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STUPIDITY, IDIOCY AND STUPID IDIOTS

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INTRODUCTION

I am stupid. So are you. I am also an idiot. So are you. And every once in a while we are also stupid idiots. My stupidity and idiocy is less relevant to you than yours. The idiot playing the biggest role in your life is after all the one staring back at you in the mirror every morning. So the purpose of this essay is to give you a chance to reflect on your own stupidity, not just identify it in others, even if the latter does offer a wealth of opportunities.

The words “stupid” and “idiot” are typically used about other people, even if we sometimes judge our former self as having been a prize idiot. Sometimes this self realisation comes quickly, but it normally takes longer and usually never comes at all. So this is a kind of self-help book, with some – granted very general – information about how being too much of an idiot or dimwit can be avoided.

The need for a philosophy of stupidity is supported among other things by observations of how large numbers of people behave on social media. There is essentially a lot of poor thinking and associated behaviour in circulation. Idiots do have a tendency to make themselves known, which makes it easy to

overestimate the scale of stupidity or idiocy. Either way, there seems to be plenty to consider.

There are few, if any, limits to how stupid we humans can be. The author Terry Pratchett (1948-2015) points out: If you put a large switch in a cave somewhere, with a sign on it saying ‘End-of-the-World Switch. PLEASE DO NOT TOUCH’, the paint wouldn’t even have time to dry.¹ Such colossal idiots are rare, but they *do* exist. We can all be tremendously stupid, but for some this attribute is so prevalent that it basically defines who they are.

The reason we are all stupid is because stupidity is inextricably linked to our ability to think. In this essay, I interpret “stupidity” as being the failure to use our ability to think, while “idiocy” refers to our poor use of this ability. The words “stupidity” and “idiocy” are associated with *faults* for which you can normally be criticised, not with shortcomings that can’t be blamed on circumstances beyond your control. I am referring to people with a “normal” or higher functional level. Of course it’s not unusual to find yourself wondering if some of those writing in online comments sections or forums can be described as having a “normal” level of cognitive function and this makes deciding where one should draw the line between what’s within or beyond “the norm” anything but unproblematic, but I won’t be getting into that debate. Even if

you for example can perform mathematical showpieces or happen to be a global leader within cancer research, you can be equally thick as a plank or a total idiot in many other areas. If anything that's more likely the case because your ability in one area gives you a poorly founded belief that you also excel in all kinds of other areas. I've met enough people claiming to have a high IQ who don't come across as very bright and haven't achieved anything significant. There are of course smart people who have achieved something *and* have a high IQ, but they are usually interested in far more important things than what their IQ is.

We all do idiotic things. Many of us will have questioned why we didn't check the fuses were off before cutting a power cable. In such cases the world will give you instant feedback on how what you did wasn't especially smart. As a rule, this is enough to put you off repeating the mistake, at least not immediately. But these things don't always end well, and the so-called "Darwin Award" is a source of merriment here even if it is, tragically, only presented to those who have contributed to human evolution by removing themselves from the gene pool by either dying or making themselves sterile in a spectacularly stupid or idiotic way. Among the favourites are a Canadian lawyer who in an attempt to prove that a type of sheet glass was unbreakable, threw himself at a window on the 25th

floor. The glass didn't break, but the lawyer hadn't checked if the frame could withstand such force, which it couldn't – and the glass came out of the frame. It's no great surprise that ninety percent of these award winners are men.

Feedback from the world can also come in the form of an exam result. When marking exam papers I'll occasionally come across one written by a student who despite having little command of the material has tried to answer as well as they can. For example the student who wanted to explain the difference between random generalisation – such as, that all the students in the back row wear white T-shirts – and scientific law, by saying that “scientific law is ratified by the king.” As an examiner I'll chuckle, scratch my head and attempt to reconstruct how the student has thought, and chuckle even more when I realise what's gone on in their head, which in this case was that the student didn't know the difference between scientific and judicial law.

This essay is a tiny contribution to the philosophical discipline called virtue epistemology. The word “epistemology” is derived from two Greek words *episteme* (understanding, knowledge, insight) and *logos* (reason, study). In other words, it is the study of understanding. “Virtue” is a translation of the Greek word *arete*, which means functioning well. Virtue ethics is therefore the study of how you can be a

good moral agent. Virtue epistemology is correspondingly the study of how you can be a good cognitive agent. The essay describes some features of how and why you fall short as a cognitive agent. Qualities like arrogance, narrow-mindedness, stubbornness, imperviousness to arguments, a lack of will or ability to admit mistakes, levity and carelessness, will make it far less likely that a person will reach a sensible understanding. If you want to be a relatively smart person, these are qualities you should actively seek to identify in yourself and fight.

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) makes a distinction between the soul’s “deficiencies” and “illnesses,” saying that there is a categorical division between them.² Personally I would claim that it is more of a smooth transition, where the soul’s “deficiencies” move towards illness if they become sufficiently radical. When for example one enters into a discussion with people who like conspiracy theories, it’s often unclear which side of the fence they’re on, and in some cases it’s difficult to avoid the conclusion: Not only is this stupid or idiotic, it is also madness because it is so far beyond any reasonable standard of human rationality. Idiocy is a bit like flypaper to me. I’ve spent far too many hours of my life looking at websites devoted to absurd conspiracy theories on just about anything or the most insane beliefs about alternative therapy. None of it made me any wiser, but it undoubtedly had some entertainment value.

You might object here, that I'm more or less branding those who disagree with me as stupid, and it's of course no good consistently making *ad hominem* arguments, where I attack people instead of their opinions. However what's crucial in this context is not exactly what your opinions are, but how you came to have them. You are not stupid because you are wrong. Whether or not you are stupid depends on the *way* you are wrong. You can in fact have entirely correct views on the facts of a case, but still be stupid if you have a stupid way of reaching them. It's like drunk driving: You may well get home without harming anybody, but you're still an idiot for drunk driving. Whether you are stupid or not, isn't dependent on whether your opinions are right or wrong, but how you got them.

The stupid and idiotic are not aware of it themselves – they are blind to their own condition. The possibility for self insight is however always there because we all have room for more than one thought, and thus recognise stupidity and idiocy in ourselves if we are open to the fact that we have the capacity for both. It is far easier to be aware of someone else's stupidity and idiocy than our own. This is rightly pointed out in the Sermon on the Mount: "Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye, 'when there is the log in your own eye? You

hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.”³

Philosophy at it's most fundamental is about self-reflection, about working on one's own thoughts and ways of looking at things. Nobody can perform such self-examination on your behalf. You have to do it yourself. A book like this can at best help you become aware of your own tendency to be stupid or idiotic, or for being a stupid idiot, and offer a few pages on how and why you make a fool of yourself. After that it's up to you to do something about it, remembering of course that it is a Sisyphean task – you will never truly beat it.

THE RICH VARIETY OF STUPIDITY

Numerous expressions can be used for describing ourselves when we fall short as conscious and active beings. In psychiatry “idiot” once meant a person with an IQ below 25. This is not how the expression is used today, nor how I would use it. We cannot say there is any consensus on the meaning of the words “stupid” and “idiot.” Some make a very clear distinction between them, others use the words interchangeably, while others consider one a subgroup of the other.

One can imagine many ways of differentiating between our shortcomings as conscious beings. In his novel *Foucault's Pendulum* (1980), the writer and philosopher Umberto Eco (1932 – 2016) distinguishes between four types: cretins, fools, morons and lunatics.⁴ The cretin is someone who can neither articulate anything nor coordinate their actions. The fool is someone who consistently talks about the wrong thing – about dogs when everyone else is talking about cats, who'll ask a recently widowed man how his wife is – and will consistently break the rules of conversation. Morons are categorized by incorrect reasoning; they are near masters of fallacy, and if such a person ever said something right, you can guarantee the opinion they arrived at was dubiously founded. Unlike morons,

lunatics are not governed by any kind of logic, and form opinions based on their shortcomings rather than misconceptions – because lunatics are able to prove absolutely anything. Eco claims that a normal person is someone who manages to combine these four types in a sensible manner, because they all lie within us.

The economic historian Carlo M. Cipolla (1922–2000) divides humans into four groups: the helpless, the intelligent, bandits, and the stupid.⁵ The helpless benefit society, while losing out themselves. If you however succeed in benefitting society and yourself, you are intelligent. Bandits benefit themselves at other people's expense. While the last group, the stupid, are those who cause others harm without gaining anything from it themselves. Cipolla claims that at any given time there are far more people in the stupid group than you might think. To justify this claim he refers to universal human experience; that people you thought were intelligent turn out to be stone-cold stupid, and that we are continually exposed to stupid people who make life miserable for us.

My view differs slightly in that I believe we are all stupid, just not all to the same extent. I also link the expression “stupid” to a person's lack of thinking rather than to the consequences their actions have for themselves and others. For Cipolla, a stupid person is someone who by definition

inflicts harm on others without gaining anything from it themselves. But while they can be annoying, I don't think most stupid people cause significant harm to their surroundings. I'm not least doubtful that Cipolla's assertion that stupidity is a congenital trait some people have, and others don't: "One is stupid in the same way one is red-haired; one belongs to the stupid set as one belongs to a blood group."⁶ I would instead say that we're all stupid at first, and then, in varying degrees, manage to rise above this stupidity, but we then, in many cases, regress into stupidity again. I perceive stupidity as thoughtlessness, which is something that can come to the fore in various ways throughout life. Cipolla's most startling claim is that any group will contain an equal share of stupid people, whether it's a group of influencers or Nobel prize winners. He offers no reason for this claim other than referring to his "law" that the likelihood of a person being stupid depends on all the other characteristics this person has. Instead I believe that one's stupidity is largely dependant on a range of other characteristics one has. Even if there was reason to believe that a number of Nobel prize winners are quite stupid and that a number of influencers are smart, it strikes me as being overwhelmingly likely that the share of stupid members within each group is not identical.

As indicated I divide us into three categories:

1. Stupid.
2. Idiots.
3. Stupid idiots.

We are all stupid: We express ourselves through clichés and stock phrases to hide the fact that we don't have any significant understanding of what we're talking about. It's hard for it to be any different. We are also idiots, because if we are to rise above our stupidity, we cannot avoid reflecting, but none of us avoid making idiotic mistakes in our reflection. The stupid do not think, and idiots think badly. Stupidity is our cognitive starting point. We can however surpass this now and then by actually starting to think. When we start to think, idiocy is a real danger, and one we cannot really hope to entirely avoid. On the other hand, we can and should strive to avoid becoming stupid idiots. You become a stupid idiot because when the idiocy has cemented itself you start to accept what's idiotic as obvious truth.

The stupid person is thoughtless, the idiot thinks poorly, and the stupid idiot embraces his misconceptions thoughtlessly. What we might loosely call "being thick as two short planks" can have more dimensions than that, but I'll settle for this basic

categorisation. You are initially stupid, and you then become an idiot. Both categories are dynamic. You can wander in and out of them. The stupid person feels no doubt, and relies completely on what he has been told. It is when doubt arises that stupid people can develop into idiots. In the case of stupid idiots, doubt is again overcome in favour of absolute certainty.

Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592) points out:

If (as those of us have been led to do who make a study of ourselves) each man, on hearing a wise maxim, immediately looked to see how it properly applied to him, he would find that it was not so much a pithy saying as a whiplash applied to the habitual stupidity of his faculty of judgement. But the counsels of Truth and her precepts are taken to apply to the generality of men, never to oneself: we store them up in our memory not in our manners, which is most stupid and unprofitable.⁷

If you are stupid, you are not initially aware that you are stupid. The extent to which you become aware of your own stupidity is usually pointed out by other people. If you're given enough reminders of your stupidity, you can become self-consciously

stupid. The idiot is more open to the fact that he is an idiot because the idiot is always in a process of reflection, which admittedly fails. The stupid idiot, on the other hand, is immune to criticism.

Some people are more stupid than others, and some people are bigger idiots than others. And you wouldn't want to represent just one of these types by being either stupid, an idiot or a stupid idiot. You can be stupid, an idiot and a stupid idiot in different respects all at once. The terms don't characterise a person as a whole, but the qualities – or lack of them – that a person has. With some individuals, however, one of these characteristics will be so dominant that it is tempting to identify the person with the characteristic. Some will object to expressions such as “stupid” being used for people, and not just for thoughts and actions, just as many will also argue that one should not use the expression “evil” for people, but only for their actions, the likely reason being that it is simply unkind to refer to a person as “stupid” or “evil.” Of course, I agree that it isn't nice to say this about someone, but when you say it, it isn't normally meant to be nice, but rather to be critical. The word “critical” comes from the Greek *krinein*, which means to judge, determine and discern. To be critical is to distinguish between what is valid and what is not when placed under the microscope of reason.

Nevertheless, it will be claimed that the word should be limited to describing someone's actions rather than the person

themselves. But why would we do that? It should be pointed out that the same people who disapprove of using the words “stupid” and “evil” about a person, normally see no problem at all with describing a person as “clever” or “good” without explaining why the positive adjective is applicable but not the negative adjective. There is an unfounded asymmetry here. To be consistent, they should also stop using the positive adjectives about people. The question is whether there’s particularly good reason to.

Actions have characteristics that can be described by adjectives, but people also have characteristics that can be described by adjectives. The adjectives one uses about a person relate to the adjectives one uses to describe the person’s thoughts and actions. Why? Simply because neither the person themselves nor anyone else has access to who this person actually *is* other than via what that person does and says. You are what you do. If you behave badly, you are bad, and if you think stupidly or idiotically, you are stupid or idiotic. I would also add that nobody is identical in terms of the worst they have done or the stupidest thing they have thought. We are all composite products within a continuum.

Purely good, evil, smart or stupid people only exist in the world of fiction. They are idealisations. The expressions “stupid,” “idiot,” and “stupid idiot” denote what the German sociologist

Max Weber (1864–1920) called *ideal types*. An ideal type is a construction where one emphasises the typical characteristics of a phenomenon, and how in reality it would never exist in any pure form. We all exist at some point within a continuum that runs from good to evil, smart to stupid. But we're not all at the same point on the continuum. Some of us are more stupid or more evil than others – or both. None of us are exempt from being stupid or making idiotic mistakes now and then. However there are some people who so clearly display one of these characteristics that they are almost the embodiment of the ideal type.

Just how stupid or idiotic someone is when they make a claim that isn't especially smart, depends on how they say it. Take a statement like: "Everything happens for a reason." If someone claims this, it can of course be because they've heard it somewhere and are just repeating it parrot fashion. In that case, they are stupid. On the other hand, the person may have attempted to consider the matter and thus reached that conclusion themselves, like many before them. If that's the case, they are an idiot. There is good reason to believe that absolutely everything that happens has a *cause*, but it's easy to slide from one expression to another and say that everything happens for a *reason*. This is something we genuinely have no reason to believe. By "reason" we're actually saying a greater meaning, a goal, a greater

connection that explains that there is some kind of *purpose* for everything that happens. However, we have no convincing reason to believe in such a cosmic purpose.

When we reflect on the world – as all humans do – we allow ourselves to be misled by our own language. Because an idiot is going through a constant process, you can discuss this confusion with him. For example, you can point out, by referring to Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), that philosophical questions arise when we confuse the expressions we use, when ideas clash, when we have several mutually incompatible and unavoidable thoughts that collide and we no longer know how we should relate to ourselves and the world. We then need to tidy up our thoughts and language. The idiot can also mobilise some new arguments for why his claim is actually valid, which can then be discussed. A good idiot is open, not absolutely certain. A bad idiot has no doubt whatsoever, and will flatly deny there is anything problematic about their claim of everything happening for a reason, that it is obviously true and so on. When that's the case, the person will have become a stupid idiot who mindlessly embraces his own fallacies.

Stupidity is a bit harder to identify these days than in the past. This is because our era is characterised by a greater diversity of opinion. In the past, a stupid person could be identified if they thoughtlessly mimicked a dominant belief, be it from a state

authority or public opinion. Today, however, there is such a wide variety of opinions in circulation that someone with only a slightly more unusual position can be misunderstood as thinking independently. The stupid person is by definition part of a community precisely because he uncritically bases his opinions on the dictates of an authority. The stupid person is a herd animal. The idiot is a far more solitary figure, sometimes fumbling cautiously and occasionally racing off in an attempt to reorientate himself.

Allow me to also say that I certainly do not believe that all stupidity is bad. Without a solid dose of stupidity nothing would work. Mats Alvesson (b. 1956) and André Spicer (b. 1977), both management scholars, have developed a theory on what they call “functional stupidity,” which they correctly claim is necessary for an organisation to function.⁸ They describe functional stupidity as “an inability and/or unwillingness to use cognitive and reflective capacities in anything other than narrow and circumspect ways.” The theory was meant as a response to the biased emphasis within organisation theory on how employees’ cognitive capabilities should be mobilised as much as possible. Their general point is that an organisation where employees are relentlessly questioned about and expected to provide details of everything they do, will have become totally dysfunctional. They go on to describe functional stupidity as “a refusal to use intellectual resources

outside a narrow and 'safe 'terrain.'" It creates a sense of security among certain employees because it leaves little or no doubt about how a task should be carried out, it reduces friction between colleagues and creates order within the organisation. In short, it makes it possible for people to do their jobs.

This reminds me somewhat of a memorandum I was asked to write for Telenor when the company was planning to build a new headquarters about 25 years ago. One of the ideas behind the building's design was that habits are bad for creativity, and since one hope was that the building would encourage creativity it was important that its design prevented the forming of habits. This was one of the stupidest things I had ever heard, because habits, rather than stifle our creativity, actually liberate it. Without habits we'd be unable to do anything at all, let alone anything innovative. Admittedly, Telenor was in good philosophical company. For example John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) warning against the habit of power, writes: "The human faculties of perception, judgment, discriminative feeling, mental activity, and even moral preference, are exercised only in making a choice."⁹ Furthermore: "The despotism of custom is everywhere the standing hindrance to human advancement."¹⁰ Both Mill and Telenor overlook the way habits play an essentially *positive* role in our lives. Without habits the world would seem devoid of meaning because habits bind the world together into a whole and form a backdrop for the

individual things, so that they can seem meaningful. Without habits the world simply wouldn't make sense to us. That we also have both good and bad habits, is another matter. Any break from a habit is only possible based on a mass of habitual conditions. In much the same way, stupidity – that one doesn't constantly think about absolutely everything – is a requirement in order to get anything done at all.

Alvesson and Spicer's point can be extended and apply to more than organisations: Functional stupidity is necessary in order for anything to work. It is a point that can be extended down to an individual level, and all the way up to a societal level. Without stupidity the world would fall apart. However, they also note that stupidity can be dysfunctional when you get stuck in unfortunate practices because you never question them. This, in turn, can create friction and undermine an organisation. Stupidity can oil the machinery, but if the amount of stupidity becomes too great, the machinery will eventually break down. There is certainly good, functional stupidity, but it has a sad tendency to lapse into bad stupidity.

[...]

FOOTNOTES

1. Terry Pratchett: *Thief of Time*, New York: Harper Torch 2002, p. 82.
2. Immanuel Kant: *Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view*, trans. Mary J. Gregor, The Hague : Nijhoff 1974, p. 72.
3. Matthew 7:3; cf. Luke 6:41.
4. Umberto Eco: *Foucaults Pendelum*, trans. William Weaver, San Diego : Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1989. p. 63.
5. Carlo M. Cipolla: *The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity*, London: WH Allen 2019, p. 37.
6. Ibid. p. 19f.
7. Michel de Montaigne: “On habit: and on never easily changing a

traditional law,” in *Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech, London: Penguin, 2003, p. 163.

8. Mats Alvesson & André Spicer: “A Stupidity-Based Theory of Organizations,” *Journal of Management Studies* 7/2012.

9. John Stuart Mill: *On Liberty*, in *On Liberty, The Subjection of Women & Utilitarianism*, New York: The Modern Library 2002, p. 60.

10. Ibid. p. 72.