

The Psychosocial Basis of Stupidity

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What is stupidity? It is the learned corruption of learning. At best, learning about our surroundings and ourselves is an imperfect process. At worst, it is rendered difficult, impossible or self-defeating by stupidity, which promotes maladaptive behavior by denying us knowledge about our environment and our effects on it. In general, learning is directed and controlled by a “Schema” —a master cognitive plan by which each person organizes information. It is both a mental set which provides a context for interpreting events in the perceptual field and a program for behavior. Schemas are good, if they are appropriate and adequate, or bad, if they are inappropriate or inadequate for the situations and problems at hand. Stupidity is a matter of unnecessarily modifying a good schema to its detriment or unnecessarily adhering to a bad one to one’s own detriment. We commonly do both, since we are all emotionally involved with our schemas to the extent that we identify with them. Thus, a person may change his to suit his self-image while being reluctant to alter it simply to bring it into congruence with information from the environment.

Basically, a schema is a system of belief, and all people need something in which they can believe. Often, this is a religious belief system based on faith in supernatural powers, forces or beings and is accompanied by equally strong beliefs (i.e., “Secular religions”) in human institutions and individuals. Whatever the basis of the schema, it rationalizes the believer’s relation to the world while defining what he considers to be proper behavior in it. [1] Invariably, each schema is accompanied by an ideology—an intellectual, logical expression of the beliefs. The irony of the human condition is that a person’s behavior is so often inconsistent with his specific ideology, particularly in matters of importance.

This self-deceptive aspect of human nature is due to the role the schema plays in binding groups of people together. The schema is not only a behavioral/belief system for an individual; it is also a unifying force for society. However, stupidity is induced when linguistic values, social norms, groupthink and the neurotic paradox promote a positive feedback system which takes schematic behavior to detrimental extremes unjustified by and at odds with external conditions.

Language functions not only as a communication system for a group but also as a value system which defines the mental life of the members and thus is a prime contributor to stupidity. On the positive side, language obviously makes it possible for people to discuss problems, processes and phenomena of which they are consciously aware. On the other hand, language also (and much more subtly) affects the process of perception and makes it so ambiguous that people can accept clear discrepancies between their beliefs and actions in many important, ego-defining situations. To wit, Crusaders killed for Christ, [2] and capitalists enlist the aid of government when free competition hurts their special interests. With perception rendered so ambiguous and subjective, stupidity is invited, if not actually promoted, as people usually can find some verbal framework in which they may rationalize their behavior [3] and some scapegoat or excuse to explain away their failures.

Thus, it appears that the verbal nature of our schemas shapes human perception by blurring the boundary between unwelcome fact and desired fancy. Perception is actually quite an active process in which the perceiver selects certain aspects of his environment as

worthy of his attention. Many important events may be simply ignored because they are not deemed significant or interesting. On the other hand, as we see as much with our minds as with our eyes, we are fully capable of perceiving conjured fantasies of events that did not happen and things that do not exist. Further, if and when an actual event is perceived, it can be distorted, with details added or omitted to suit the psyche of the observer. Finally, and most important of all, raw sensory data are coded, reorganized and given meaning according to the perceiver's particular value system. [4] Ergo, what any person perceives is very much affected by his own experiences, attitudes, motives, psychological defenses, etc., all of which are shaped very much by "Categorizing" according to verbal values.

We each really build our own reality by this process of sorting out perceptions into categories. These are our own schematic constructs based on our specific language group. These constructs then determine each person's psychological world, the rules of tongue used to assign percepts to the given categories and the hypotheses created to explain how various events and objects perceived relate to one another. [5]

While linguistic systems act as screens or sieves between people and their environment, they promote cooperation among group members by fostering common perceptions. At the same time, they promote intergroup conflict as different languages lead to various perceptions and cognitions in different societies. [6] Thus, language is an obstacle not only to objectivity but also to cooperation among diverse groups. Worst of all, language keeps people from understanding what they, themselves, are doing. Euphemisms are particularly effective verbal devices for masking reality: E.g., the Nazis suspended the constitution under the guise of "Protecting the German people" and assumed dictatorial powers via "An Act for Relieving the Distress of Nation and Reich" [7] or, better yet, "The Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor". [8] It is tough to argue with that in any language and all but impossible in "Nazi German". In the cause of the party, the Nazis invented terms-like "Hitler weather" for a sunny day—confiscated some words and changed the values of others. [9] Generally, people have dysfunctional beliefs because their conscious schemas are shaped by the verbal values of their reference group—i.e., their nation, religious organization, professional association, etc. With everyone using the same biased language, it is unlikely that members could develop original, self-correcting ideas. Hence, it is difficult for an insider to form and usually stupid of him to offer an objective, critical analysis

of his reference group, whatever it may be. Any attempt to do so would most likely be regarded as heresy and the critic shunned or dismissed as a threat to group integrity. Ironically, the only thing more aggravating to a group than a critic is an ideal-ist who actually lives up to its stated creed.

Usually, people cannot be objective about themselves or anything else since they use their group/ language values to judge their world. If people are anything, they are judges, and their perceptions of things and events are judged good or bad according to the standards formulated by their given social experiences. To the extent that conformity is induced by both language and norms, objective criticism is inhibited and stupidity induced when people strictly adhere to forms of thought and behavior which are irrelevant to the problems at hand or self-defeating for those involved.

One human universal is that every group is endowed with attributes which members regard not only as positive and praiseworthy but self-justifying and self-glorifying. Individual members develop these by internalizing group norms through socialization. [10] In fact, it is through this process that a group is formed, thereby giving individual members a sense of belonging. Dress, manners, gestures and many other forms of learned social behavior tend to promote a sense of group unity and identity by encouraging conformity among members. In addition, examples of "Success" by high ranking members, verbal dicta and formal corrective measures all inhibit deviation from group standards. Possession of qualities defined as "Good" makes a member a "Good person". (On the other hand, negative qualities are commonly attributed to outsiders and members of out-groups according to the degree of competition between the groups.) [11]

The development of the cognitive norms of socially approved ideas and shared illusions that interfere with critical, analytical thinking can also promote group cohesion. However, when this process goes to the extreme, reality testing is suspended and the condition of "Groupthink" leads members to overestimate their collective power and righteousness. They tend to consider themselves invulnerable to any of the dangers inherent in their activities, and they become excessively optimistic about results they expect from actions they contemplate. In such instances, there is a strong probability of risky adventures being attempted with complete confidence of success. Although such an attitude may be advantageous to some groups, like military units in combat, even this is not always the case: The Bay of Pigs fiasco in Cuba in April, 1961 remains the archetypical example of this phenomenon at its worst. [12]

People indulging in groupthink find themselves not only invincible but invariably right according to their own standards. This presumption of inherent morality usually means that no one in the isolated group will question its basic beliefs. Thus, members are likely simply to ignore ethical and moral consequences of their actions, since they assume they are right and what they are trying to accomplish is obviously good. Of course, if actions against an out-group are under consideration, the enemy is stereotypically viewed as evil, weak and stupid and is accordingly routinely referred to in suitably disparaging terms. [13]

Basically, groupthink is a way for closing the minds of members of a cohesive unit. Policies are rationalized rather than scrutinized; data conflicting with such policies are ignored rather than evaluated; warnings of impending or possible failure are dismissed rather than discussed. [14] By such means, the group schema is maintained intact, which is obviously the most important thing of all. Whether or not behavior is appropriate or successful is a distinctly secondary consideration to the maintenance of group image and ideology.

That image, ideology and a sense of esteem as well are all promoted by pressure toward uniformity within the group. The group censors itself by suppressing deviations from the prevailing consensus and minimizes expression of doubts. The result is an illusion of unanimity, with judgments apparently conforming to the majority view. Dissent is considered disloyal, and direct pressure may be brought to bear against any member who seriously questions any of the group's stereotypes, delusions or policies. In addition, self-appointed "Mind guards" may shield the group from adverse information that might shatter their shared misconceptions or placid complacency about their own effectiveness and righteousness. [15]

The imposition of unwanted, negative perceptions upon group thinkers (or anyone indulging in behavioral fantasies) may produce the condition of "Cognitive dissonance", [16] with the disturbing data being misconstrued or misinterpreted if at all possible so as to save the schema. If failure cannot be denied, blame is to be affixed anywhere but where it belongs—usually as far down the chain of command as possible. The failure of generals during World War I to learn the obvious lesson that the day of frontal assaults was over is a classic case in point: They insisted the tactic was basically sound; it was always the execution by incompetent field officers that was faulty. [17]

In this context of an inability to learn, life may be viewed as a dynamic imbalance. Social life, particularly, is often a compromise state between goal achievement and group survival. Either may be sacrificed for the other but usually with results deemed stupid by anyone judging according to the criteria of the function sacrificed. For example, government agencies are notorious for taking on lives of their own at the expense of efficiency. As a bureaucracy grows and becomes entrenched, its ability to respond effectively to its environment is reduced, and although growth of the agency is regarded as a sign of success by the civil servants in charge, the accompanying inefficiency is regarded as stupid by citizens trying to get action.

Judgment is shaped not only by the viewpoint of the perceiver but also by the time scale used to evaluate effects. In this context, stupidity's most reliable ally is the "Neurotic paradox" —a self-destructive learning pattern which occurs when an act is reinforced with an immediate short-term reward although its long-term consequences will be maladaptive [18] A drug addiction is a classic example of this phenomenon: Getting a fix is an immediate reward, although it is clearly in his long-term worst interest. Thus, his immediate judgment is that getting the fix is necessary and, in that sense, good, even if he knows it is working toward his eventual demise.

Since judgment is so subjective and made from an arbitrarily, subconsciously selected perspective, people usually fail to see themselves as doing something stupid while engaged in behavior detrimental to their own interests. They persist in such activity because they have a schema which defines success in terms of the behavior undertaken while it simultaneously inhibits percepts of undesirable negative consequences. Contrary to prevailing psychosocial dogma, feedback from the environment does not necessarily lead to adaptive behavior [19] (i.e., adjustments most likely to produce positive results) because incoming data are first screened by the perceptual defense system. During this process, incoming information is likely to be dismissed or misinterpreted if it conflicts with and cannot be adjusted to fit the existing belief system, and natural selection is replaced by cultural selection.

It is important to bear in mind that such self-deception in moderation may be an effective defense mechanism which promotes self-confidence in an individual and cooperation within a group. It is only when it goes to excess that it tends to become stupidly maladaptive, but it is precisely this which is made probable when

a behavioral or cultural trend develops into a self-rewarding, positive feedback (posfeed) system. When this occurs, a pattern of activity becomes rewarding in and of itself regardless of its extrinsic consequences. Behavior may then go to an extreme because it is reinforced by the schema, which functions as an intrinsically gratifying, internal reward system for such conduct. When possible, such self-reinforcing behavior is imposed on external conditions, and in the absence of critical self-examination, intellectually incestuous ideologues [20] can become victims of their own excesses as inner directed behavior runs out of control and becomes disruptively self-defeating for an individual or group. [21]

Hence, as learned corruption of learning, stupidity may not be only an inhibitor but also an inventor of feedback. Some stimuli, lessons and thoughts are blocked, while an active imagination may create pleasing perceptions that are misleading and which promote activities that may be maladaptive. The net effect of all this is to detach the mental world from the external environment, and as we all suffer the resultant imbalance on occasion, stupidity must be considered a normal psychological condition which has gone to one of two extremes. It may be due to a deeply ingrained, inflexible maladaptive schema, or it can result from an overactive fantasy which produces fanciful thoughts that are flexible to the point of misperception. In either case, the resultant mental set is a compounding of our biological heritage and cultural environment.

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15. *Ibid.* p. 175..
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