

The Ethical Basis of Stupidity

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An arbitrarily based indifference if not hostility to those with good ideas underlines our pervasive stupidity in social relations. By contrast, the basis for our undeniable successes in matters technical become all the more obvious. If we could but apply scientific objectivity to the social domain we might undercut our proclivity for individual and collective maladaptive behavior. This is well worth considering, if indeed our faith in science is justified and if the application of scientific analysis to human behavior would lead to a reduction in stupidity as this book portends.

Science, in the form of the social sciences, has already proved successful in helping people learn about themselves and their interactions with their institutions. It has also proved useless in providing any sort of ethic to direct the application of knowledge gained to any clear-cut, long-range benefit to humanity. Science is especially good in the narrow, immediate sense of gathering information about a specific problem or set of conditions and the more specific the context, the better. How those data and possible solutions to problems relate to society in general is another problem in itself and beyond the scope of true science. All science can legitimately contribute to the application of knowledge to problem solving is projections of likely future results and sometimes sample test case studies of how things went in the past.

As previously noted, one of the major shifts in our mental world in the past few hundred years is that we tend more and more to believe in human institutions with a fervor previously reserved for presumed supernatural forces. Thus, although the influence of established churches may have waned during this period, religious belief is still as powerful as ever as a factor shaping human behavior. All the horrors and cruelties which used to be the province of the devoutly sectarian (as evidenced by their witch hunts and inquisitions) have been extended and expanded upon by the devotees of secular (i.e. political, economic and cultural) institutions. It is expecting too much of science, which in its pure form is morally neutral, to combat such forms of socially induced subjectivity. Scientists can be objective and may make us more knowledgeable, but they will not make us better.

Technology: The real problem confronting the foes of stupidity is not one which can be solved by gathering more knowledge, which is the function of scientific research. The solution will be found in the humane application of knowledge, which is a matter of technological ethics, with stupidity in this context being something of an intellectual sin [1]. It is very much to our credit that we are so clever as engineers-efficient at inventing and building all kinds of sophisticated machines and contraptions. A list of major human achievements would read like a "What's What" in technology-moonwalks, atomic power, heart transplants, gene splicing, etc. But all this success in applying knowledge comes up short and leaves the feeling that this success is that of a detached system which has taken on a life and purpose of its own rather than that of one virtuously filling a human need. Although we rejoice in the qualitative improvement in health attributable to medical science, the overall plight of humanity has been poorly served by those who apply what we know, with each plus for a special interest group seemingly balanced by a minus for the general public and each cultural advance accompanied by new political, economic and social problems.

If a worst-case scenario is needed to make the point, it is, unfortunately, all too available and recent. The fundamental and total immorality of the Nazi regime scars the conscience Western civilization because it proved, in an incomprehensible way, knowledge does indeed make us free. It expands our ability to “Do” without providing any kind of human value or humane ethic other than operational efficiency. In fact, the most disturbing aspect of the tragedy is that the Nazis were so efficient in a cause so perverse. Survival in the concentration camps-based on the vilest if not stupidest misapplication of force in the pursuit of an ideal-seems just that much worse when we realize it was made possible only by the willful rejection of the truth [2]: At this extreme, it was “Be stupid or die”. What is civilization worth if it cannot prevent-indeed, induces-such demonic, destructive forces in ourselves? Are science and rationality powerful enough to overcome misperceptions based on irrationality and hate?

Worse yet, Nazism was much worse than technology gone mad for its own sake. It was the logically calculated use of the most advanced technology of the time, by the best educated, civilized culture of the time attempting to realize a policy deemed by its democratically elected leaders to be in the best interests of humanity. If the Last Reich had occurred anywhere else or at any other time, it would have been bad enough, but at the turn of the century, Germany was the center of civilization, with the greatest of universities and a culture of such breadth and depth that it has never been surpassed and rarely equaled^a. In science and music, Germany was preeminent [3]; in philosophy and engineering, Germany predominated, and this was the era when the leaders of the Nazi empire received their formative education and basic values of pride cum arrogance^b. In this context, the most distressing chapter was written by the doctors who led the programs of euthanasia and mass gassings for which Hitler and his ilk are infamous. They attended the same medical schools as their humane colleagues but apparently took a hypocritical oath which allowed them to be more Nazis than physicians.

Two features of the rise of the Nazis stick like undigested lumps in the craw of Western civilization-that the German universities were a prime means by which the Hitlerians infected the Fatherland with their poison [4] and that democracy was the means by which they rose to power. As for Hitler, he was vulgar in manner and speech and used words not to convey or develop ideas but to arouse emotions [5] of the illiterate and others craving power. There is, unfortunately, nothing inherent in the educational process to keep motivated maniacs from usurping the lessons taught and learned [6]. Worse yet, when times are bad, demigods can be embraced by an electorate deceived by ap-pealing but deceptive propaganda. For all its education and democratic if not Christian tradition, Germany remained essentially pagan and tribal. Its intellectual accomplishments were those of a detached elite but did not reflect values shared by the voiceless many.

^aIn every field but critical fiction and especially humor. Not only was there no German Dickens, Balzac, (Ergang. 1967. 208.) Zola or Shaw, (Watson. 2010. 404) there most emphatically was no German Mark Twain let alone a Teutonic Will Rogers. In the 1930's, German movies spoofed the old aristocracy but not the emerging Nazis. In a more general sense, there is something schizoid in German culture: reflecting the linguistic divide between the informal “Du” and formal “Sie”, Germans are both romantic and rational. When the two faculties combine, the earth shakes but not with laughter. In terms of scientific supremacy, by 1930, Germany had racked up 99 Nobel prizes in physics compared to 18 by England and six by America. (Gillon. 178.).

^bAs did ironically many of the leaders of America's progressive movement. A survey in 1906 revealed that 116 of America's top economists and social scientists had studied at least one year in Germany and became imbued with the elitist notion of experts molding society like clay (Rodgers. 86-87.) into a Yankee model of Bismark's Reich, (Goldman. 1952. 102), which Woodrow Wilson acknowledged, in 1877, as the system “Most nearly perfected in the world”. (Zakaria. 66.) The Japanese agreed: in 1891, the Meiji oligarchs searched the world over for the best system of government and settled on Bismarck's constitution which sub-ordinated the legislature to the emperor. (Malcolm.) Hitler never went beyond his formal education except in his virulent, pathoilllogical anti-Semitism.

Culturally, it remained as shallow as it was great, and its reversion to Fascism revealed how superficially Christianity and humane values had coated the land. Worst of all, historians are unanimous in agreeing that there was not a single redeeming feature of the Third Reich [7] other than it was self-destructive. As ultimates in the annals of stupidity, none top those who deny the Holocaust actually happened.

They start where with an answer and do not budge. The most convincing way of con-fronting them with the fact of the event is the result of interrogations of some 10,000 of those accused of perpetrating the horror. The most common response was, "I was ordered to". However, it is most significant that of all those questioned, not a single one said, "It did not happen".

On the other hand, the Judaic ethic conveyed by the story of Abraham and Isaac speaks to the willingness of a devout believer to follow an immoral order. God ordered Abraham to kill his son, Isaac, and he was ready to do so before God rescinded the order. The Biblical fact remains, Abraham was ready to carry out the extremely immoral act because he had been ordered to do so. The lesson, unfortunately, is that the hu-man conscience is not an effective control system for preventing blatant immorality when a higher authority gives the order for it [8].

Nor are science and technology. Both are methods: the one helps us learn, the other helps us do. Neither is a control system. They are both morally neutral and offer humanity no ethical precept which will protect us from ourselves. Worse yet is the realization that all the cultivated learning in the world seemed to encourage rather than prevent the most despicable abuse of power ever. Worst of all is the fact that the gas chambers were so efficient in the commission of mass murder. From the selection and transportation of the victims to the creation of the ashes and soap, the whole operation was a marvel of engineering proficiency. It would be very stupid indeed to think that it could not happen again or anywhere else. The sad fact is that if it could happen in Germany then, it very certainly could happen somewhere else some other time. Nationalism and racism, a sense of injustice and betrayal, a frustrated feeling of superiority and most especially, a fanatical elite with a mission to purify the world by replacing diversity with righteous order, most of these elements are common in too many societies and religious movements-e.g. Islam-today. The miracle is not that we have so much trouble but that we have so little.

Problems: Trouble we do have, of course. In contrast to our great achievements in technology, we have our dismal failures in human affairs. Poverty, starvation, disease, crime, drugs, riots, wars (real and potential) all confront us every day on the news. Science helps us learn about nature, and technology pro-vides us with the means for effecting change, but neither pro-vides us with the understanding we need to help ourselves. Hence, people continue to suffer in sloth and apathy-ill-housed, ill-clothed, ill-fed-while a self-content middle class smugly convinces itself it is somehow morally superior to the disadvantaged, and government charity doles out just enough useless help to keep the disenfranchised hopelessly dependent on the long spoon.

If this is the best we can do, we are indeed in a mess. Per-haps we would do better if we recognize that we and the institutions we believe in are the causes of our problems [9]. Much psychological research has gone into the study of humans as problem solvers, which is all well and good because we can and do solve problems. However, virtually no attention has been directed toward analyzing our considerable ability to create problems and even less to our inability to solve them. On the one hand, we are rather deft at dealing with natural problems; our scientific and technological triumphs are all over natural phenomena-the human body, genes, electromagnetism, space. On the other, our failures are self-generated, and we cannot correct them because those in power who created them do not recognize them as problems solvable within the system [10]. Nor, often, are they: Catholic Mexico's population problem pops to mind, as does America's Mid-East policy based on the fact that we are wedded at the lip to Israel to the same degree our politicians are committed to deficit spending as a fiscally irresponsible way to get reelected.

Perhaps if we understood our foibles by applying the schematic model for stupidity advanced here, we could render human behavior comprehensible. Ethics could then be a function of knowledge rather than religious rites and cultural taboos in the way our technological expertise allows us to make informed rather than mystical decisions about our interactions with nature and each other.

Cooperation: One example of the interaction of expertise, knowledge and ethics in human affairs is that of the increasing moral imperative for cooperation. Ironically, while technological success has promoted the growth of human populations, computers have made disruptive innovative thought more difficult and individual creative thought anachronistic. The development of new disruptive ideas is more difficult because technology is standardizing our cultural world. Conformity in dress, behavior and thought is promoted by centralized control in the fashion industry, the legal system and the media. We isolate ourselves from interpersonal contact with headsets plugged into boom boxes playing synthesized music or endure prefabricated laugh tracks on sitcom TV. Finally, old-line fanatics, like religious fundamentalists, confirm the cultural quo.

Thus, creative thinking which promotes unity is now the responsibility of some undefined, centralized establishment. It would be nice if this were a planned process, with each idea adding to our collective happiness, but it is basically haphazard, with each item adding to someone's bank account regardless of long-term consequences for society in general. Without realizing what has happened, we have turned our right to be original over to the amassed media. Oddly, this constitutes one example of stupidity due to the lack of an overseeing schema as growth without development has produced change without progress. As might be expected, a competing example of repressive stupidity lies at the other extreme-the enforced conformity ominously presaged in George Orwell's dystopian 1984.

A more extreme example of amoral stupidity is the way we are wrecking our environment. Thanks to our failure to plan resource development, we are killing our lakes and streams, poisoning our forests, turning rain into showers of acid and are generally strangling our life support system [11]. Just as nuclear weapons forced reason upon diplomats, it is the technological excesses that is forcing reason upon us. As classic examples of the neurotic paradox in action, their immediate, short-term profits blind corporate executives to the long-term negative effects their practices have despoiling everyone's land, water and air [12]. These indulgences beget, however, protesters who assert their right to live and breathe and who gather strength from the obvious soundness of their position that if things continue at the current rate, there soon will be no environment left to despoil. Thus, the battle of those who would wreck the world in a random, chaotic, indulgent way versus those who would save it by systematic, controlled planning. With the political power structure being what it is today, they will probably reach a com-promise-to wreck it by systematic, controlled planning.

Power: If it is trite today to observe that our technological excesses are challenging our morality, it is still worth noting that this development may decrease the likelihood that compromises in the future will be reached on the basis of sanity rather than power. Power sharing based on rights meant that more often, more people dealt with each other as equals, but we are commonly surrendering our inalienable rights to the establishment.

In a more realistic vein, it would be nice if someday all existent disputes could be settled fairly rather than by force or formality and that all decisions reached would be functions of reason rather than irrationality. Whether we ever reach such a state will depend to a large degree on the role stupidity plays in our future. Stupidity can both prevent survival, by promoting misunderstandings, and promote it, by making us more accepting of our limitations. It is most likely, however, that stupidity will transcend survival because we do not understand our limitations. Specific cultures rise, flourish and then pass away for lack of effective self-control-too much or too little. However, stupidity remains, appears and reappears in successive generations and civilizations with such monotonous regularity that we cannot expect ours to be an exception and endure unless we answer that overwhelming question never seriously posed much less answered before: how can we be so stupid?

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