

The Power of Stupidity



by Giancarlo Livraghi

Chapter 21 – Problems of Perspective

We know that the Earth is round. But our daily perceptions tell us that it's flat. We know that the horizon is limited, we need to climb higher to see farther away. But, too often, we forget to do so in the perspectives of thought and curiosity. We remain confined, without even realizing it, in the restricted sphere of our point of view and our little circle of habits.

Perception studies indicate that we see things differently not only from the top of a mountain or the bottom of a valley, but also sitting or standing up – or moving a few steps in one direction or another. And the same object, or the same picture, can be understood quite differently depending on how we look at it.

“Witness” experiments show that, even a few minutes after having seen the same thing, each person reports it differently – not because he or she is intentionally lying, but because of differences in perception.

We know that understanding means “putting ourselves in someone else’s shoes”, looking at things from another person’s point of view. It may seem obvious – but it’s difficult, because we aren’t in the habit of changing perspective.

I have been learning a lot from readers because they all read differently. Every time someone reads a book, a new book is born, that isn’t what the author wrote, but what takes shape in the mind of the reader. It also happens that one reader’s comments or doubts help me to understand another’s. Two angles of view are better than one, three or more offer additional insight.

The large – and ever growing – variety of information and communication is a wonderful resource, but the abundance can be confusing – and it’s sterile when narrow perspectives make dialogue dull and learning superficial.

It helps to perceive geography and look at maps. We can live quite happily without always remembering exactly the capital of Maybeland or the population of Whatistan. But we can have a much better idea of what is happening, and how people think and behave, if we understand where they are and how they live. ¹

This isn't just a matter of changing perspective when it's necessary, to free ourselves of shallow conventional perceptions or to understand someone else's point of view. It is always useful, whatever the subject, to look at it from different angles. It can be intriguing, sometimes surprising, often interesting, to deliberately change perspective.

It is also mind-opening to change language. Our perception can be different when we use another word for the same thing.

Knowing more than one language isn't only an obvious need for communicating with people who don't understand our "mother tongue." Language isn't just lexicon. It's also what philosophers call *Weltanschauung* – "view of the world."

Johann Goethe used to say: *«Those who know nothing of foreign languages know nothing of their own.»*

This isn't just a matter of how English can be different from Chinese (as a way of thinking as well as a language) – or of the many obscure, confusing jargons, such as politicese, legalese, bureaucratese, techniquese, businessese, financese, economicese, abstruse, scientese, literariese, fashionese, etcetera – that seem to be (and they often are) deliberately meant to confuse whoever doesn't belong to a particular clique. The problem is also that people who share the same language can misunderstand each other when their ways of thinking are different.

Translations can be misleading. The same (or similar) words can have different meanings not only in different languages, but also in varying cultural contexts or situations. This can be frustrating, when we are not sure that what we read or hear makes sense in our way of understanding it. But it can be quite interesting when, by changing perspective, we can get a much better idea of what is really meaningful.

Of course there are differences not only in spoken or written language, but also in "non-verbal" communication. Understanding pictures, behaviors, "body language", tone and manner, can be confusing if we don't appreciate diversity. It's intriguing and interesting when we change our point of view.

It takes a fair amount of mental exercise to change our perspective on everything, perceive whatever we are looking at, or thinking about, from different angles. This isn't only a methodic discipline, that can be vitally necessary in serious and important matters. It's also a more general state of mind, an "openness" of perception that, with practice, can become a pleasant habit, an interesting way of life.

¹ There are some examples of "geographical" misperception online in *Perspective Errors* gandalf.it/stupid/perspect.htm

It's instinctive, to some extent unavoidable, sometimes right, to have an "egocentric" point of view. It is scientifically correct to set the "center of the visible universe" wherever the observer happens to be.² It's obvious that our perceptions are placed at a tiny and ever-changing point of contact between an "outside" and an "inside" world. But we need to understand that it's only one of infinite possible perspectives. If we don't learn to expand our horizon, our perceived "universe" shrinks into a dull mental cubicle of nearsighted boredom.

Fifty years ago a bright Italian writer, Vitaliano Brancati, explained why stupidity is dull. *«Fools are bored because they lack a subtle quality, discerning. An intelligent person discovers a thousand nuances in the same object, perceives the deep difference between two apparently similar facts. A fool doesn't distinguish, doesn't discern. He is proud of his power to think that different things are the same.»*³

Life can be very boring with the constant repetition of the same circumstances, the same conversations, the same exasperating clichés. "Looking from another point of view" as often as possible isn't the only way of getting out of the doldrums, but it's one of the most effective.

Improving perspective, thinking less conventionally, finding points of view that aren't the usual or the obvious, doesn't only make us more intelligent – or less stupid. It's also a lively, exciting experience, aesthetically pleasant even before it's useful. Changing perspective can be quite amusing. And it's often enlightening.

A description of the book
is online – stupidity.it

² It would be long and complicated to get into what we are learning from cosmology and particle physics – and I hope scientists will forgive me for this oversimplification. But it's a fact that what we call "universe" is what our instruments can "see" (though there are no limits to what imagination can conceive.) And, while Heisenberg's "uncertainty principle" applies specifically to quantum physics, it is widely true that we change things by observing them. That's why it takes more than one point of view to have a better idea of what we are trying to perceive.

³ Published in *Diario Romano*, Bompiani, 1961, page 142.