

The Power of Stupidity



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Chapter 17 – Stupidity and Cunning

One of the reasons why stupidity is poorly understood is that “cunning” is often confused with intelligence. The perception is as simple as it’s misleading. There are “smart” people and there are fools, who are there to be exploited – and that is supposed to be fun. The swindlers are praised for their cleverness, the victims are mocked for their gullibility.

From this point of view, widespread stupidity isn’t a disease. It’s a resource. Stupid people should be kept as stupid as possible, to provide rich hunting grounds for the exploiters.

There is an obvious ethical problem. When this way of thinking is accepted, humankind splits into two categories. The smart, that have a right to prevail, and the rest who are, and must remain, “inferior.” That’s awful, isn’t it? But it’s widely practiced, though rarely admitted – and it’s creeping around in all sorts of disguises.

Without openly saying so, many applaud the “winners” and humiliate the “losers.” It’s an unfortunately widespread perception that, after all, that’s how the world turns.

There’s a lot of hypocrisy. When the “smart alects” are caught and exposed, they are mocked and despised. But, as long as they appear to be winning, they are too easily forgiven. Far too often, they also praised and admired.

All this isn’t only morally unacceptable. It’s also stupid. It corrupts all values of human relations and societies, undermines trust, deteriorates commitment. When deception is perceived as the winner, the losers are quality, teamwork, loyalty, the wish to learn and improve.

If we measure stupidity only by “quantitative” criteria (as in the “stupidity diagram” – chapters 8 and 11) this sort of problem isn’t directly perceivable. We can notice the effects of behavior, but the problem remains of understanding why.

It isn't enough to know that there is a lot of stupidity. We need to discover its many disguises – especially those that make it appear “smart.”

It isn't always stupid, or malicious, to be a bit “cunning.” Slightly devious approaches can be used for a good purpose. It can be intelligent to use an “indirect” approach to bypass prejudice or obstinate resistance to something that is quite useful and desirable, but not readily understood. But it's important to understand that such occasionally effective devices can turn into stupidity if they become a habit.

It can make sense to sweeten, as far as possible, a bitter remedy. As Mary Poppins used to say, «*just a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down*» – though that doesn't always happen «*in a most delightful way*», sincerity doesn't need to be harsh.

But if we get into the habit of disguising all sorts of nasty things as “good” we open the way for the administration of poison. And those who nanny us are often trying to limit our freedom, blur our judgment and increase their power. In one way or another, they want to make us stupid. ¹

There can be “cunning” games and jokes. This can be harmless, as long as it's only playing and having fun. Or it can be intelligent, when humor helps us to be aware of trickery – or to understand what can be hidden behind a smokescreen of appearances, conjuring skills or playing with words. But it isn't always easy to tell where the game ends and the cheat begins.

A peculiar fact is that swindlers, cunning as they are, don't have much imagination. The “modern” frauds, applied with the latest technologies, are nearly always a repetition of old tricks. ²

It isn't really surprising, but it's quite depressing, to see how many people are still falling into the same traps. Stupidity, as well as the wicked art of exploiting it, is as old as humankind.

The solution is not to “be cunning” and join the tricksters. This can be quite dangerous – and often self-destructive. One of the most successful frauds is (as it has always been) the confidence game, where the swindled think they are the swindlers.

It's important to be aware, to know the tricks and the human weaknesses that make them too easy. And also to realize that in many situations, even though no one is deliberately trying to cheat, everybody can get hurt because of misinformation or misunderstanding. What we need is intelligence, in both its meanings: better thinking and better information.

It isn't enough to despise the “cunning” and to stay away from their booby traps. It's necessary to understand how the trickery works and to unmask as many as possible of its maybe clever, but not “impenetrable” disguises.

A description of the book is online – stupidity.it

¹ See *Nannies, bibs and gags* gandalf.it/offline/nannies.htm
That was ten years ago, things have been getting worse.

² It's quite stupid to be carried away with fashion and to go chasing whatever appears to be “new”, especially in technical devices. See chapter 19 *The Stupidity of Technologies*.