

Questions and answers on stupidity

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This interview was done by e-mail for a review

Contra la estupidez humana

gandalf.it/estupidez/adn.htm

published in Spanish by the ADN newspaper on December 19, 2011

These are the questions and answers as written originally in English

How would you describe briefly human stupidity?

It's the contrary of intelligence. This isn't as obvious as it sounds. It helps to know that "intelligence" comes from the Latin verb *intelligere*, "to understand". And indeed stupidity is basically a lack of understanding.

It's more interesting to consider what stupidity *does* rather than fuss about what it *is*. However there is an effective definition in *Understanding Stupidity* by James Welles (1986). He calls it «*the learned corruption of learning*». And explains that «*stupidity is a normal, dysfunctional learning process formed by linguistic biases and social norms to establish a feedback system which carries behavior to maladaptive excesses*».

This sounds somewhat arcane, but the substance is quite clear. Stupidity isn't an illness, it's a "normal" part of being human. But it's also a serious and dangerous "dysfunction".

What is the stupidest thing that ever happened to you?

I wonder. To understand which is "the stupidest" I would need to know which one caused the worst consequences. In several situations I have been able to realize, over time, how some behavior that appeared harmless turned out to be worse than I thought – or, vice versa, an apparently awful blunder didn't really do much harm. But "the stupidest thing that ever happened to me" is likely to be one that I don't remember or I haven't yet discovered.

I hope to have more opportunities to understand if, when and how something I did (or didn't do) had bad results. Learning from mistakes is one of the strongest tools against stupidity.

What if it wasn't my mistake, but something that "happened"? This, too, is part of the learning process. And also in this sense there are things of which I am not aware, but with a healthy dose of curiosity I might be able to discover.

I know there are many, but in your opinion, which do you think has been the biggest stupidity in history?

Of course there are differences of opinion about which may have been “the biggest”. But here are a few examples.

By sheer number of victims, the stupidity of maniac racism in the twentieth century ranks awfully high. And that of course includes, in addition to the horrors of the Holocaust, many million killed in World War Two. (Also World War One was a catastrophe, but caused by a different syndrome).

By length in time, in “western” history, eight centuries of deep obscurantism – forgetting and destroying almost everything that humanity had been learning in “classic” culture and had to be re-discovered, partly re-invented, before we could again move ahead in the path of knowledge.

At this time, there are several dangerous stupidities. One of the biggest is the worldwide clumsiness in managing the environment and developing renewable energy sources. Another is the uncontrolled criminal power of financial gambling prevailing on the “real economy” and depressing the “wellbeing” of people worldwide (I have published some angry articles on this subject in 2011 – online in gandalf.it/stupid/).

Is human intelligence more advanced than stupidity?

Considering the enormous power of stupidity at all times, still very strong and harmful, we must be tempted to say “no”. But the fact is that humanity, for a million years or maybe two, has been able to survive climate changes and plagues, all sorts of natural or man-made disasters, etcetera – and in recent times has been growing in numbers (and lifespan) much faster than ever before. In biological and evolutionary terms, this is “success”.

Our species can’t prevail by physical strength or size, it needs to use “brain over brawn”. So we must say yes, somehow we are “more advanced in intelligence”. Though it would be extremely stupid to assume that we are intelligent enough to cope with the circumstances of today and tomorrow.

It is presumptuous to call ourselves *homo sapiens*. But we are truly *homo faber* (“man the toolmaker”). No other species has an even remotely comparable ability to “make tools”.

These talents have developed far beyond anything that we could imagine two or three centuries ago (a very short time in the history of humankind). It isn’t an exaggeration to say that we now have the power that we used to attribute to “gods”. But we can’t afford to be as careless and whimsical as the gods of mythology. We have no Olympus or Valhalla where we can retire while we mess up the terrestrial environment.

Why do ignorance, fear and routine make us stupid?

I have covered these subjects in chapters 13, 14 and 15 and in other parts of *The Power of Stupidity*. Here is a short summary.

Ignorance isn't the same as stupidity. But the combination is dangerous. 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. As Bertrand Russell used to say, «*the trouble with the world is that the stupid are cocksure and the intelligent are full of doubt*». And Mark Twain: «*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*».

Fear is definitely intelligent, when there is something of which we must be really afraid. But, strange as this may seem, there is fear of knowledge. A desire to avoid knowing what may cause doubt or perplexity. To remain in the shallow, but comfortable, shelter of commonplace and prejudice.

There can be “good” habits, based on wisdom and experience – or simply doing what we like. But “staying with the habit of what we think we know” is a widespread cause of stupidity. Habit and routine weaken curiosity, discourage the desire to explore, discover, learn, improve, change perspective. It helps to get into the habit of changing habits.

Why do some stupid go so far in positions of power?

Because everywhere there is more stupidity than we expect. And when it's in power it does more harm, because a few people damage many. But there are also other reasons.

Chapter 10 of my book is about the stupidity of power. There is an inherent structure in the machinery of power that generates and rewards arrogant stupidity. Another problem is megalomania – people in power are led to believe that they are “better” just because they have power (and this delusion is reinforced by courtesans and sycophants).

Fear can be an obnoxious tool for repressive power. «*Here comes the bogeyman*» is a perverted tool of authority – often used with grownups as well as children.

Intelligence is not contagious, but stupidity is. Don't you think so?

Organized intelligence is a wonderful tool for the improvement of practically everything, but it needs careful management, active cooperation, organized motivation, genuine empathy. It takes time and dedication to build a “quality circle”, it's unfortunately easy to break it.

Stupidity is contagious. It spreads like an infectious disease. And the more it is shared by several people, the more dangerous it becomes. As Terry Pratchett says, *«the intelligence of the creature known as a crowd is the square root of the number of people in it»*.

Avoid the stupid or confront them?

Confrontation is rarely a solution. And with stupidity it's obviously useless. But, as we need to understand that we are all somewhat or somehow stupid, on the other hand almost nobody is "completely" stupid. So we can look for a way of communicating with the non-stupid part of someone's mind and find a path from there.

We can comfortably stay away from stupid-dominated environments if they aren't a necessary part of our daily life. But avoiding stupidity altogether is impossible, because it's everywhere. The crucial resource is learning to understand it. Starting, of course, with our own.

Humor can help. But, here as well, it's better to start with self-irony. As Ethel Barrymore used to say, *«you grow up the day you have your first real laugh at yourself»*.

Cipolla divided stupid and clever. But stupidity affects us all. How to get rid of it? I do not consider myself very smart, but not so stupid. Anyway, I have done so many stupid things...

My book starts with these words. *«Stupidity is a nasty problem. I have always been fascinated with human stupidity. My own, of course ...»*.

And I commented, in chapter 9, that it's difficult for me to know how stupid I am – but *«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»*.

So, if you are aware of the fact that *«you have done so many stupid things»*, you are already off at a good start. It isn't so bad to "do stupid things". It happens to all of us. What is really important is learning from our mistakes.

As you know, I consider Carlo Cipolla's bright essay one of the very few really good things ever written on this subject. But there is a crucial difference between his approach and mine. He stays with the usual habit of thinking that some people are stupid and some are not. That makes him and his readers comfortable – "the stupid" is always someone else.

Of course it's embarrassing, but we need to get past the uncomfortable initial crossing of looking critically at ourselves if we want to find the real path in understanding stupidity. We can't "get rid of it" totally. But there is a lot that we can do to reduce its power.

Is it disappointing that, since Walter B. Pitkin wrote about stupidity, almost nothing has changed? Do you think it's an incurable disease?

Many things have changed and more are changing. But stupidity is with us as it has always been, long before Walter Pitkin wrote *A Short Introduction to the History of Human Stupidity*. The history that Pitkin, quite deliberately, never attempted to write developed since the origin of humanity – and also much earlier. Stupidity is inherent not only in the nature of our species, but (as far as we can tell) in all forms of life.

Stupidity isn't a disease. It's a "normal dysfunction". As such, it can't be totally eliminated. But it isn't "incurable". There is a lot that we can do to reduce its power and prevent its consequences. The better we understand it, the more effectively we can cope with its dangerous effects. This is the basic subject of my book.

Social networks have become more evident. Have they multiplied stupidity?

No communication tool is, per se, a cause of stupidity (or intelligence). It depends on who uses them and how. So-called "social networks" make human stupidity largely visible – but that is a consequence, not the origin, of the problem.

Unfortunately there are places where stupidity, superficiality, clutter and irrelevance are actively encouraged. But we shouldn't worry too much about such oddities. Fashions come and go. The whole environment is still in an early stage of development (the internet has existed for forty years, that's a short time). The size is enormous (there are over 500 million websites) and getting bigger, but we have a long way to go before it can reach "maturity" or develop to its full potential.

I have been online for twenty years – and I still have a lot to learn on how to use the net more effectively (this, of course, includes "tweaking" technologies and systems to fit out needs and intentions).

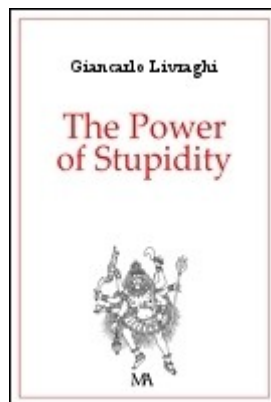
Fast communication beyond physical neighborhood and across cultural bias is a wonderful resource. We are still in the early stages of learning how to use it (and with the enormous expansion of the system we need to find new ways of tracing our course through the clutter). While it's irritating to crawl through lots of boring nonsense, finding better paths can be quite interesting.

***If your boss is stupid, and your partner,
some of your friends... What to do?***

Move away? Get rid of them? That sounds simple, but it isn't easy. And quite often it doesn't work, because by changing environment we run into more of the same – or other sorts of stupidity. To begin with... are they really stupid? Or are we unable to understand them? If we aren't good at coping with our own stupidity, putting the blame on others can only make things worse.

If and when we are really sure that someone is stupid (or anyhow “incompatible” with our lifestyle and way of thinking) well then yes, it's better to find a (preferably not conflictual) way of ending the relationship.

Sometimes it's impossible to cut the umbilical cord (because of a work or family or neighborhood situation that we can't change). But there are ways. “Managing conflicts” so that they become less harmful is a subtle art, but it's worth learning. Always starting with a change of perspective. Do we know how to listen – and to look at things from another person's point of view? This is always a good idea, also when there are no conflicts to be mended.



There are websites for the three editions of the book

The Power of Stupidity stupidity.it

Il potere della stupidità stupidita.it

El poder de la estupidez estupidez.it

Articles and comments in English, Italian and Spanish gandalf.it/stupid/