WORLD JOURNAL OF ADVANCE HEALTHCARE RESEARCH

ISSN: 2457-0400
Volume: 2.
Issue: 1.
Page N. 74-84
Year: 2018

Review Article www.wjahr.com

THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL BASIS FOR STUPIDITY

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Received date: 15 November 2017 **Revised date:** 06 December 2017 **Accepted date:** 27 December 2017

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Who are we?[1] What are we? Why are we?[2] When seeking answers to these eternal if confounding questions, we tend to flatter ourselves by being accurate when it suits us and partial when it pleases us. In terms of our technological ability to use tools to make tools, we are truly awesome. In more general cognitive terms, our intellectual capacity to solve complex problems justifies the gratifying conclusion that we are intelligent. However, if this is true, it is only part of the truth.

It is also true that young people are turning to drugs and suicide for the escape they bring from a world in which adults preach peace[3] while surrounded by criminal violence, drug and child abuse, high school massacres, gangland vendettas, piracy on the high seas, organized prostitution and sexual slavery. More people than ever are in prisons and mental institutions, and vandalism is as widespread as alcoholism is rampant.[4] Such basic social problems appear and reappear generation after generation in culture after culture. Not only have we failed to match our ability in mechanics and engineering with a comparable level of expertise in political and social relations, but our vaunted technological and intellectual genius is readily bent to destructive purposes which harm rather than help people. Thus, all things considered, we look pretty stupid.[5]

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—and nobody knows what it is.[6] The only thing we know for sure is that whatever intelligence is,[7] 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.

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, costly[8] and potentially devastating phenomenon of stupidity totally neglected. One could read the entire literature in the social sciences without finding 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 fair hearing in its own right.

In this article, we will use a mixture of two approaches to answer the question "What is stupidity?" One is to consider the conditions Barbara Tuchman, in **The March of Folly**, deemed necessary for an act to qualify as a folly: 1.) ample, relevant information must be available to the performer, who is in a knowledgeable state about the given situation; 2.) the act must be maladaptive for the performer–a factor in the analysis of folly being "Best interest", with folly being the achievement of "Worst interest"; and 3.) there must be other possible ways of reacting available. Although we will eventually discard all of these considerations as inadequate for the purpose of defining stupidity scientifically, as we examine and then dismiss them, we will learn much about the limitations of science[9] and the Lamarkian, maladaptive essence of human nature and culture.

The other approach is to answer that **stupidity is the learned inability to learn: That is–a normal, dysfunctional learning process which occurs when a schema formed by linguistic biases and social norms acts via the neurotic paradox to establish a positive feedback system which can render behavior irrelevant and carry detached actions to maladaptive excesses.** This book will elucidate the interactions of the

enumerated specifics of this commonplace process by which *learning corrupts learning*. In this context, note that stupidity usually manifests itself in two interacting functions of the human psyche —the self-deceptive inability to gather and process information accurately[10] and the neurotic[1] inability to match behavior to environmental contingencies. Although, it has social and moral dimensions, it is based in epistemology.

Self-Deception: (S-d) In an epistemological context, stupidity is the failure to gather and use information efficiently and therefore is the illegitimate brainchild of self-deception.[11] Traditionally, self-deception has been considered only in terms of the use or abuse of information present within a cognitive system —that is, a person has to "Know" something in order to deceive himself about it. However, we must acknowledge it is also self-deceptive (i.e., misleading) and usually self-defeating for one to refuse to gather new, relevant information about matters of importance.[12] In any context, s-d comprises such an essential element of human nature that our capacity for it is apparently infinite: we like agreeable data, and nothing is so agreeable as data which confirm our beliefs.[13]

Not surprisingly, behaviorists have coined unnecessary explanations for the pervasiveness of s-d. Allport (1937) posited a survival advantage due to the delay it permits a person to cope with unpleasant truths–although how delaying coping promotes survival is unclear. Trivers (1976) suggested s-d helps deceive others in that one who is unconscious of his own motives is less likely to betray them to competitors/enemies. Further, Krakauer (1978) reasoned that s-d promotes rational analysis by separating disturbing percepts in the unconscious from awareness in the superegoish, presumably and sometimes logical brain.[14]

Beyond s-d, when considering stupidity in relation to knowledge and data processing, it is imperative to distinguish between the related phenomena of "Agnosticism" and "Ignorance". Both words may be used to indicate the condition of "Not knowing", but they describe entirely different ways of maintaining that condition. Pure, innocent agnosticism is not really stupid, in that it does not indicate an inability or unwillingness to learn. Agnosticism is the cognitive state when information is physically inaccessible (unavailable) to an individual or organization. Relevant data are simply not present in the environment in a form discernable to the sensory apparatus of the living system (person, group, etc.). For example, humans cannot see light in the ultraviolet and infrared bands, so we are agnostic (rather than stupid or ignorant) for missing any such environmental cues which may be there.[15]

The newly coined term “Agnorance” covers the situation when a system has information which does not get into the decision making process.[2] This occurred in the Roman Empire in the 4th century, when the bureaucracy kept the emperor from knowing what was going on:[16] Information was in the system; it just did not make it to the top.

Pure ignorance, on the other hand, usually indicates stupidity in that data are present but unheeded.[17] A classic example of this was aviatrix Amy Johnson, who, in 1930, presumed to fly from London to Sydney. As she later wrote, “The prospect did not frighten me, because I was so appallingly ignorant that I never realized in the least what I had taken on”.[18]

The reason ignorance does not always indicate stupidity is that some information could seriously disrupt existing psycho /social systems were it to penetrate the cognitive defenses so exclusion may sometimes be somewhat adaptive. This is really a rather complex and imperfect process, as stimuli must be at least superficially perceived (i.e., screened) before being rejected by the system as being threatening to the existing belief structure or "Schema", the standard picture each of us has based on our individual personal, sensory experiences:[19] it is used to evaluate incoming data with an inherent bias toward maintaining its own integrity and proclivity for inventing data to confirm if not complete a form or image–as in Gestalt psychology. Some disturbing data do get through without the mind’s awareness although motivation can play a role in ignorance if some relevant, available information is prevented from getting "Into the system" (i.e., accepted and incorporated into the cognitive program). This is likely to occur when a person senses that learning more about a particular matter might force him to experience anxiety, feel guilty, upset his existing psychic equilibrium[20] and perhaps undergo the most traumatic, terrifying ordeal one can be compelled to endure—he might have to change his mind.[21]

In fact, recent research shows that misinformed people when exposed to valid facts rarely change their minds. For example, the demotion of Pluto from the rank of planet pops to mind: Not only Plutonians but many humans found this quite disturbing.[22] Even incredibler, people often become more strongly set in their false beliefs when confronted with contradictory facts.[23] Thus, facts can actually make a misinformed belief stronger because admitting one is wrong is psychologically difficult if not unacceptable. When there is accommodation to new info, it is at first timid, minimal and as conservative as possible.[24]

Knowledge: While knowing is nevertheless supposed to be good, there can be so much knowledge that the quality of information processing suffers. When buried in the New Age bane TMI (too much info), people limit themselves by specializing– sacrificing breadth for

depth, with each doing well if he knows something about anything. In terms of quality of information, people debase themselves by qualifying their standards—sacrificing validity for appeal, with each accepting whatever is suitable often leading to counterinfo[25]–i.e., misinformation. As Ronald Reagan once noted, the problem with liberals was not that they were ignorant but that what they knew was wrong.[27] So, we must bear in mind that both the validity and quantity of what is known are equally important.[3]

Unfortunately, these compromises not only fail to protect people from an overload of trivia but can keep them from knowing what is going on in their world. Worse yet, this overload can be self-created as happened with the American intelligence community after the truck-bombing of the Marine barracks in Beiruit in Oct., 1983. The intelligence postmortem showed a need to connect known dots, but, to the detriment of the victims of 9/11, the intelligence establishment gathered more dots.[27]

The process of dot gathering is part of the general intellectual process which has been encapsulated by the acronym "OODA", standing for Observation, Orientation, Decision, Action.[28] Observation is obviously the process of gathering dots. Orientation is the process of integrating gathered dots into the schema. When dots are rejected or invented for the sake of the schema's integrity, stupidity is invited if not invented, as attempts to make observations fit preconceptions increase the risk of disorientation.[29] Thus, a posfeed system can induce rigidity and/or irrelevance for lack of corrective information in a constantly changing cultural environment.

A classic case was Lyndon Johnson in 1960, when he refused to listen to anyone who disagreed with this analysis that John Kennedy would not have enough delegates at the Democratic Presidential Convention to win on the first ballot. In that vein, a staffer who reported that Kennedy had Wyoming sewn up was fired: consequently, fewer and fewer people told him the truth as *they* saw it,[30] leaving him to hear only those who told him the truth as *he* saw it.

Generally, an open system can process only so much incoming information so fast, and that should be important material, not irrelevant (e.g., sexual orientation or religious affiliation of coworkers) or insignificant detail. However, not only are systems sometimes overwhelmed by shear volume of information,[31] but important material present and known is not always brought to conscious light. At an institutional level, the RAF experienced this problem in France in the spring of 1940, when intelligence simply was not getting to those who needed it in time to act upon it partially because of organizational complexity.[32] Worse yet is the penchant of leaders like W for "Deniability" rather than accountability[33]– they are not interested so much in doing a job as in shifting blame for failure elsewhere.

At the national level, every government has its covert band of operatives who skulk around doing whatever is necessary and improper. The general population and even most government employees are better off not knowing what is going on because the CIA, James Bonds, etc. skulk around betraying the ideals which hold civilization together, so their actions may be hidden from us for the good of our leaders if not us.

At the individual level, knowing certain otherwise innocuous things may be suspicious, as a completely innocent Mid-Eastern detaintee could find when being interrogated by overzealous antiterrorist federal officials. "You know that? How do you know that? You must be connected to terrorists!"[34]

As many doctors well know, too much candor can also be disastrous. There was a case of a terminal cancer patient who was given a useless drug (Krebiozen) and recovered. Upon learning the drug was useless, he had a relapse. Given a super-strength placebo, he again recovered, only to have a final and fatal relapse when learning that drug was useless.[35] This was a case in which belief worked a miracle cure; it was knowledge that killed.

As important as the quantity or quality of knowledge present in a system is the attitude toward gathering more. Often, people are hampered by their reluctance to learn more, although usually learning is helpful—particularly if it leads to a stronger, more inclusive belief structure. On the other hand, learning more may threaten one with having to change his egodefining schema, which most are reluctant to do.

Another aspect of "Knowing" is that a person has had some experience which prepares him for the decision at hand–that is, he has some idea about what he should do. For example, when, in late 2011, Penn state football coach Joe Paterno was faced with a charge of sexual misconduct brought against one of his assistants, part of his explanation/defense for his (mis)-handling of the situation was that he had never had to deal with anything like this crisis before.[36] His action might not be considered stupid because, in this case, he really had no idea how he should proceed. While no situation is totally new, and there should be some basic principles involved which give a clue as to how to deal with any situation, some experiences go off the graph of expectation leaving a deer in the headlights to wonder what schema if any to extend to a given set of novel[37] circumstances.

Finally, we must throw "Forgetting" into the mix. A lesson may be learned, only to be lost over time usually due to being left unused–you lose what you do not use. A modern example was the lesson the American army learned in Vietnam regarding insurgency: fifty years later, it had to be relearned in the Mid-East.[38] On the positive side, relearning a lesson is usually quicker than was the original learning process.

Emotions: In all situations, the desire to know is often tempered by a sense that learning might be more emotionally disturbing than helpful. This complicates any consideration of stupidity, when "Knowing" is one of the defining criteria for the condition. If a person does not know what is going on, he might do something maladaptive, but it is not stupid as such. However, if a person is making a point not to find out relevant information in his environment, is that not even stupider? If it would seem so, bear in mind we all have defense mechanisms to protect us from awareness of embarrassing cognitions and psycho/cultural mechanisms to help us cope with the unsettling cognizance of our own inevitable death.[39] Thus, the condition of "Knowing" appears to be of little value when one attempts to determine if an act was stupid or not.

Once people gather information, they treat it in one of two ways depending on whether they like it or not. The double standard is known as "Confirmation bias" and is quite simple: that which is confirming is accepted;[40] that which is contradictory is rejected.[41] To put it another way, the standard for evidence required to change one's mind is higher than that to confirm one's beliefs. A prime example of this phenomenon was the double standard stupidly applied to information regarding the planned invasion of Iraq by President George W. Bush in Mar., 2003. A former CIA official stated, "When it comes to information supporting the invasion of Iraq, the bar was low. When it comes to intelligence that doesn't say Iraq has weapons of mass destruction, the bar was incredibly high ...." To make matters worse, top leaders at the CIA played to the White House audience and highlighted the intelligence 43 and his minions wanted to hear. Further, once intelligence was provided to the administration, it elevated any rationale which justified invasion and, on the other hand, suppressed any–i.e. the absence of WMD–which cast doubt on it.[42]

It might be ideal if all data were treated equally, but personal biases predispose people to be either selectively ignorant or unconsciously inclusive[43] to the point of invention. During the Civil War, Union General George McClellan chronically indulged in the former condition by always insisting he was facing forces vastly superior to his own, and his intelligence staff fell into line by obligingly providing him with estimates of enemy troop strength which confirmed his belief all valid evidence to the contrary.[44] On the other hand, 43's regents created an alternative reality for him by never letting him see any information showing they (and he) were wrong[45]– an element of a positive feedback system which worked pretty well until Aug., 2005, when TV news coverage of hurricane Katrina blew away insiders' self-serving illusions about how well the federal government relief efforts were working on the Gulf coast.

Relevance: In most situations, ignorance promotes a common characteristic of stupid decisions—irrelevance. When stupidity is in full glory, the most discrepant cognitions are somehow matched up in the most implausible ways. Further, obvious relevancies are ignored, so the behavioral world takes on the bizarre, chaotic quality of a Wonderland gone berserk. Fantasized cause-effect and means-ends relationships are coined at random while real ones are blithely ignored. The monumental is trivialized and the crucial disdained as an afflicted mind locks in on and pursues its own worst interest with happy abandon.

Unfortunately, the determination of "Relevance" is quite judgmental, so stupidity is inherently a arbitrary/subjective phenomenon or as the eponymous Emma observed in Jane Austin's novel, "..... folly is not always folly". Deeds once considered stupid may turn out to be brilliant. On the other hand, achievements initially hailed as works of genius may later be exposed as patently moronic[46] (e.g., the Maginot Line and the Edsel).

While much is made of the human brain's ability to associate various cognitions (ideas) in relevant cause-effect relationships, the amount of fatuity in the world suggests that the brain might also prevent or inhibit such functional associations while it promotes irrelevant connections. The child's brain begins by treating all possibilities as equally probable. Learning couples certain stimuli with certain reactions. No behaviorist's model of functional rewards, however, could possibly account for the diversity of the world's religions nor the battle science has constantly had to wage against agnosticism and the oft theologically induced intellectual sin of ignorance.[47]

In this cognitive context, it appears that stupidity is a very normal way for the human mind to compromise with its own emotional inability to deal directly with information coming from the physical environment in the context of emotional rewards from the psychosocial environment. This is a schizophrenic reaction which permits us to cope with distinct but interacting features of the human condition. For each of us, the invention and development of our special strategies are functions of a commitment to a particular lifestyle

determined by both our general culture and our specific personal experiences.

Neurotic Paradox: (N-dox)In terms of intellectual development, stupidity may justly be viewed as both adaptive and maladaptive. In the short run,[4] it is adaptive in that it helps an individual adjust to his cultural group's values by permitting him to accept any obvious contradictions between the real and ideal. As a means to short-term adaptation, stupidity is a classic example of the "Neurotic Paradox" which promotes behavioral patterns which are subject to immediate short-term reinforcement although the long-term results will be negative.[48] A related drawback is that short-term errors may be hard to overcome in the long run[49] if the immediate decision sets you off on a bad behavioral pathway which becomes progressively more and more difficult to escape from later. Addictions to drugs or "Pleasure" would be commonplace examples of this basic physio/psychological principle of learning and life.[50] As philosopher Honoré de Balzac noted, "Pleasure is like certain drugs, to continue to obtain the same result, one must double the dose, and death or brutalization is contained in the last one".[51]

If stupidity is adaptive in helping one fit into his immediate surroundings, it is maladaptive over the long run, as it inhibits innovations and constructive criticism of the social environment. Individuals adjust to the group, but the group loses its capacity to adjust to its surroundings as members sacrifice their individual integrity, insight and ideas and conform to prevailing mores for the rewards of social acceptance.

Of course, the bottom line, long-term net effect of stupidity is negative, but its universal presence cannot be understood without recognition of its role in helping people adapt to their immediate, short-term social situation. Thus, it becomes clear how there can be so much stupidity around although it is, in the long run, maladaptive. Survival within the system is promoted if one is so stupid as to accept the system's stupidities. Also, short-term survival of the system (institution, group, etc.) is promoted through enhanced social cohesion. However, these immediate gains are countered by the long-term loss of induced inefficiency of information processing. Our cultural life is really a very human trade off among these three dependent features: 1.) objective, rational, logical processing of information; 2.) psychological gratification and self-image of the individual and 3.) group cooperation and social cohesion.

With the qualification of arbitrariness in mind, it should be noted that most people who find stupidity in others judge efficiency of processing information and usually do not even consider the emotional and social dimension of decisions affecting individual and institutional life. Accordingly, what might be regarded as stupidity may in fact be a healthy, short-term compromise with psychic satisfaction and group cohesion. Real stupidity comes when one factor (information processing, psychic comfort or social cohesion) disrupts the others.

Extremes: One of the reasons a student of human behavior has difficulty generalizing about stupidity is that both opposite extremes can lead to stupid behavior. In a given situation, it may be stupid to do too much too soon or too little too late,[52] so if being a day late and a dollar short can be disastrous, so too can being the first to move too quickly. As Bill Gates observed, "Microsoft does all the stupid things first", and then other companies profit from those mistakes.[53] Just as overreaction and underreaction may both be counterproductive, hypersensitivity and insensitivity can both have negative effects. The Golden Mean may indeed be the best policy in most situations, but that leaves contradictory opposites having equally negative results. Ergo, the student of stupidity, when citing a cause for the condition, must automatically ask himself if the opposite extreme on the conservative/inventive schematic continuum might not also have produced a similar effect.[54] It can be equally stupid to rely on superstition as depend on routine; to spurn efforts at improvement and reform as have exaggerated confidence in given individuals, organizations or tactics.[55]

Viewed the other way, most actions can be criticized as stupid from either side. For example, de Bathification of Iraq after the successful invasion of coalition forces in 2003 has been generally denounced as leading to civil disorder and political upheaval.[56] However, some critics maintain it was the correct policy but should have been done sooner. The final criterion of judgment of any act must be its (in)effectiveness in accomplishing a given goal, stated or not, without inducing negative side-effects, which are more likely to ensue after more extreme rather than moderate actions performed sooner than later.

As long as a functional balance between polar extremes is maintained, stupidity can be viewed as a normal part of the human experience.[57] It is a mechanism of cultural selection which will be found wherever people speak, organize and act. Static human systems usually cannot cope with themselves nor–as in the case of Rome–the conditions they create. An organization evolves to deal with a set of given circumstances and, in attempting to solve perceived problems, creates new problems. It then either adapts to the conditions it creates or stupidly tries to maintain itself until it is replaced by the next institution in the hopefully endless cycle of human organization.

Positive feedback: (Posfeed)It is important to bear in mind that such stupidity in moderation may be an effective defense mechanism which promotes self-confidence in an individual and cooperation within a group.[5] It is only when it goes to excess that it tends to become stupidly maladaptive, but it is precisely this which is rare in nature[58] but made probable when a behavioral or cultural trend develops into a *self-rewarding*, positive feedback system as happened, for example, in Germany in the 1930's. When this occurs, a pattern of activity (e.g., belligerent nationalism/rationalism) becomes rewarding in and of itself regardless of its detrimental extrinsic consequences.[59] Behavior may then go to extremes because it is reinforced by the schema, which functions as an intrinsically gratifying, internal reward system for such conduct. With the waning of critical self-examination, individuals or groups may become victims of their own excesses as the confirmation bias of inner directed behavior becomes self-defeating.[60] The fact is criticism is necessary and healthy.[61]

However, a dysfunctional imbalance develops when, through internally induced, sustaining, self-reinforcement, a system gradually becomes insulated from moderating influences of the external environment until it becomes a perpetual motion machine whose prime if not sole purpose is to stay in motion.[62] This is exactly what stupidity is—*a schematically generated, self-deceptive substitution of an internal feedback mechanism which gradually and progressively disrupts the monitoring of behavioral impact on the environment, thus leading to poor decision making as the belief system (i.e., schema) becomes increasingly out of kilter and at odds with and unaffected by available but unheeded evidence of its deleterious effects*.[63] A classic example was the Labour Party's incessant power grabs in Britain in the late 1940's, when every self-induced problem was used as an excuse for another powergrab, which led to even more problems.[64]

In such cases, indulgers think themselves immune to Healey's Law–when you get to the bottom of a hole, stop digging.[65] The feedback loop has broken down so they do not realize further digging is counter-productive so they keep at it. As psychologist Charles Ponzi (of Ponzi Scheme infamy) said: "A man always wants more. More money. More possessions. More power. The more he buys, the more he wants to buy. It's human nature".[66] The same principle can drive a social fad to a mania, as happened with the goldfish-swallowing jag in America in 1939: It started with one, went to three and eventually to the hundreds.[67] Basically, this positive feedback principle is fundamental part of our psychocultural nature at the very least.[6]

To wit: thousands of years earlier, Greek historian Polybius (204-122 B.C.) recognized this general problem in his analysis of various forms of government which, if left alone, go to similar self-defeating extremes. Monarch tends to tyranny; aristocracy to oligarchy; democracy to mobacracy.[68] He also found the solution: checks and balances provided by cooperatively competing administrative, legislative and judicial branches. Hail Madison.

An alternative but sinister arrangement is a mutually reinforcing system of two cultural/psychological trends. The science of global warming paring up with the mass media's need for grabby stories is an example. Each one piques the other to greater excesses: More research produces more doomsday scenarios which justify more scientific studies.

To put this all another way, it may or may not be stupid to make an error; however it definitely is stupid not to learn from a mistake but rather repeat it. As Cicero observed 2,000 year ago, "To err is human, to persevere in error is only (sic) the act of a fool."[69] A classic example of this was the commitment of the popular press to the erroneous theory that high colesterol causes heart problems: Research results to the contrary were roundly ignored by the mass media in the cause of supporting bogus dogma.[70] One concrete contribution of this book might be to help everyone recognize stupid conduct and prevent its repetition by learning from it and filling in with knowledge where the original feedback loop broke down. The general process is for those with a socially condoned, linguaistically acceptable theory at first to adapt the evidence to the posfeed theory–even to the point of ignoring evidence right in front of their noses[71]/ eyes– and then, second, adapt (i.e., tweek) the theory to fit the evidence (e.g., add epicycles to the heliocentric model of the solar system), and, if necessary, finally junk the theory when it, via the n-dox goes to maladaptive excess and then ultimately breaks down because it no longer can cover irrefutable, factual evidence and perhaps even causes real, deleterious consequenses.

Cooperation: This breakdown often follows from stupidity's initial success in creating an arbitrary world that will maximize group cooperation in a counter-productive cause. This can be done by blocking disruptive input–like refusing to recognize A causes B–or by inventing pleasing images and ideas–by creating causal connections which do not exist.[72] Such tactics may prove to be maladaptive in the long run, but this is the price for the immediate reward of enhanced cognitive consonance and social cohesion.

As effective as stupidity may be in promoting intragroup cooperation, it disrupts a system's capacity for effective learning. Understanding is sacrificed for the sake of emotional comfort and cultural stability. The drawback of this intellectually limiting complacence is that it all

but guarantees frictional competition and conflict with other equally maladapted individuals and groups.

One might reasonably expect that such competition and conflict would weed out stupidity so that the more intelligent individuals and systems would eventually prevail. However, it appears that there is at least as much stupidity now as ever before, so it seems that competition merely replaces one stupid system with another. If this leaves people with the option of being ruled by a bunch of idiots or a pack of fools, they can be excused from being too concerned about the difference. On the other hand, anyone who wants to understand what makes everyone else so stupid would do well to consider the factors which contribute to this most common mental state.

Language: If it is human to err, it is even more human to speak, it is in language systems that we find a major source of human stupidity. Language has two basic functions in society: it permits people to exchange information as it promotes cooperation. Stupidity necessarily follows from the compromise reached by people as they balance these two factors. When people speak, they usually both impart information and convey their group identity.[7] This social aspect of language expresses common values and presumes common assumptions. It also means that critical information is often couched in terms and tone acceptable to all—which in turn means a lot of criticism is muted and stupidity glossed over if not induced.

Much is made of the brain as a system for processing information, but there is relatively little interest in how information is not used or is misused. One common assumption is that if knowledge is misused, there was some breakdown in the rational system of the mind. However, much of the mishandling of data is systematic and based on the way words can freeze understanding[73] and verbal social values render language a cultural rather than computerized processing medium.

While it is difficult to study how people do not do something,[8] we must consider how and why people do not use certain information readily available to them. The answer has to be that some facts are emotionally disturbing and would be emotionally/socially disruptive if permitted to pass through the cerebral word processor. This emotional element throws off judgment—or provides a shifting basis for analysis. It is also the source of the "Motivated ignorance" which characterizes the human propensity to be not just uninformed about egodefining issues but biased by the values implicit in the linguistic system used to process data. Such bias can be deliberately induced as when Newt Gingrich's political action committee GOPAC published a campaign pamphlet in 1994 which suggested using "Contrasting words" (e.g., betray, cheat, collapse, corruption, crisis, decay, destruction, failure, hypocrisy, incompetent, insecure, liberal, lie, sick, etc.)[74] as convenient labels for Democrats' actions.

To complicate the matter further, organizations and institutions commonly develop their own argot. Thus, in the Pentagon, "Burn" does not mean "Light on fire" but "Copy"; "Chop" does not mean cut into pieces with an axe or clever but "To sign on" to a proposal or program.[75]

In general, language is basically a coding system people use to accomplish two interrelated ends: convey information and maintain or increase group cohesion. Language categorizes experience so that generalizations about the environment are possible, but the labels (words) used for these categories often pick up emotional connotations which disrupt the processing procedure[76]–expressing feelings while distorting perceptions.[77] The evaluation of the informational component of language then becomes inextricably bound up with the emotional life of the speakers/users and shapes attenuated cognitions.[78]

It is this emotional factor which precludes objectivity within any linguistic system. Hence, stupidity is best construed as a social defense mechanism parallel to the Freudian defense systems which protect individuals from an overload of awareness. Just as many Freudian defense mechanisms are generated within individuals who fear self-knowledge,[79] stupidity develops within a society to inhibit unacceptably accurate cognitions of both personal and institutional ineptitude. Along with idiosyncratic forms of individual stupidity, members of a society exhibit collective forms of idiocy (e.g., suppression of dissidents or embarrassing news) within the context of —or reaction against— social values.[9]

Filtering: The induced subjectivity underlines the essential social nature of stupidity. Society defines awareness of factuality as it funnels fictions into our consciousness. The mind is really a psychologically conditioned filter which a given experience may or may not penetrate, depending on the value structure of a particular culturally condoned and constructed prism and the nature of the incoming data.

In virtually all cases, stupidity is perpetrated subconsciously, in that the agent cannot sense that his actions are counter-productive in terms of his/her self-sustaining set of values. What he does sense is an emotional satisfaction that precludes any objective analysis on his part (and which is incomprehensible to any outside observer) because one does not consciously engage in self-analysis when cognitions are successfully shunted into emotionally acceptable if irrelevant categories.

In the rational/intelligent model of behavior, discriminative stimuli guide actions so that behavior is "Appropriate" and likely to lead to positive results: behavior is considered to be under "Stimulus control",[80] and this model is actually fairly descriptive of how the mind routinely handles unimportant matters. However, the more a matter is an ego-defining issue, the greater the role of the schema vis-a-vis immediate stimuli in shaping attendant behavior, with the result that actions become increasingly inappropriate and even counterproductive. To put it the other way, stupid behavior becomes increasingly common as a schema blocks the perception of impinging stimuli and an understanding of issues and/or creates substitute stimuli and idiotic ideas through fantasies.[81] Perception trumps reality when the schema becomes rigidly maladaptive and self-sustaining as with Presidents Wilson, Hoover and Lyndon Johnson, who clung to failed policies and dysfunctional schemas when it was clear even to their advisors that in each case the selected course of action was failing.[82]

The basic problem with the rational/intellectual model of the brain as a computer is the presence of self-sustaining bugs. Computers may or may not have bugs, but the brain has built in emotional biases which fade in and out depending on the nature of the "Input". The appropriate computer model in this vein would not be a bug[10] but an electronically unstable machine with a defective program which keeps the hard drive steady by preventing major alterations of its programs. In human terms, correcting a program (i.e., changing one's mind) is necessarily emotionally involving and therefore done only reluctantly. In computer terms, any program is inherently maladaptive because of its necessary and inevitable impact on perception[83] (i.e., the process of data input and analysis).[84]

Perception: The act of perception can be broken down into two separate steps. First, information gets into the system as a result of selective attentional processes. The brain does not treat all external stimuli equally. Perception is a process of directed discrimination, with stimuli deemed "Important" getting attention denied the trivial. However, what is deemed important is in no way a function of objectivity, since the emotional component of information interferes with the accuracy of its handling. Some stimuli get favored treatment and are emphasized while others are ignored. Generally, inference can perform the job of perception by filling in missing information when incoming data are insufficient or incomplete.[85] The paranoid may perceive something trivial as threatening so as to justify his fear. Alternatively, someone else might pass over potentially upsetting stimuli as too disturbing to contemplate.

Speech writer Richard Goodwin made two summary statements of stupidity when dealing with Vietnam. One came when he called a Pentagon troop estimate "A guess derived from speculation informed by ignorance and fueled by desire".[86] The other described his reaction to President Johnson's "Gulf of Tonkin" speech in August, 1964 as "...the product of ignorance blended with wishful thinking and dulled perceptions."[87]

The dulling and skewing of perceptions occurs partially because after stimuli enter the system, they are then organized into "Meaningful" units, with "Meaningful" being as arbitrary as anything can be. This process of organizing is linguistic categorizing, which commonly results in illusions, stereotypes and misperceptions. The net result is that selected data are arbitrarily construed to conform to the existing cognitive program —the self-sustaining, self-promoting schema.[88]

Schema: The schema is the ego-defining belief structure of the individual.[89] It is the frame of reference for the perception of stimuli and defines the behavioral repertoire available for responses to them. The schema provides both general and specific expectations about their relations and affects memory by limiting recall of stored information but, as compensation, may fill in information when experience with an object/event is limited.[90] It is modifiable by experience as the individual interacts with his/her environment,[91] and minor adjustments are quite common and occur with little or no emotional reaction or awareness.

The schema is a verbal/behavioral construct through which situations are perceived in a linguistic context which systematically distorts incoming information so as to reinforce itself at the expense of contradictory, disturbing data. This is the basic mechanism of stupidity, as it necessarily causes people to be out of sync with their environment. The schema is a self-sustaining cognitive paradigm which maintains its emotional base by misperceiving the environment through verbal labeling of stimuli and cognitions. It has something of a hypnotic effect, focusing attention on schema confirming percepts so that these data can be processed while reality testing on the rest of the perceptual field is suspended. The garnered data then serve to strengthen the schema as they are incorporated into it.

As a function of experience, the schema can both help and hinder the individual dealing with problems in the environment. The schema is an advantage when the person confronts a problem similar to one already solved, as each time it gets easier to deal successfully with such situations. However, the schema may limit insight— the act of pulling together various facts into novel relationships. In this sense, experience and the created schema can inhibit innovation, limit perception

by stereotyping[92] and contribute to the persistence of behavior which was adaptive but has become irrelevant.

Again, we must emphasize the inherent arbitrariness of the entire phenomenon. There is no particular virtue in holding or changing a given schema except relative to the environment over time. This, in turn, is an uncertain base, the perception of which is confounded by linguistic bias.

Judgment: Stupidity thus results both from and in perceptual limits on learning which prevent a system from recognizing its own limitations. A new idea is not judged objectively by an independent standard but is regarded primarily as a challenge to the prevailing ego/social system. This is an emotionally based, usually subconscious reaction. Only secondarily can the cognitive content of new information be processed consciously and rationally on its actual merits.

When pondering the passing of many great human institutions down through the ages, one must conclude that most failed to adapt to changing conditions. What is not so obvious is that the new conditions were often induced by innovations produced by the institutions themselves. The development of the clock and schedule by Benedictine monks provide an obscure but apt example of this point: They both eventually enhanced the secularization of time with the rise of commercialism to the ultimate detriment of the Church.[93]

Generally, turnover of organizations is inherent in the human conditions to the degree that the prevailing schema limits values to those appropriate to the circumstances present when it developed. These values unduly sustain the status quo by preventing recognition of problems created by the impact of the institution. This perceptual failure occurs concurrently with the general schematic restriction on the development of any novel modes of thought or behavior. Indeed, one of the sad ironies of cultural life is that most innovators must fight the system in order to improve it. Very few organizations encourage innovation, so most transcendent achievements first have to overcome entrenched opposition from the establishment.

Although we all delight in the triumphs of the crackpots who contributed to the advance of civilization, it is impossible to appreciate the tragedies of those who failed not because they were wrong but because they could not overcome the built-in idiocy of their cultural environment. When stupidity reigns supreme, the establishment stifles critical analysis so as to thwart improvement and protect the reigning schema for as long as possible.

Such was the case in 1929 when, months before the Crash, Alvin T. Simonds sent an objective article to **Nation's Business** suggesting a business decline, only to have the accurate, reality-based piece rejected because it was "Pessimistic".[94] Worse yet was a visit by five FBI agents, in 1931, to the **Wall Street Forecast** for reporting on the “Dismal situation facing banks and investors”. After the interview, one of the agents reported they had thoroughly scared the editor, who was unlikely to resume disseminating the truth about the banking situation.[95] It is noteworthy that accuracy was treated as an irrelevancy in this case. Agnosticism in the general business community was promoted by wishful thinking. This is just a single example of the blind egotism so common in stupidity—the reluctance to perceive and respond to unpleasant realities.

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