

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 always 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, ordinary 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 than 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 of 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 Notturmo* published by Bompiani in 1956. I am translating from the 1994 Adelphi edition, page 100.

³ *Corriere della 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