as in any considerate analysis of the problem) is that the most foolish of all fools are those who believe that they know everything and never make mistakes.

We must consistently cast a shadow of doubt not only on prevailing prejudice, unfounded assumptions and general hearsay, but also (and above all) on our own opinions, especially when they seem certainties.

As Mark Twain said *«It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble, it's what you know for sure that just ain't so.»*

When it's time for action, doubts must be set aside – but not forgotten. If we don't go on learning while we move, we can lose track of what we are trying to achieve.

How much of what "we think we know" is the result of inadequate information, or poor understanding, or some problem in our perception, or notions that we carry without knowing where they came from? Always more than we think, if we aren't in the habit of doubting everything, for the sake of learning.

Doubt isn't weakness or insecurity. Quite to the contrary, it's a point of strength, when we know how to live with it as a resource.

There are people who can spend their entire lives being "certain" of lots of things that they don't really understand. That is dangerous stupidity.

Is it difficult?

It isn't easy – or comfortable. Especially in the initial stages of understanding the treacherous nature of human stupidity. But it isn't as difficult as it may seem. Should it become hateful, obsessive diffidence? No. Doubting is a way of being and thinking, a resource for knowledge and understanding.

It doesn't mean that we should always mistrust everyone and everything – that's impossible, and uselessly unnerving.

To trust is necessary, in many circumstances, even when it's not unavoidable (as it is quite often, as we can't survive in any organized society without trusting people, that we don't even know, who are providing services and resources that are necessary for our well-being, even for our basic survival.)

But we need to know how to doubt – of other people's opinions as well as our own – if we want to continue learning.

Do we have the time?

Is it time consuming? Not always. In any case, the time spent knowing where we are going, and why, is much less than the time and effort needed to correct the results of stupid mistakes.

There are six pages in chapter 16 on the stupidity of haste. It's worth repeating here that, while avoiding the consequences of hasty blunders saves a lot of malaise and disappointment, understanding before rushing ahead is also an enlightening, encouraging, often amusing experience.

Generosity – not only unselfish

Being genuinely generous isn't only commendable behavior. It's pretty obvious that, by doing something good for someone else, we reduce the overall stupidity in the system. But it's also good for our personal advantage. A sympathetic, kind, humane attitude opens grounds of dialogue, cooperation and learning that are inaccessible to egocentrics and egoists.

This doesn't mean that we should expect gratitude or goodwill. It rarely happens. But mutual trust, when soundly based, is very valuable. Sincerely warm relationships are an enjoyable experience per se – and can build a pleasant and constructive environment where intelligence can thrive and there is less nourishment for stupidity.

Listening – first and foremost

There is a basic concept, that probably is the most important antidote to stupidity – and the greatest source of intelligence. It's called *listening*. A clear and simple word, that is worth some comment.

It's generally believed that a quality of intelligence is to be able to say – to explain, to make things clear. This is true, when it isn't just rhetoric or style, but genuine and effective communication, information, relevant comment and interpretation. But the finest art isn't speaking (or writing.) It's listening. As is quite clear to those who have a good understanding of communication.

Ernest Hemingway said: *«I like to listen. I have learned a great deal from listening carefully. Most people never listen.»*

A widespread form of stupidity is to be in love with one's voice. To speak for the sake of speaking, regardless of whether anyone else is interested in what we are saying – and without listening to what they may have to say. By doing so we aren't only awfully boring, and often going unheard. We also lose many opportunities to learn something.

The world is full of people who listen mostly to themselves. Usually, while they don't understand others, they also lack a clear perception of their own inflated ego. They spend all their life nurturing an imaginary "self", that they try to impose onto everyone else. The problem is that a bit too often they succeed, because it's part of human nature to be "followers" – to fall into step with whoever poses as a leader – and this enhances the stupidity of power, as we saw in chapter 10.

Such is the inability to listen that people can be close, even live together, for many years, without understanding each other or having any real communication. The often spoken or quoted phrase *«My wife (or my husband) doesn't understand me»* isn't only a conventional excuse for infidelity.

To listen isn't just a matter of hearing and understanding. It's putting oneself in someone else's shoes, seeing things from another person's point of view. Not just keeping our ears open, but paying attention beyond appearances, having genuine sympathy and really caring for what maybe someone isn't saying, but would like us to perceive. This isn't only about understanding other people. It's important also to know how to listen to ourselves. And to perceive the meaning of situations, environments and circumstances.

It was explained in an interesting way by Karl A. Menninger. *«Listening is a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force. The friends who listen to us are the ones we move toward. When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand.»*

While other problems relating to stupidity are poorly studied and understood, the lack of listening is a syndrome that is widely and seriously discussed. There is an abundance of books and essays, also academic studies, on this subject – in addition to our dismay when we realize that we aren't being heard. But are we doing what we should to be understood? And why should other people listen to us if we aren't good enough in listening to them?

Of course this is about reading as much as it is about listening. Jorge Luis Borges said: *«One isn't what one is because of what one writes, but because of what one has read.»* And it's also about seeing. Too often we perceive what suits our habits and miss what could widen or improve our perspective – as explained in chapter 21.

It's worth listening to all sorts of different things – including those that, at first glance, may seem irrelevant. We can learn by understanding mistakes – or seeing through the silliness of pompous nonsense or apparently irrelevant banter. As Plutarch said, two thousand years ago: *«Know how to listen, and you will profit even from those who talk badly.»*

Of course not everything that we hear, read or see is worth knowing – or understanding in any depth. But it takes more than good hearing or keen sight to catch the interesting signals that can appear where and when we least expect them. It's worth repeating that insatiable, instinctive curiosity is a fundamental resource of intelligence.

Unpredictable – but awareness helps

One of the most dangerous facts about stupidity is that it's unpredictable. This is fairly well understood by common sense – and confirmed by any serious study of the subject.

But this is so only if we assume that human behavior (friend or foe, favorable or contrary) is always reasonable or coherent. That is to say, we underestimate the power of stupidity.

This isn't about "predicting the future." It's a matter of perceiving situations – and deducing possible consequences. When we learn to understand stupidity, we can also know how, when and where it's more likely to get into the act. Its ways of existing and causing damage have always been exasperatingly, monotonously repetitive since the origins of humankind.

In addition to a general understanding of stupidity, we can also have a specific perception of how it tends to surface in the behavior of a single person (including ourselves) or in a particular environment or situation. Stupidity is generally uneven. We are all more often stupid (or not) in some than in other ways.

If, instead of pretending that stupidity doesn't exist in our milieu, or believing that we are immune, we realize that it's everywhere, we discover that it's more predictable than we generally assume.

Depending on the circumstances, it can be more or less difficult to guess how stupidity will interfere. But we can be pretty sure that, in one way or another, it will happen. Probably "at the worst possible time" (Murphy's Law – chapter 4 – isn't just a funny joke.) By simply knowing how likely it is, we can avoid being taken too often by total surprise.

The Power of Passion

As we saw at the end of chapter 28, there is a strong emotion called passion. Unlike obsession or anxiety, it's a powerful, lively resource.

There are risks. We can make fools of ourselves when we are too easily carried away by enthusiasm. But it's much more stupid to be passive, indifferent, apathetic, careless or callous.

We can be genuinely passionate about great ideas or small hobbies, people we love or things we cherish, major tasks or apparently small details. On any scale, it's an essential way of being human. Pleasantly exciting and intensely motivating.

Let me add here that passion is a vital force, a leading drive behind the most successful and rewarding human achievements. It's a powerful antidote to boredom, depression, inertia – and stupidity. Like strong medicine, it can have "side effects." But we can't be really alive without it.

Yes, we can – with good humor

Disturbing as this may be, the first and crucial step is to understand that stupidity isn't a joke. It doesn't belong only in funny stories, entertainment, mockery or folklore fables. It's silly to believe that it's somewhere else, in an imaginary land of the fools, as separate from the world we live in. But it's a widespread habit to stay away from the problem – and so avoid the embarrassment.

If we know how to listen, we can learn many interesting things. It helps us also to catch the early signs of stupidity symptoms – and so avoid its worst consequences.

The more we know how to understand stupidity, the better we can reduce its power. We can't defeat it completely, but there is a lot that we can do to reduce the discomfort and the danger of living with this basic characteristic of human nature.

Sometimes it's fun, sometimes it isn't, but learning to be less stupid is a jolly good reason for good humor.

anche in italiano

también en español

Brown’s Job

by Robley Feland – 1920

Brown is gone, and many men in the trade are wondering who is going to get Brown’s job.

There has been considerable speculation about this. Brown’s job was reputed to be a good job. Brown’s former employers, wise, grey-eyed men, have had to sit still and repress amazement, as they listened to bright, ambitious young men and dignified older ones seriously apply for Brown’s job.

Brown had a big chair and a wide, flat-topped desk covered with a sheet of glass. Under the glass was a map of the United States. Brown had a salary of thirty thousand dollars a year. And twice a year Brown made a “trip to the coast” and called on every one of the firm’s distributors.

He never tried to sell anything. Brown wasn’t exactly in the sales department. He visited with the distributors, called on a few dealers, and once in a while made a little talk to a bunch of salesmen. Back at the office, he answered most of the important complaints, although Brown’s job wasn’t to handle complaints. Brown wasn’t in the credit department either, but vital questions of credit got to Brown, somehow or other, and Brown would smoke and talk and tell a joke, and untwist his telephone cord and tell the credit manager what to do.

Whenever Mr. Wythe, the impulsive little president, working like a beaver, would pick up a bunch of papers and peer into a particularly troublesome or messy subject, he had a way of saying, «What does Brown say? What does Brown say? What the hell does Brown say? – Well, why don’t you do it, then?» And *that* was disposed.

Or when there was a difficulty that required quick action and lots of it, together with tact and lots of that, Mr. Wythe would say, «Brown, you handle that.» And then one day the directors met unofficially and decided to fire the superintendent of No. 2 Mill. Brown didn’t hear of this until the day after the letter had gone. «What do you think of it, Brown?» asked Mr. Wythe. Brown said, «That’s all right. The letter won’t be delivered until tomorrow morning, and I’ll get him on the wire and have him start East tonight. Then I’ll have his stenographer send the letter back here, and I’ll destroy it before he sees it.» The others agreed, «That’s the thing to do.»

Brown knew the business he was in. He knew the men he worked with. He had a whole lot of sense, which he apparently used without consciously summoning his judgment to his assistance. He seemed to think good sense.

Brown is gone, and men are applying for Brown’s job. Others are asking who

is going to get Brown's job – bright, ambitious young men, dignified older men.

Men who are not the son of Brown's mother, nor the husband of Brown's wife, nor the product of Brown's childhood – men who never suffered Brown's sorrows nor felt his joys, men who never loved the things that Brown loved nor feared the things he feared – are asking for Brown's job.

Don't they know that Brown's chair and his desk, with the map under the glass top, and his pay envelope, are not Brown's job? Don't they know that they might as well apply to the Methodist Church for John Wesley's job?

Brown's former employers know it. Brown's job is where Brown is.

"Brown" is a remarkable example of practical intelligence.
This is why it's included in my book *The Power of Stupidity*.

Brown's Job was first published in 1920 in *The Wedge*, the house organ of the George H. Batten advertising agency – and as an advertisement in 1928, when Batten merged with Barton, Durstine & Osborn to become BBDO (where Robley Feland was a director).

I had read *Brown's Job* in the Seventies, when I lived in New York – but I lost my only (paper) copy and for many years, though I tried in every possible way, I couldn't find it. It had disappeared, not only from files, shelves, drawers, computers and networks, but also from people"s memories. Unexpectedly I was able to recover it in March, 2002. Some bright person had put it online. But later it vanished from where it was – and now this appears to be the only place where it can still be found in the internet.

I guess it doesn't need any comment. Let me just say that if we are lucky enough to meet a "Brown" at any time in our life it's very unlikely that we shall ever forget that person. And if we are *very* lucky we can *be* Brown – if only occasionally.

Giancarlo Livraghi gian@gandalf.it

March 2002
(some comments updated May 2009)

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home

Simple Thoughts on Complexity

The Chaos Theory
in five easy pictures:
an informal attempt
to simplify complexity

by Giancarlo Livraghi
gian@gandalf.it
November 2004
(English translation August 2005)

anche in italiano – también en español

For over twenty years I have been trying to understand what we can learn from the Theory of Chaos and the many elaborate analyses of complexity, turbulence etcetera. It isn't easy, but it's intriguing. It's a matter of understanding that things called "chaos" aren't chaotic, but follow laws that we can't easily understand or define; and that complexity is actually simple, but our way of thinking makes it appear complicated.

This is how Mitchell Waldrop explained it in his book Complexity *(1992):*
«The edge of chaos is where life has enough stability to sustain itself and enough creativity to deserve the name of life. The edge of chaos is where new ideas and innovative genotypes are forever nibbling away at the edges of the status quo, and where even the most entrenched old guard will eventually be overthrown».

The edge of chaos is where we are. But what does that mean in everyday practice?

One day, in October, 1997, a question kept popping up in my mind. Was it possible to explain some points on complexity in an extremely simple manner? Silly as it sounds, I tried. I wrote these short comments and asked the opinion of people who, from different angles, had been studying chaos and complexity quite seriously. Had I made any mistakes? Was it oversimplified, superficial or nonsense? They were somewhat embarrassed – but, much to my surprise, they grudgingly agreed that it made sense.

Three years later, I still wasn't quite sure. In December 2000 I printed a few copies of this text in a tiny book, that I gave to friends and acquaintances.

Their comments encouraged me to place it in another book, that was published in 2001. Again, I had several encouraging inputs from readers – and I was again surprised that none of them found it simplistic, superficial or unreasonable.

I believe that understanding complexity is one of the ways of reducing the risk of being stupid. So in November, 2004 this was published once more, in Italian, as an appendix to a book on The Power of Stupidity.

Here it is, for the first time, in English. I hope readers won't think it's stupid – and maybe more people will find it practically useful.

A small update: in May, 2009 this was published again in The Power of Stupidity in English.

In the meantime I have had fewer comment on these "simple thoughts" than on my general work on stupidity – but the same trend continues. For some readers the simplicity may be embarrassing, but nobody seems to think that it's silly.

If any people reading these short notes are competent in mathematics, physics, statistics, ecology, biology or management theory, I beg their pardon for the childish simplification of the reasoning and the pictures. I am not trying to offer scientifically strict or philosophically accurate models or patterns, but only a few hints for practical thinking.

I am not trying to get into the elaborate analyses of the Chaos Theory, turbulent systems and complexity. There is abundant literature on these subjects – and for many years it has been clear (at least in theory) that it doesn't concern only physics, meteorology or engineering, but also human behavior – and, therefore, organizations, society, the economy, politics and culture.

Let's begin with an observation that may appear simplistic. But "obvious" facts are often a good starting point.

When we are planning to go from **A** to **B**, the concept appears in our mind as a straight line:

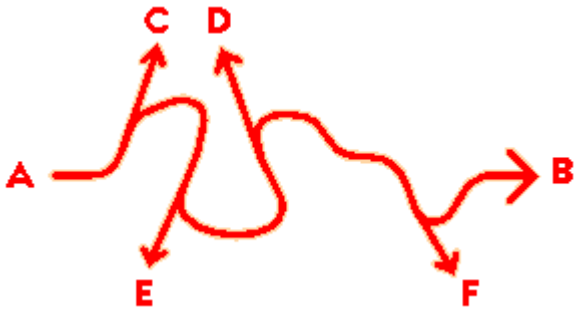
In a real world there are no straight lines. Between **A** and **B** there are obstacles, interferences, indirect routes, so that even if the task is extremely simple, such as going out for a cup of coffee, our actual behavior is likely to take this sort of shape:

In a task as simple as this, that takes a few minutes, it's unlikely that in the meantime we shall forget where we are going and why.

But the problem takes a different shape when it involves an organization, with much greater complexities, unexpected events, constant change of the situation and the environment, etcetera.

> Any group of people doing something together is, de facto, an organization. Even four or five people meeting for a cup of coffee. And even in the simplest case reality is more complex than is shown in these flat pictures. Going to the coffee house involves a three-dimensional route, because there are probably stairs or elevators. In an organization, even when it's small, the model is obviously multi-dimensional. The "flat" diagrams that I am using to summarize the picture are necessarily less complex that the situation in actual experience. But I hope simplification can help to understand the basic nature of the problems, that would be hard to detect in an analytical "topology".

So it becomes possible (it actually happens quite often) that some parts of the organization forget the original direction...

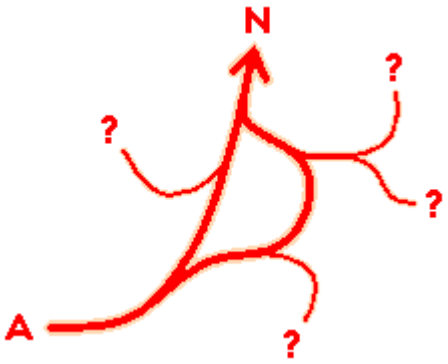


... and the entire system loses sight of the objective, with the added complication that several people or groups think that they are heading for **C**, **D**, **E** or **F** and therefore they work in disharmony with each other and with the organization as a whole. This is, in any case, a serious problem – but it's to be noted that people heading for **C** or **F** are shifting, though on a lateral course, toward **B**, while those heading for **D** or **E** are moving in the opposite direction – and in order to return to a route leading to **B** they will need a complex, cumbersome (and often expensive) detour. It's quite easy, observing the behavior of organizations, to notice how often this sort of thing is happening.

In an environment that isn't changing, or where evolution is predictable and controllable, there is (if only in theory) a simple solution. Everybody should have a compass. That is to say, nobody should be left to carry out a task without understanding a broader perspective. All parts of the organization should know that the objective is **B**, and the process should be continually monitored so that the (unavoidable) deviations return as soon as possible to the right direction. The system, therefore, would behave like this:

But in a complex and turbulent environment the process could evolve quite differently. The situation is mutating and unpredictable. Heading only toward objective **B** may turn out to be a mistake.

If we look back a the third picture, with diverging directions, we notice that (for instance) two “spontaneous” deviations (**C** and **D**) are converging in an unforeseen direction. It may be useful to find out why. We could discover that this is the situation:



In this example the “turbulent” evolution of the system has led us to discover a new objective **N** – and to understand that it’s convenient to concentrate our energies in that direction, while not losing sight of other “branches” that could reveal unexpected opportunities.

We notice that some of those “branches” have directions relatively close to our “old” objective **B**, some don’t move far away from our “new” objective **N**, while others point to still unexplored territories – and that the entire system has taken a shape that may be less “logical”, but is structurally more simple than those generated by forcing the system to follow a “linear” model.

The fact is that “complexity” (or “chaos”) isn’t inherently more complex than apparently “orderly” systems – and it can lead to simplicity. The problem is that we are not trained to understand how it works.

This looks more like the growth of a climbing tree than the structure of a machine or the manufacturing of an industrial product. Quite often the study of complexity leads to biological analogy.

It could be quite complicated to study the theoretical implications of this (pretty obvious) conclusion. But a simple, intuitive perception of this fact can help us to understand how to behave in a world dominated by turbulence and complexity, where “non linear” thinking is often the winner.

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the power of stupidity
index

home

The Power of Stupidity

by Giancarlo Livraghi – stupidity.it – gandalf.it

Quotations

These are some of the quotations included in chapter 27,
in other parts of *The Power of Stupidity* and in related articles

(To avoid any “hierarchy” they are in alphabetical order)

Human beings, who are almost unique in having the ability to learn from the experience of others, are also remarkable for their apparent disinclination to do so.
Douglas Adams

There is no such thing as an underestimate of average intelligence.
Henry Adams

Scientists will eventually stop flailing around with solar power and focus their efforts on harnessing the only truly unlimited source of energy on the planet: stupidity.
Scott Adams

The culture industry not so much adapts to the reactions of its customers as it counterfeits them.
Theodor Adorno

The wise man doubts often, and changes his mind. The fool is obstinate, and doubts not; he knows all things but his own ignorance.
Akhenaton

I happen to feel that the degree of a person’s intelligence is directly reflected by the number of conflicting attitudes she can bring to bear on the same

topic.
Lisa Alther

If we cannot define stupidity, at least we can trace most human misfortunes and weaknesses to it. Its manifestations are legion, its symptoms are endless.
Richard Armour

When people thought the earth was flat, they were wrong. When people thought the earth was spherical, they were wrong. But if you think that thinking the earth is spherical is just as wrong as thinking the earth is flat, then your view is wronger than both of them put together.
Isaac Asimov

If a man will begin with certainties, he shall end in doubt, but if he will be content to begin with doubts, he shall end in certainties.
Francis Bacon

You grow up the day you have your first real laugh at yourself.
Ethel Barrymore

I read the newspaper avidly. It is my one form of continuous fiction.
Aneurin Bevan

The world turns and the candle burns and the blind lead the blind.
A Bim song

Prediction is very difficult, especially about the future.
Niels Bohr

However big the fool, there is always a bigger fool to admire him.
Nicolas Boileau

In politics stupidity is not a handicap.
Napoleon Bonaparte

Every time you think television has hit its lowest ebb, a new program comes along to make you wonder where you thought the ebb was.
Art Buchwald

Freedom of the press is perhaps the one that has suffered the most from the decline of the idea of liberty.
Albert Camus

A large section of the intelligentsia seems wholly devoid of intelligence.
Gilbert Keith Chesterton

There is no opinion so stupid that it can't be expressed by some philosopher.

Marcus Tullius Cicero

Always and inevitably everyone underestimates the number of stupid individuals in circulation.
Carlo Cipolla

Learning without thought is labor lost; thought without learning is perilous.
Confucius

It is not enough to have a good mind, the main thing is to use it well.
René Descartes

We keep moving forward, opening new doors, and doing new things, because we're curious and curiosity keeps leading us down new paths.
Walt Disney

Man is stupid, phenomenally stupid.
Fyodor Dostoievsky

The number of fools is infinite.
The Ecclesiastes

Two things are infinite, the universe and human stupidity. I'm not sure about the universe.
Albert Einstein

It is better to keep your mouth closed and let people think you are a fool than to open it and remove all doubt.
Attributed to George Eliot, Samuel Johnson, Abraham Lincoln, Mark Twain and several others

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?
Thomas Eliot

The stupidity of men always invites the insolence of power.
Ralph Waldo Emerson

Stupidity has made enormous progress. It's a sun so shining that we can no longer look at it directly. Thanks to communication media, it's no longer the same, it's nourished by other myths, it sells extremely well, it has ridiculed good sense and it's spreading its terrifying power.
Ennio Flaiano

To be stupid, selfish, and have good health are three requirements for happiness, though if stupidity is lacking, all is lost.
Gustave Flaubert

Put your trust in simple sentences and simple arithmetic. Mistrust four syllable words and continuous reports of tranquillity.

Paul Foley

The dumbest people I know are those who know it all.
Malcolm Forbes

If a million people believe a foolish thing, it is still a foolish thing.
Anatole France

Half the world is composed of people who have something to say and can't, the other half who have nothing to say and keep on saying it.
Robert Frost

Doubt is the father of invention.
Galileo Galilei

The greatest intelligence is the one that suffers most from its own limitations.
André Gide

Maybe violent wickedness can be decapitated, but stupidity has too many heads.
André Glucksmann

There is nothing worse than aggressive stupidity.
Johann Goethe

Stupid is as stupid does.
Forrest Gump (by Winston Groom)

What experience and history teach is this – that people and governments never have learned anything from history, or acted on principles.
Friedrich Hegel

There are more fools in the world than there are people.
Heinrich Heine

Never attribute to malice that which can be adequately explained by stupidity. Never underestimate the power of human stupidity.
Robert Heinlein

Rush, that most exciting perversion of life, the necessity of accomplishing something in less time than should be truly allowed for its doing.
Ernest Hemingway

We believe only what we see. So, with television, we believe everything.
Dieter Hildebrandt

Television has done much for psychiatry, by spreading information about it as well as contributing to the need for it.
Alfred Hitchcock

Genius may have its limitations, but stupidity is not thus handicapped.
Elbert Hubbard

When men are most sure and arrogant they are commonly most mistaken.
David Hume

At least two thirds of our miseries spring from human stupidity, human malice and those great motivators and justifiers of malice and stupidity, idealism, dogmatism and proselytizing zeal on behalf of religious or political idols.
Aldous Huxley

Curiosity is one of the permanent and certain characteristics of a vigorous intelligence.
Samuel Johnson

Nothing in all the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity.
Martin Luther King

Everything you read in newspapers is absolutely true, except for that rare story of which you happen to have first-hand knowledge.
Erwin Knoll

Stupidity comes from having an answer to everything. Wisdom comes from having a question for everything.
Milan Kundera

All the brains in the world are powerless against the sort of stupidity that is in fashion.
Jean de La Fontaine

Creativity is the sudden cessation of stupidity.
Edwin Land

Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.
Leonardo da Vinci

It's so simple to be wise. Just think of something stupid to say and say the opposite.
Sam Levenson

Being intelligent is not a felony. But most societies evaluate it as at least a misdemeanor.
Lazarus Long (a character in novels by Robert Heinlein)

The first method for estimating the intelligence of a ruler is to look at the men he has around him.
Niccolò Machiavelli

Nobody is exempt from saying stupid things, the harm is to do it presumptuously.
Michel de Montaigne

Stupidity is active in every direction, and can dress up in all the clothes of truth. Truth, on the other hand, has for every occasion only one dress and one path, and is always at a disadvantage.
Robert Musil

We are drowning in information but starved for knowledge.
John Naisbitt

The love of power is the demon of mankind.
Friedrich Nietzsche

Entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity.
William Ockham (“Occam’s Razor”)

Simplicity, very rare in our age.
Publius Ovidius Naso (“Ovid”)

I would have written a shorter letter, but I didn’t have the time.
Blaise Pascal

Stupidity can easily be proved the supreme social evil.
Walter Pitkin

Science has not yet taught us if madness is or is not the sublimity of intelligence.
Edgar Allan Poe

The intelligence of the creature known as a crowd is the square root of the number of people in it.
Terry Pratchett

Like many intellectuals, he was incapable of saying a simple thing in a simple way.
Marcel Proust

If you want to avoid seeing an idiot, break the mirror.
François Rabelais

Neither a pathology nor an index as such of moral default, stupidity is nonetheless linked to the most dangerous failures of human endeavor.
Avital Ronell

The trouble with the world is that the stupid are cocksure and the intelligent are full of doubt.
Bertrand Russell

The fool doth think himself wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool.
William Shakespeare

A fashion is nothing but an induced epidemic.
George Bernard Shaw

A sort of melancholy, and regret, seizes us every time we meet a sophisticated, adulterated idiot. Oh the nice

fools of yestertime! Genuine, natural. Like homemade bread.
Leonardo Sciascia

The more I know, the more I know that I don't know.
Socrates

The world supports a multi-million dollar industry of intelligence and ability research, but it devotes virtually nothing to determine why this intelligence is squandered by engaging in amazing, breathtaking acts of stupidity.
Robert Sternberg

There is no greatness where there is not simplicity.
Leo Tolstoy

It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble, it's what you know for sure that just ain't so.
Mark Twain

Doubt is uncomfortable, certainty is ridiculous.
Voltaire

Stupidity is an incongruity inherent in life. Humans have developed, expanded and promoted it.
James Welles

There is no sin except stupidity.
Oscar Wilde

A philosopher always finds more grass to feed upon in the valleys of stupidity than on the arid heights of intelligence.
Ludwig Wittgenstein

Some scientists claim that hydrogen, because it is so plentiful, is the basic building block of the universe. I dispute that. I say there is more stupidity than hydrogen, and that is the basic building block of the universe.
Frank Zappa

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the power of stupidity

home

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The Power of Stupidity

Other books

(a short “bibliography”)

A supplement to *The Power of Stupidity*

by Giancarlo Livraghi – stupidity.it – gandalf.it

In all the history of human thinking there is a scarcity of studies on stupidity. But that doesn’t mean that there are no books on this subject (the most relevant are quoted in the first chapter of my book.)

Over the years, I have been doing my best to find (and, when possible, to read) as many as possible. Here is a list, with some comments. It has no pretence of being a complete bibliography, but I trust it collects most of the relevant examples.

Many can be defined as “stupidaria.” Collections of events, statements, anecdotes or behaviors that, in the author’s opinion, are to be considered stupid.

For instance *Unusually Stupid Americans* (2003) and *The Lexicon of Stupidity* (2005) by Kathryn and Ross Petras are collections of stupid or grotesque episodes, news and comments. The same authors have published ten other “stupidaria.”

Also *Uncle John’s Book of the Dumb* by John Scalzi (2003) is an anthology of stupidities and misunderstandings – more depressing than amusing. *Book of the Dumb 2* was published in 2004.

Duh! by Bob Fernster (2000) defines itself *The Stupid History of the Human Race*. But it isn’t history – or a book on human stupidity. It’s merely a collection of circumstances and behaviors, at different times and in different places, that are more or less silly,

unusual or strange. More of the same was added in *Well, Duh!* in 2004.

An earlier "stupidarium" was *Dictionnaire de la bêtise* (1965) by Guy Bechtel and Jean-Claude Carrière.

De Encyclopedie van de Domheid by Matthijs van Boxsel (2002) isn't an encyclopedia, but a collection comments, ironies, anecdotes and quotations about examples of silly behavior, from mythology and fables to recent events.

There are several other books (and online collections) if the same sort, adding to the clutter of stupidaria while offering no relevant contribution to the study of the problem. (See the list in Italian for more examples.) Recent growth of this clutter may suggest that there is some awareness of stupidity, combined with a desire to dismiss it as "funny" rater than trying to understand it.

There are some books that have a more interesting approach, looking into the causes and effects of human stupidity.

An example is *How Chance and Stupidity Have Changed History: The Hinge Factor* by Eric Durschsmied (1998.) It examins 17 historical cases, from the Trojan horse to the Gulf War.

I must confess that I haven't read *The March of Folly – from Troy to Vietnam* by Barbara Tuchman (1984) and *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence* di Norman Dixon (1994) and therefore I can't comment on their contribution to historical studies on the stupidity of war.

Another catalogue of catastrophical mistakes caused by stupidity is *History's Worst Decisions – an Encyclopedia Idiotica* (2005) by Stephen Weir. It isn't an encyclopedia, but a collection of fifty historical or legendary examples, from Adam and Eve to recent events, inspired by George Santayana's comment. *«Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.»*

Essai sur la bêtise by Michel Adam (1975) is a "psycho-moral" dissertation on the decay of ethics. It makes no great contribution to the understanding of stupidity – though it contains some interesting comments on the philosophical value of doubt, the clumsiness of self-satisfaction, the dangers of prejudice.

Rather than a study of stupidity, *La bêtise* by André Gluksmann (1985) is a political essay developing an analysis of how it's omnipresent in a variety of historical, social and cutural situations and how it can appear under a variety of discuises. Gluksmann comments that *«maybe violent wickedness can be decapitated, but stupidity has too many heads.»*

An exception in the general scarcity of academic work on this subject is *Stupidity* by Avital Ronell (University of Illinois – 2003.) She confirms a basic fact: stupidity is hard to define and poorly understood. *«Essentially linked to the inexhaustible, stupidity is also that which fatigues knowledge and wears down history.»* And it is a serious problem. *«Neither a pathology nor an*

index as such of moral default, stupidity is nonetheless linked to the most dangerous failures of human endeavor.»

The Talent for Stupidity by Edmund Bergler (published posthumously in 1998) is defined as "The Psychology of the Bungler, the Incompetent, and the Ineffectual." It's meant to be a manual for psychiatrists, considering "the mechanism of stupidity" to be "a subdivision of masochistic neurosis."

Isaac Asimov's brilliant novel *The Gods Themselves* (1972) can be seen as a study of stupidity and its dangerous consequences. Starting with the titles of the book's three parts *Against Stupidity... The Gods Themselves... Contend in Vain?* he explores the possibility that the power of stupidity may extend beyond human dimensions. This concept is inspired by Friedrich Schiller – *«Mit der Dummheit kämpfen Götter selbst vergebens.»*

Another science fiction story is *The Marching Morons* (1951) by Cyril Kornbluth. It's about an obnoxious character who wakes up from cryostasis in a future where, because of birth control in the more evolved population and exaggerated reproduction of the underprivileged, a minority of "intelligent" people rules over a multitude of fools. He offers to the élite a solution to reduce the overpopulation problem: offer sexy holidays on Venus and lose the tourists in space. At the end he falls victim to his own scheme.

> The title is derived from "The Marching Chinamen" paradox. The entire population of China lines up and files through a gate, but the marching never ends because of the birth of new children.

An unpleasant book was written ninety years ago. *L'homme stupide* (1919) by Charles Richet. It may be interesting as an example of a cultural period and environment, but it's boring – and irritating for some of its content, including explicit racism. It's more acceptable in other parts, such as the condemnation of violence, credulity and superstition. It isn't a study of stupidity, but an invective against the errors, horrors and monstrosities of human behavior.

Le stupide XIX siècle by Léon Daudet (1922) is probably the stupidest book ever written on this subject. A violent and incoherent polemic against all cultural, social and political developments since the end of the Middle Ages.

If we go back to the eighteenth century... Gustave Flaubert was obsessed with human stupidity. For many years he collected thousands of examples, hoping that he would be able to put them together in an *Encyclopédie de la bêtise*. But he was defeated by the immensity of the task. Later he tried to deal with this subject in a novel, *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, but it remained unfinished (it was published incomplete, after his death, in 1881.) His concern and dismay with "cultural stupidity" is a thread also in other books, including the gallery of mean and dumb characters that lead Emma Bovary to despair. (More on this subject in *Embarrassing or Obsessive?* – chapter 28 of *The Power of Stupidity*.)

It is reported that also Jorge Luis Borges, in 1934, started writing a *Historia Universal de la Infamia* – but gave up when he found that

the task was too big for a lifetime.

In 1937) Robert Musil, in his short lecture *On Stupidity*, noted how scarcely studied was *«the shameful domination that stupidity has on us»* – and commented dismally that he had found *«unbelievably few predecessors in dealing with this subject.»*

Some interesting observations on *The Genesis of Stupidity* are at the end of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) by Max Horkheimer e Theodor Adorno. Quotations and comments are in chapter 30 of *The Power of Stupidity*.

The Natural Science of Stupidity by Paul Tabori (1959) contains some comments on stupidity, but most of this interesting and well written book is about something else. It's a collection of unusual and intriguing (but not necessarily stupid) situations and events at different historic times and in different parts of the world.

In his bright introduction to Paul Tabori's book, Richard Armour observed that *«If we cannot define stupidity, at least we can trace most human misfortunes and weaknesses to it. Its manifestations are legion, its symptoms are endless.»*

Also Max Kemmerich, half a century earlier, spent many years collecting peculiarities and anomalies in the history of human cultures. His book *Aus der Geschichte der menschlichen Dummheit* (1912) is an aggressive critique of dogmas, churches and religions.

In *Über die Dummheit* (1909) Leopold Löwenfeld deals with stupidity as an illness. His purpose is to "categorize" different sorts of misbehavior rather than look into the problem of stupidity.

Three volumes by a Hungarian author, Istvá Ráth-Véigh, are titled *Cultural History of Human Stupidity* (1952) followed by *New Stupidities in the General History of Humanity* and (somewhat too optimistically) *The End of Human Stupidity*. Also these are not studies of stupidity, but collections of more or less "famous" examples of human foolishness.

An even vaster collection, in seven volumes, *Geschichte der menschlichen Narrheit* was published by Johann Christian Adelung in 1785. This too isn't about history or stupidity – it consists of biographies of impostors, braggers and fanatics.

A famous book, five hundred years ago, was *Narrenschiff*, a "funny" story by Sebastian Brant. It was published in German in 1494, in Latin as *Stultifera navis* in 1497. It was translated into English, and expanded, by Alexander Barclay as *The Shyp of Foyls* in 1508. An imaginary ship sailing to Narragonia (the land of fools) carried a bunch of variously unpleasant characters. The same concept was developed, a few years later, by Thomas Murner in *Narrensbenschwörung* and *Schelmenzunft* – satiric galleries of priests, monks, nuns, robber barons and mean rich.

A recent book (2001) on the same subject is *The Ship of Fools* by Gregory Norminton, developing the story from a picture by Hieronymus Bosch.

This theme has had, over the centuries, several developments in literature and painting. But they are ironies on habits and behaviors that are considered foolish, crazy or unpleasant – not studies on the problem of stupidity.

Sometimes the famous *Moriae Encomium* (1509) by Erasmus of Rotterdam is quoted as a book on this subject. But that is questionable, because the "folly" that he ironically praised is not the same as stupidity.

Two books were particularly relevant in my work on *The Power of Stupidity*. One, as mentioned in chapter 1, is *A Short Introduction to the History of Human Stupidity* (1932) by Walter Pitkin. The other, as explained in chapter 7, is the short, but brilliant, essay by Carlo Cipolla *The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity*, that was written in English in the early Seventies, but wasn't formally published until it appeared in a book (in Italian) in 1988.

Good as they are, there is a problem with both these books (as well as the majority of comments on stupidity by almost everyone, at all times and in all cultures.) The fool is always "someone else" (see chapter 9.)

One of the best studies ever published on this subject, with a clear perception of how we can all be stupid, is *Understanding Stupidity* by James Welles (1986) that I quoted in chapters 1, 2, 27 and 28 of *The Power of Stupidity*. He also wrote *The Story of Stupidity* (1988) that isn't a general history of human stupidity, but a series of short and interesting descriptions of stupidity at different times and in different cultures, from ancient Greece to America in the twentieth century. (Both books are combined in the same website.)

Chapters 5 and 6 of *The Power of Stupidity* are about two basic "modern classics" on a closely related subject – "why things go wrong." *Parkinson's Law* (1957) by Cyril Northcote Parkinson and *The Peter Principle* (1969) by Laurence Peter.

Another interesting book is *The Dilbert Future – Thriving on Business Stupidity in the 21st Century* (1997) by Scott Adams. It isn't an essay on stupidity (nor a "prophecy" on the twentyfirst century.) Like other books by the same author (and many of his famous cartoons) it's a sharply satirical analysis of the cultural and structural decay in business enterprises. It includes this ironic forecast: *«Scientists will eventually stop flailing around with solar power and focus their efforts on harnessing the only truly unlimited source of energy on the planet: stupidity.»*

A catastrophical view of the situation is offered by René Delavy in *Macht x Dummheit = Selbstzerstörung* (2005) "Power x Stupidity = Self Destruction." (On the stupidity of power see chapter 10 of *The Power of Stupidity*.) According to this book we are beyond "the point of no return" and – while we are lulled and confused by "stupitainment" – collapse becomes unavoidable.

I was attracted by the title, but disappointed by the content, of *La inteligencia fracasada – teoria y pratica de la estupidez* (2005) by José Antonio Marina. In spite of its subtitle, it offers scarce contributions to the understanding of human stupidity. With an abundance of examples and digressions (sometimes relevant or amusing, but often dispersive) it lists the factors that can cause a "failure of intelligence" – such as prejudice, superstition, fanaticism, etcetera.

A strange book is *Why So Stupid?* (2003) by a Maltese psychologist, Edward de Bono. While making no contribution to understanding stupidity, it states that all humankind is totally deprived of intelligence and people can become intelligent only by attending the author's lessons – and any study of history, philosophy, science or culture is to be considered useless, actually harmful.

Panfleto contra la estupidez contempránea (2007) by Gabriel Sala is an aggressive criticism of social, economic and political degeneration in "western cultures" – specifically of the information industry being warped by *entetanimiento* (based on *tittytainment* as defined by Zbigniew Brzezinski in 1995.)

Bréviaire de la bêtise by Alain Roger (2008) is mostly about French and other literature telling stories that can be seen as examples of stupidity or otherwise relating to the subject. Also this author observes that *«stupidity has never been studied systematically and its definition remains obscure and confused.»*

The Cure for Corporate Stupidity by Larry Bloom (2012) isn't about stupidity. It's a neuro-psychological essay on how to *«avoid the mind-bugs that cause smart people to make bad decisions»* in business management. Four of the 176 items in its extended bigliography are books about stupidity. I am pleased to find that one is *The Power of Stupidity*. The other three are *Introduction to the History of Human Stupidity* by Walter Pitkin, *The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity* by Carlo Cipolla and *Understanding Stupidity* by James Welles. (As I have explained – these are, also in my opinion, the three best books I ever read on this subject.)

Also *Puttin' Cologne on the Rickshaw* by William Bouffard (2012) is about mismanagement. *«A guide to dysfunctional management and the evil workplace environments they create»*. It contains several quotations from *The Power of Stupidity*. An interesting additional article by Bill Bouffard is *The Alice-in-Wonderland syndrome* – and some of his comments are in *The stupid pitfalls of rudeness*.

There was a movie produced in Canada in 2004. *Stupidity – The Documentary* (directed by Albert Nerenberg.) It's a somewhat confusing and disorderly collection of somehow related subjects, with some interesting observations and several not particularly enlightening examples. But, in any case, it must be credited with the fact that it's the only of its kind, with a unique commitment to discussing a rarely studied subject. It includes interviews with Noam Chomsky, Giancarlo Livraghi, Avital Ronell and James

Welles.

Another movie, *Idiocracy*, produced in the United States in 2006, is totally useless. A boring and clumsily "funny" story of a hypothetical future in which "intelligence is extinct" and all humanity is stupid. It's partly based on *The Marching Morons* that Cyril Kornbluth had published in 1951.

I must confess that I haven't seen *Le dîner des cons* (*The Dinner Game*) – a successful play by Francis Veber (1994) that became a movie in 1998. A competition among a group of friends to see who can find the stupidest person to bring to dinner. People who have seen it say that it's bright and amusing. But it's more a "comedy of errors" than an irony on stupidity.

Another movie that I haven't seen is *The Stupids* (1996.) According to reviews, it isn't about stupidity. It's just another "funny" story of awkward or bizarre events in a family of clumsy people.

There are recent books that somehow include "stupidity" in the title, but have nothing to do with this subject. Some are reprints of books that were called something else, but are commercially renamed to make them seem "new." Obviously they are not worth listing here.

There are some books in Italian. Most of them are "stupidaria" – or otherwise irrelevant. A few offer some insights on stupidity. They are listed and explained in the Italian version of this bibliography.

All books (or otherwise reading) can be useful.
Including those that are not about stupidity, but often
(in one way or another) show its ubiquitous presence.
I shall continue to read and to learn. But so far I have found
more confirmation than doubt on the concepts
that I have tried to summarize in *The Power of Stupidity*.
A very short book compared to the size of the problem.

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the power of stupidity

home

The Power of Stupidity

So far, only fourteen reviews

Stupidity is an extremely destructive force – June 2009

A world run by the power of stupidity – June 2009

La estupidez nuestra de cada día – amén – September 2009

Finally, a textbook of human stupidity – September 2009

Is curiosity the essence of learning? – August 2010

Humanity's most destructive force – October 2010

Stupidity the Dark Force – November 2010

Useful insight about human stupidity – November 2010

Quoted in "Puttin' Cologne on the Rickshaw" – July 2012

Thoroughly enjoyable – October 2012

Four anonymous opinions – undated

book

power of stupidity

home