The Power of Stupidity

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Chapter 2 – Stupidity and Biology

Though it isn't an illness, stupidity spreads like a virus – or, more broadly, multiplies as all living creatures do. But, in a basic biological environment, the "stupidity problem" doesn't exist. The process is based on the production of an extremely large number of "dumb" mutants. Only very few (the "fittest") survive, and that's it. From that point of view, what we see as catastrophe is just another variation in the "natural" course of events. Occasional destructive fires are understood by botanists as a necessary, indeed desirable, step in the evolution of a forest. Millions of living creatures that die in the process may disagree, but their opinion is irrelevant.

In that perspective, solutions are simple and very effective. If there are too many people, all we need is another plague (or any mass slaughter device that will not interfere too much with the overall environment) that can kill 90 percent of humankind.

The surviving ten percent, as soon as they get over the shock, are likely to find the resulting environment quite agreeable. They are also likely to be genetically similar: share specific traits of appearance and attitude. If they all had green hair, pink eyes and liked rainy weather, they would soon come to consider the (extinct) people with any other hair or eye color, as well as people that like sunny weather, as rather quaint and "inferior". Their moisture-resistant history books would treat most of us as we treat the Neanderthals.

The destruction or sterilization of our planet, by man-made nuclear (or chemical) power, or maybe by collision with some wandering rock, would be an irrelevant detail in a cosmic perspective. And, if it happened before the development of space travel and colonization, the disappearance of our species (along with the rest of the terrestrial biosphere) wouldn't cause much of a stir even in our galaxy.

But in the particular biological environment that is set by certain species (such as ours) the system is based on the assumption that the environment can – and should – be controlled; and that each individual in our species (and in other species that we "protect") should be able to live longer, and more pleasantly, than he or she would in an uncontrolled environment. This needs a particular breed of organized "intelligence." Therefore stupidity, at this stage and in this sort of evolutionary environment, is extremely dangerous.

Some people seem to think that the decay is beyond repair, that by some awful twist of evolution stupidity has totally prevailed. There are, quite distressingly, many facts that appear to confirm that view. This book is an attempt to understand if and how an extreme catastrophe can be avoided.

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It could be long and complicated to get into the scientific debate (often pointless, but sometimes enlightening) on the intelligence of biology or the biology of intelligence. One can argue, depending on the point of view, that evolution is intelligent – or stupid. And the same contradictions can be found in the study of human cultures.

On this subject there is another interesting observation by James Welles. Archeology is mainly dedicated to searching for intelligence. That is, what since the origin of our species makes *homo sapiens* different from other humanoids that (according to our criteria) appear to have lesser thinking ability. Or, in not so remote times, finding facts that show "progress" – improvement in technique, science or social organization. History, on the other hand, is an inexhaustible collection of errors and failures – an endless celebration of the power of stupidity.

Another observation by the same author is the ambivalence of cultural heritage. Tradition is a buildup of experience and useful "know how." But it is also sclerotic rigidity of prejudice, superstition, habit, dogmatism, constrictions, obedience, that hinder knowledge and are often the roots of human stupidity.

Not only in philosophical and scientific evolution, but also in everyday life, we are often faced with a choice. What must we keep of our knowledge from experience and what should we learn from new stimuli – or from things that we already know, but we haven't yet understood as well as we could? We need to do both, whenever we have an opportunity. There is a lot that we can learn by combining experience with curiosity.

Recent studies in paleoanthropology help us to understand that at the origin of our species, in the most "primitive" human cultures, there were coherent and cohesive social structures. [1] There are values, deeply rooted in human nature, that can quite effectively reduce stupidity and counteract its effects. The problem is how to find them and make them work in the turbulences and complexities of today.

[1] See *The Evolution of Evolution* `gandalf.it/stupid/darwin.htm`

It would be far too complicated, very long, and somewhat boring, to get into a discussion on the nature of intelligence. Theoretical debates are endlessly complicated and often inconclusive. But one fact is relevant: it makes no sense to define intelligence as only linear or logic – and it's equally wrong to discard as stupid what doesn't seem to be fully explained by rational thinking.

Reason and emotion, logic and intuition can't be separated. Great steps in knowledge (and science) were made by intuitive perceptions that only later found a precise "rational" explanation. Also daily experience proves that intuition can be faster, and more effective, than too much reasoning.

We can be stupid if we allow ourselves to be led only by emotion, but we are not very bright if we think that all problems can be solved following an apparently logical sequence. This is one of the reasons why, at the end of this book, there are some "informal" observations on how to simplify complexity.

A description of the book
is online – stupidity.it