

# The Power of Stupidity



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## 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 understand, 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](http://gandalf.it/netmark/comline.htm) The whole text of this book is available for download in [cryptocomicon.com/beginning.html](http://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.