

# Stupidity: instinct or culture?

Giancarlo Livraghi – November 2010 (*post scriptum* added July 2011)

This is a question sometimes raised in conversations with readers – or, otherwise, with people interested in the subject. It is covered “indirectly” throughout my book, *The Power of Stupidity*. I guess it deserves to be discussed specifically, though it isn’t easy. There could be enough material to fill another book – but that is not what I am planning to do. I hope these few pages are enough to set the pattern.

Some prompts, readers tell me, come from a variety of sources. Such as a “definition of stupidity by James Welles (and my comments.) Observations on “the origin of stupidity” by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, summarized in part 4 here and more extensively quoted in chapter 10 of *The Power of Stupidity*. A review by physiology professor Pedro Fernández-Llebrez. And several parts of my book. Links are in [gandalf.it/stupid/instcult.htm](http://gandalf.it/stupid/instcult.htm)

It is actually a combination of six questions.

1. Is stupidity a disease or a basic condition of humankind?
2. Is it only human or shared by all living beings?
3. Is it originated by genetic instinct or by cultural bias?
4. If evolution favors “the fittest”, why isn’t stupidity decreasing?
5. Which is “the fittest” behavior for human evolution?
6. Where do we go from here?

Basically, the answers can be summarized in a few words.

- (1) It’s part of human nature – we are all, to some extent, stupid.
- (2) It is not specific to humanity, there is stupidity in all sorts of species.
- (3) It is neither totally genetic nor exclusively cultural, it’s a combination.
- (4) The answer isn’t easy – but, anyhow, it’s a fact.
- (5) Nearsighted selfishness is not the right prescription.
- (6) We can no longer afford to be as stupid as we are.

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Oversimplified answers can be simplistic. Anyhow, they aren’t enough. It’s worth looking into all this with a bit more depth. Let’s start with the choice of a word.

Occasionally someone asks: why am I calling it “stupidity”? All the authors of worthwhile writing on this subject (and many of the worthless) are doing so. But I am not only following their lead. There is abundance of other words, with different shades of meaning.

Ass, dumb, dunce, fool, idiot, imbecile, moron, obtuse, thick... etcetera. Sometimes “stupid” can be used in a humorous, friendly way, with no worse meaning than “don’t be silly” – but basically it’s a serious problem. To make a long story short, I have considered the possible alternatives and it’s pretty clear that “stupidity” fits better than any other word (it may be less easy in some other languages, e.g. in French – but, as long as we are dealing with English, Italian and Spanish, this is it).

# 1

Is it a disease? No. I have never found any example of a medically identified mental condition being called “stupidity”. Furthermore, some people with serious, even dangerous, brain or behavior misfunctions can be very bright. Just as clinically healthy people can be very stupid.

It takes a few more words to explain why it’s wrong to think that people can be split in two separate categories: those who are stupid and those who are not. It’s a widespread mistake and it’s dangerous. For several reasons, including the fact that the brightest people can be (an often are) brushed off as “stupid” by those who are too dumb to understand them.

Self-criticism is a basic tool for understanding, learning, improving. No scientific development makes sense unless it constantly doubts its findings and looks for better explanations. Dogmatic, unverified assumptions are a major source of stupidity.

This isn’t only a key fact in science and philosophy. It is also so in everyday life. Some of the most boring, and dangerous, people are those who overestimate their own intelligence and believe that they never make mistakes or fail to understand facts, opinions or concepts. It’s much better to be a bit stupid (and aware of it) than to be carried away by an idiotic assumption of “superiority” or infallibility.

We need to understand that we are all, to some extent, stupid. Anyhow, even if we weren’t, we would soon become so if we didn’t practice every day three basic resources of learning and intelligence: listening, curiosity and doubt.

On the other hand, nobody is *completely* stupid. One of the basic tasks of society, education, and each one of us individually, is to help “apparently stupid” people to improve their awareness and mental skills – as well as being always ready to learn from everybody, because everybody knows something better than we do.

Unfortunately many power systems are doing the opposite, because when people are stupid (or ignorant, or both) they can be more easily deceived and dominated. And a large part of the culture industry, by deliberate intention as well as by sheer stupidity, is doing the same. The onslaught is so overwhelming that even the brightest and culturally prepared people can be confused and misled unless they keep their doubting well honed.

No matter how smart we think we are, it’s always better to assume that we can be stupid. And so can everybody else, including people who are generally intelligent and reliable.

# 2

Now let’s get to the second question. Is stupidity only human? I must start by admitting that I have no specialized education in biology, physiology, genetics or ethology. I have read a lot on these subjects, but not enough to be competent in the practice any such discipline.

So I hope scientists will forgive me for some maybe clumsy simplifications. But it's a proven fact that our DNA is quite similar to that of other species – and so are many ways of our behavior. It may be an exaggeration (though there is no proof of the contrary) to believe that forms of stupidity, as well as intelligence, can be found in bacteria or viruses or in the remote beginnings of biochemical evolution. But there is little doubt that more complex animal (and vegetable) species behave quite often in self-defeating or ineffective ways that can be clearly defined as stupid.

Stupidity in super-human beings is an imaginary, but conceptually realistic, assumption. As Friedrich Schiller wrote, *«against stupidity the gods themselves contend in vain.»* Of course the many stupid things done by the Gods of Olympus (and a variety of deities in other religions) are anthropomorphic, but it's quite reasonable (or, at least, safe) to believe that assumed “superior” entities aren't immune from stupidity.

Anyhow, if we move from myth to perceivable reality, all we need is ordinary experience to notice how widely admired people have their fair share of stupidity. And “celebrity” can actually make it worse. As Albert Einstein wrote in a letter to Heinrich Zangger, in 1919. *«With fame I become more and more stupid, which, of course, is a very common phenomenon. There is far too great a disproportion between what one is, and what others think one is, or at least what they say they think one is.»* If Einstein admitted that he could be stupid, why should anyone else be ashamed of having the same problem?

But let's get back to biology. We find that not only the close to kin, such as primates or cetaceans, but also other quite different species, have remarkable intelligence and learning abilities. But, if we consider facts with an open mind, we can't avoid discovering also stupidity in their behavior.

When Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno wanted to explain “the origin of stupidity”, they deliberately chose a non-human example. *«The true symbol of intelligence is the snail's horn with which it feels and smells its way. The horn recoils instantly before an obstacle, seeking asylum in the protective shell and again becoming one with the whole. Only tentatively does it re-emerge to assert its independence. If the danger is still present it vanishes once more, now hesitating longer before renewing the attempt. The snail's senses depend on its muscles, and muscles become feebler with every hindrance to their play. Physical injury cripples the body, fear the mind.»*

This leads to an intriguing definition. *«Stupidity is a scar. It can stem from one of many activities – physical or mental – or from all. Every partial stupidity denotes a spot where the play of stirring muscles was thwarted instead of encouraged. In the presence of the obstacle the futile repetition of disorganized, groping attempts is set in motion.»*

Cowardice, by hiding or staying away from danger, can help survival – and thus be a “successful” evolutionary trait, for snails or people or lots of other species. As mental cowardice (fear of knowing) is closely related to its physical equivalent, this can contribute to explain how stupidity survives and thrives in the process of evolution.

Horkheimer and Adorno went on to extend the example from “snail” to humanity. And of course there is no reason why it can't be done the other way round. Anyhow, it would be quite interesting to develop studies of stupidity in other species, that could be less influenced by human fear and embarrassment in looking at our own.

Does this mean that we could try to identify a stupidity gene? It's unlikely, because in stupidity there is a combination of several attitudes and behaviors. And tampering with mind-related genes (or brains) can be very dangerous, leading to unexpected and potentially awful consequences. It's much more effective to tackle this problem on the cultural-educational side. (As long as it's done in a free and open environment.)

I realize that – for lack of such scientific exploration – it's an overgeneralized and unproven postulate, but it makes sense to believe that stupidity is “inherent in life”. This is one more reason why we should do our best to understand how it works and how to prevent or reduce its effects.

### 3

There is a question that comes to mind at this point (and was specifically asked by some readers.) Is stupidity an “instinct” that we have in our genes – or is it produced by the cultural environment?

The general belief is that genes can not be modified by experience or culture. This is technically true, but it isn't so simple. In species like our own, individuals need to survive and grow for several years before they can reproduce. They also need to have qualities that are attractive to the other sex – and to be organized so that they can take care of their children. “Natural selection”, over time, favors those genetic factors that best fit the prevailing and preferred characters and behaviors. Social and mental habits and attitudes, “good” or “bad” as they may be considered, are indeed “inherited” in our genes – and therefore can be defined “instinctive”.

But there is a strong influence of culture. Human beings, at birth, are very poorly equipped to survive on their own. They need an enormous amount of learning before they can be really “human”. So cultural environment, education and social involvement are as relevant as genetic traits – or probably more so.

One of many possible examples. Let's assume that a woman is “genetically oriented” to be independent, bright, assertive, to seek learning and achieve results. In some cultures she will be encouraged, admired, considered attractive, have good opportunities to be successful, to mix her genes with those of intelligent men and to influence the education of her children. An evolutionary winner.

In other societies a woman with the same genes, when not tamed into obedience, would be a sad loser. Marginalized, relegated or otherwise isolated – if not imprisoned, enslaved or killed. If she is lucky enough to be able to run away, she will wind up somewhere where she will be well accepted, contributing to the “genetic build” of her chosen environment. While the “genetically submissive” (if any such people really exist) remaining where she was will generate more of their kind, thus reinforcing the decay of their repressive culture.

Does that mean that in places where some form of repression has existed for a long time there is no hope for improvement? Not really. There are “unexpressed genes”, hidden potential, even in the most humble individuals, that can blossom in many ways when offered an opportunity. No matter how widespread and nurtured stupidity can be, there is no place or time in which it is invincible.

Are geniuses successful “mutants”? Maybe, sometimes. But they are more often the result of an environment that favors their talent (even, sometimes, by opposing it – as long as it happens in a free, open-minded culture, disagreement can be more of a stimulus than a hindrance.)

## 4

These observations are getting us close to an attempt to answer the fourth, and most difficult, question. In a species that relies much more on its mental resources than on any other sort of strength, why are humans getting taller, running faster, living longer, but being as stupid as they have ever been?

I wonder if any scientist, in biology, genetics, physiology, anthropology or psychology will ever be able to come up with a clear answer. The fact is that, so far, we don't have one. Studying stupidity is a desperately undeveloped (and disliked) discipline.

From a genetic point of view, there could be an actual advantage in elements of “stupidity” as lack of adjustment to the environment. Behaviors that don't work, or hinder progress, in a particular set of circumstances, may turn out to be the most effective when moving to a different situation or coping with change. So it is an evolutionary advantage to have an adequate number of people who don't fit in the established framework (that doesn't imply lack of intelligence – such characters are often too bright to be conformist). Some of the most interesting developments can't be achieved without mavericks.

It may also be a combination of two facts. One is explained by the Horkheimer-Adorno snail. Intelligence is scary, knowledge is disturbing. Those who “dare” try again, in spite of their scars, are running risks. Moving away from comfortable prejudice, cowardly commonplace, cozy dumbness, means venturing into the danger of getting hurt (as well as becoming unpopular in a predominantly narrow-minded, habit-driven environment). And, with the staggering development of discoveries, it's getting worse.

As John Updike said. *«Astronomy is what we have now instead of theology. The terrors are less, but the comforts are nil.»* So we have an awkward coexistence of two opposite thrusts. One is to seize the opportunity to know more, to expand our horizon. The other is to seek refuge in the comforting embrace of ignorance and stupidity.

But there is also another problem. Power has always liked to keep its subjects stupid. Now “ordinary people” have greater opportunities to be informed, if they try hard enough. But power has an enormous, and increasing, ability to control, centralize, manipulate and confuse the messy and treacherous mass of so-called “information” that is pestering us from every direction.

It's hard to tell which of the opposed forces is prevailing. If we had more curiosity and mental courage, the balance could be gradually tilting on the side of intelligence. If disinformation, gossip, superficiality and nonsense had the upper hand, we would be drowning in stupidity.

If we look at the bulk of the communication environment there are strong reasons to believe that it's going from bad to worse. But it has never been significantly better (considering also the fact that for millennia there was scarce

literacy and most people had no access to information beyond the limits of their village or neighborhood).

Of course there is no way of “measuring” the situation. But, all considered, it’s reasonable to assume that the “size” of stupidity (by people choosing to stay as they are or by controlling power keeping them subdued) is remaining approximately the same (large) percentage of population. And, unless something changes quite radically, it is likely to be so in the foreseeable future.

## 5

Before we try to reach some sort of conclusion, we need to look at another lesson that we can learn from evolution. Is humanity basically selfish, with each person or group of people competing fiercely with everyone else, and no perception of “common good” unless it is enforced by some “ethically superior” authority? No. That has never been the evolutionary strength of our species – and now it is even less so. The (now extinct) dismal theory of “social darwinism” was based on a poor understanding of evolution – and of human nature. We find a different perspective in modern genetics and in the interesting recent advances of paleoanthropology.

There is a wide variety of species ranging from “totally social” to “totally individualistic”. At one extreme, there are obvious examples. Several kinds of bees, ants and termites are “totally collective”. An all-female community (with short-lived males doing nothing but contributing once-only sexual reproduction) is the “being”. What matters is the hive, anthill or colony – or, when on the move, the swarm. Individual insects have no identity – or any chance of independent survival. They can’t even move to another community, because they would be killed or chased away by those who “belong” there.

Though not so easily defined, there are also examples at the opposite end of the spectrum: total individualism. Such as spiders, scorpions or snakes. Some (animal or vegetable) species are parthenogenetic. Others have males and females, but their eggs or seeds (or otherwise siblings) are fertilized and abandoned, in large numbers so some can be lucky enough to escape predators and find a place where they can grow. Or, in some species, placed in “nourishing” or relatively “safe” environments, but left to go from there on their own, with no parental or social care, protection, assistance or guidance.

Where are humans? Somewhere in between. Like other primates, to survive and develop they need a combination of individualism and social cooperation. Not only families (that anyhow are not just parents – they include brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, grandparents and cousins, as well as non-relative groupings for the sake of education and collective behavior). Also, importantly, the interdependence of different roles, with more or less “specialized” abilities and crafts. Such not-so-primitive social systems are reliably documented in human settlements dating back over a hundred thousand years.

Can there be a strictly and totally socialized, rigidly homogeneous human establishment? Yes, but only on a limited scale, such as a monastery – and with a specific, shared purpose and behavior. Anyhow, unlike bees or ants, people maintain their individual identities. With large numbers, and a diversity of attitudes, overdisciplined systems don’t work – or, when enforced, turn into “orwellian” nightmares.

Can there be totally individualistic people? Sometimes. There can be hermits and occasional Robinson Crusoes. But they are rare exceptions – and (just as monks and nuns are not supposed to have children) lonely misanthropes have a slim chance of successful reproduction.

Neither extreme is the prescription for the evolutionary success of our species. The proven fact is that it depends on a well balanced combination of individual freedom and social awareness.

## 6

And so we come to the final question. Where do we go from here?

The number of people on this planet has grown, in the last century, at much higher speed than ever before. In strictly evolutionary terms, that looks like a huge success. So are we, after all, more intelligent than stupid? Not really. The size of the problem has changed dramatically. We are interfering so much with the environment that we could be heading for doomsday.

For many millennia the situation was more simple. Communities, large or small, could survive and grow by limiting solidarity to their inside, while being competitive or aggressive with everyone else (though conflicts were often avoided or mitigated because hospitality, extended to “strangers”, was strongly rooted in many cultural traditions).

If a human tribe, or even a whole nation, became extinct or drastically reduced there would be another nearby to fill the gap – and there would be scarce, if any, lasting memories of the change. But now we are interfering with each other on a “global” scale. If the environment became unlivable, we could simply move to somewhere else. But now, unless we speed up interplanetary travel and colonization, we have nowhere to go.

We have been fairly good, since the times of cave dwelling, at developing and managing relatively small communities. And, if we were less careless in learning and remembering the lessons of history, we could do it much better. But we have no experience, and no historic learning, to help us manage the whole planet, with nearly seven billion of us as well as an enormous number of other life forms that we can't afford to ignore.

Though some of the things that we did learn, but we too often forget, can be quite useful at this time. Such as one of Sun Tzu's teachings in *The Art of War*, that unfortunately is scarcely understood and rarely practiced. «*To win a hundred battles is not supreme excellence. Supreme excellence is to defeat the enemy without fighting.*» Considering that we are our own enemy, that's a jolly good idea.

We need to understand that, while solidarity and social awareness remain vitally important in our neighborhood, they are becoming even more necessary on a worldwide scale. The dominant culture seems to be rushing mindlessly in the opposite direction. Selfishness and brutally nearsighted competition are admired as the greatest virtues and rewarded with the biggest benefits. Ethics, solidarity and “common good” are out of fashion, to be praised in empty words and forgotten in practice.

This is not the “survival of the fittest”. It may provide short-term advantages for small, nearsighted and arrogant oligarchies, but for humanity as a whole it leads to self-destruction.

We are risking the fate of the dinosaurs – with a crucial difference. As far as we can tell, they did not cause the climate changes that put an end to their era.

Now humans have greater impact on the environment than any species in this planet has ever had. If they don’t learn soon enough to manage such power, they will be causing their own demise.

As far as we can see, we are not, at this stage of evolution, competing directly with any other potentially world-dominating species. But we have more tools for disaster than we have knowhow to keep them under control.

This is why we can no longer afford our high degree of stupidity. We need to challenge its power and learn how to reduce it.

## 7

### *Post scriptum* – a possible answer – August 2011

In the eight months following the publication of this article, I have been continuing to think, read, explore, search and try to learn. (I was also involved in a “summer course” on *Intelligence and stupidity in human and animal behavior* organized by the Universidad de Málaga, July 18-22, 2011.)<sup>1</sup>

I shall go on reviewing and reconsidering, as there can be no end to learning. But here is a summary of what I have been able to understand so far.

I haven’t found a formally precise answer to the question that is the headline of these observations. And I am beginning to believe that looking for one isn’t only difficult, it may be misleading. Any attempt to define the problem as a schematic, automatic formula leads to the risk of missing its basic, necessary and fertile complexity.

It’s pretty clear that in dealing with such a subject there are unavoidable differences of perspective in a variety of academic and scientific disciplines – and obvious difficulties in interpreting the intricate relationships between instinct and thought, genetic heredity and cultural learning, individual needs and collective responsibilities. But the very nature of these complexities can lead us to some practical deductions – emphasizing the need to understand, evolve and develop cultural values.

We could continue *ad infinitum* (and it wouldn’t be a waste of time) discussing what we can learn from new insights in genetics, further developments in the study of evolution, history, anthropology, psychology, physiology – etcetera. We could also be asking ourselves if, when and how other discoveries may help us to understand human nature – and therefore the causes and effects of stupidity. But these are complex subjects, with all sorts of difficulties and contradictions. In the meantime we need to face immediately and increasingly important problems – therefore it is necessary, and it has become urgent, to understand what can be done, and how.

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<sup>1</sup> See (in Spanish) [gandalf.it/estupidez/malaga.htm](http://gandalf.it/estupidez/malaga.htm)



Of course it would make no sense to go back to the old, arrogant delusion that any species could be considered “superior”. But it’s a fact that ours is different. No other on this planet has a comparable cultural and social complexity, such abundance of technical tools and communication resources, nor such a dominating influence on the environment.

The recent growth of human population, enormously faster than at any time before, per se is to be considered an evolutionary “success”. But it’s so big that it’s warping the entire ecosystem.

Even if we had no further increase of the total number of people, we would be facing, anyhow, a serious problem: the legitimate and irrepressible desire for “wellbeing” by those, still dramatically large, parts of humanity who are living in atrociously “underdeveloped” conditions. This drive is becoming so strong that it’s shaking the fragile foundations of the worldwide system. Not because “global” resources aren’t enough, but because they are managed so stupidly that they can’t be fairly distributed.

It is sometimes said, not unreasonably, that humans today have powers comparable to those traditionally attributed to gods. But the doubt was well defined by Friedrich Schiller over a hundred years ago, in 1801, with an observation that I quoted in point 2: «*Mit der Dummheit kämpfen Götter selbst vergebens*» (“Against stupidity the gods contend in vain.”)<sup>2</sup>

Can today’s problems be solved “spontaneously”, without involving our conscious thinking, by the automatic mechanisms of biological evolution? That is to say, by those powerful forces that Jacques Monod, in 1970, so clearly defined as “chance and necessity”? A maybe oversimplified, but unavoidable, deduction from what we have been learning so far is that the answer is no. The most important and effective tool, here and now, is cultural awareness leading to deliberate conscious action.

Some “darwinian” evolutions may have helped, if only in part, to overcome several crises in the past. At a very high cost of human lives and awful suffering, with painful and troubled eras of decadence – though the result in brutally biological terms could be labeled as positive, considering that our species, “in spite of it all”, so far has survived and is growing. But now the situation is crucially different.

Anyhow, the study of history (as well as a deeper understanding of prehistory) proves “beyond any reasonable doubt” that a large part of human evolution and development can’t be explained only by genetic choices (nor by assuming that a device called “meme” is working like a gene.)

This doesn’t mean, of course, that we can negate or undervalue the abundantly demonstrated truth of the scientific system based on Charles Darwin’s fundamental studies. Nor lose interest in the marvelous story of the origin and development of life. But we need to understand that in the evolution of some specific species, as in the case of humankind, there is a prevailing and growing importance of cultural factors. Rational as well as emotional, spontaneous or organized, individual or collective, habitual or occasional – in any case their complex nature can’t be reduced to only the result of genetic patterns.

Before we get to what may be a conclusive answer, I would like to quote two paragraphs in chapter 2 of *The Power of Stupidity*.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Die Jungfrau von Orleans*, III,6. See also at the end of chapter 29 of *The Power of Stupidity*.

<sup>3</sup> Also online [gandalf.it/stupid/chap02.pdf](http://gandalf.it/stupid/chap02.pdf)

*«The destruction or sterilization of our planet, by man-made nuclear (or chemical) power or 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.»*

There are many and complex reasons why it's appropriate to consider human nature (therefore intelligence and stupidity) predominantly in a cultural perspective. They could deserve extensive cross-disciplinary analysis. But key facts can be summarized in four simple concepts.

- Genetic heritage isn't enough to "belong" to humankind. From early infancy (starting even before birth) it needs an enormous amount of learning – and this is necessarily a cultural process.
- The experience of all times proves that it's possible and useful (often necessary) to influence with deliberate learning and training also those behaviors that are managed by "involuntary" ("instinctive") physiological and psychological functions.
- Since humankind, approximately ten thousand years ago (or maybe earlier) became "residential", instead of adapting to the environment it has been changing it to fit its needs and inclinations. This behavior has been accelerating, increasing and expanding in recent times and continues to become more and more invasive.
- Even if we assume that an unaware genetic mechanism could (though it isn't clear how) help to manage these new and changing situations, in the present state of affairs it would be too slow. To have any meaningful effects from "mutation" we would need a number of generations. We simply don't have so much time, if we want to avoid going through a series of catastrophes in which we could risk extinction.

There is one important fact on our side. As explained in point 3, the necessary values and behaviors aren't "in conflict" with human nature. They don't need to be "enforced" by arrogant power or dogmatic ruling. They are well rooted in DNA and culture, since the beginning of our species. It's a matter of cultivation, not artificial discipline.

Once again, the most destructive force is the power of stupidity. Now as always, it can't be eliminated, but it isn't invincible. The difference, compared to the past, is that its effects are becoming much more serious – and remedies more difficult.

It has become urgent to learn how we can prevent, avoid or correct the consequences of human stupidity. The sooner we begin to think in this perspective, the better chance we have to find solutions.