

## The Scientific Basis of Stupidity

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In the grand, cosmic order of a deterministic universe, there can be no such thing as stupidity to a behaviorist. Behavior is simply (or complexly) caused, and the corruption of the learning process and limitations on a living system's ability to adapt are inherent in the process of life. Organic systems may be maladaptive and do fail, but because of the self-imposed restrictions of science, it is considered improper to interpret such debilitating conditions and events in terms of free choice.

On the other hand, within the microcosm of each particular cultural group, the self-deceptive language/perception complex, a social commitment to norms and pressure toward groupthink all can contribute via the neurotic paradox to setting up a positive feedback system which carries a given learning pattern to self-defeating excess.

This learning mechanism can render normal human behavior maladaptive so in human culture we may routinely find a striking revelation exceptions to the general Darwinian principle of life that normal is adaptive. Indeed, psychology may be considered a Lamarckian science dealing with the cultural inheritance of acquired characteristics. Against the background of nature as the ultimate selective field for all species, human culture is a biological anomaly with different groups and individuals commonly vying and dying to display their own particular form of the phenomenon we call stupidity. Behavior is properly termed stupid when it can be construed as failing according to and because of ends (purposes) and/or means (methods and morality) of the individual's reference group.

Thus, not all failures are stupid-just those which betray a compromise commitment to perceptual accuracy, psychological balance and social integrity by going to a dysfunctional extreme. As a general principle of cultural life, stupidity is an expression of our inherent disposition to judge-specifically, stupidity indicates a subjectively shaped negative evaluation of predetermined behavior. Stupidity is so common because people characteristically interpret their behavior favorably even if it leads eventually and inevitably to failure. Indeed, the compounding of power with the perceptual/positive feedback mechanism of stupidity which promotes and perpetuates injustice makes Armageddon more likely than Eden but most probably courts a legacy of enduring, constant strife and corruption within and among all human systems. Unfortunately, while a university/industrial complex provides us with ever more knowledge, we have no institution which addresses our major intellectual problem-what we do with information we have. Why do we not use it to help ourselves solve our eternal problems of poverty, starvation, war and stupidity? Perhaps because knowledge of stupidity does not prevent it any more than knowledge of gravity prevents someone who steps off a cliff from falling.

We are indebted to those who failed so stupidly in the past because their mistakes permit us to understand what we are presently doing. More important, we are obliged to acknowledge that our actions will shape the future. In that context, our understanding of how stupidity affects human behavior places a moral burden on us to be responsible not only for ourselves but also to those poor souls who will pay the price for our next stupid failure and the next ...and the next...☺...

“The most dangerous man, to any government, is the man who is able to think things out for himself, without regard to the prevailing superstitions and taboos. Almost inevitably he comes to the conclusion that the government he lives under is dishonest, insane and intolerable,\* and so, if he is a romantic, he tries to change it. And even if he is not a romantic personally he is very apt to spread discontent among those who are.” H. L. Mencken, 1922.

\*and stupid.☺

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