

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 Serendip³ 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.

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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.

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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.