

The Power of Stupidity



by Giancarlo Livraghi

Chapter 15 – Stupidity and Habit

Here again – let me start with a short definition. Not all habits are stupid. Some can be good, useful, efficient, comfortable and cozy. Though “changing for the sake of change” can be fun, things don’t always improve by just changing. But the force of habit can be blinding, especially when it’s combined with stupidity (or ignorance, or fear.)¹

Habit is (or appears to be) reassuring. Behaving and thinking “as usual” gives us a feeling of false security. Habit is related to another source of stupidity: imitation. “Doing as others do” saves us the trouble of thinking, knowing, understanding, deciding, being responsible of our behavior.

Habit weakens curiosity, discourages the desire to explore, discover, learn, improve, change perspective.²

As we saw in chapter 14, habit is obviously related to fear. We are afraid of stepping out of the usual path. We are afraid of what is “usually” considered dangerous or improper – even when it’s quite easy to find out that it isn’t.

It can work also the other way round, when habit encourages us to rely on things, people or situations that aren’t safe, reliable or reassuring just because they are “usual.”

Small misunderstandings or large disasters, minor accidents or great catastrophes are often the result of a false sense of security induced by habit. This is a way of unleashing the awful destructive power of stupidity.

¹ See chapter 13 on ignorance, 14 on fear and 16 on haste.

² See chapter 21 on the problems of perspective and chapter 30 on curiosity as an antidote to stupidity

Deceit, fraud, arrogance, all sorts of lies and falsities, often use habit to gain trust that they don't deserve – or to obtain obedience for no justifiable reason.

It's pretty obvious that habit can relate to ignorance. Many "bad habits" are the result of lacking or inadequate information – or poor understanding of why and how something originally became a habit. Just as often, habit is the cause of ignorance, because we don't look behind appearances, we take things for granted, we accept "the usual" without trying to understand what it is or why it's supposed to make sense.

Obviously habit is an enemy of innovation. But this isn't as simple as it sounds. One of the "bad habits" is to assume that "new" is always "better." And to jump to new solutions or devices before we have had a chance to understand if they serve any useful purpose – or if that particular choice fits our specific needs.

The habit of chasing innovation for the sake of being "up to date" is just as bad as staying with old ways when they are no longer the fittest. And it relates quite closely to ignorance and stupidity – as well as to the fear of being, appearing or feeling "different", or "left behind" if we aren't following a trend.

Fear has been for many years a way of selling useless "innovation" – not only, but especially so, in information technology. «*If you don't buy this you will be left behind*» is the threat that led companies (as well as people and families) into buying lots of stuff that they didn't need and that they were not prepared to manage. The result isn't just a monumental waste of money, but also the cause of countless inefficiencies.³

There is ambiguity also in the concept of "good manners." Kindness and courtesy are good qualities (and closely related to intelligence.) When they are genuine and sincere, they can help us to understand other people, to listen, to learn, to share – and so to reduce ignorance, fear and stupidity.

Even formal "ceremony" or "protocol" isn't always useless or meaningless. And it's important, in any case, to respect the customs and manners of other people, even when we don't share or understand their lifestyle, so as to avoid dangerous and useless misunderstandings.

But when "manners" become a prison, prevent us from communicating and understanding, we should not be afraid of "breaking the rules." It's always better, in any case, to understand which "rules" we are following and why. To know when we believe in what we are doing and when we are just following conventional habits.

It isn't always necessary or useful to "break" habits or rules. But if we accept rules and habits too easily, without understanding their reason and meaning, we can be locked in a state of "blind obedience" that makes us ignorant, stupid and useless to ourselves and others.

Imagination, curiosity and a taste for diversity are nourishment for intelligence. Habit can keep us away from these vital resources. Habit can blur our vision when it prevents us from noticing signs that are around us and don't fall into the usual pattern.

³ See chapter 19 on the stupidity of technologies.

It isn't easy to break or change habits. Our brain structure, as well as the cultural and social environment, tend to push us back into habit even when we have been able to break out of it.

One of the ways of breaking the "vicious circle" is to replace old habits with new ones. For instance, to get into the habit of being more curious, open and available, of noticing things that we weren't seeing because they didn't fit into our established perception framework.

Of course humor and irony are tools for intelligence. But many jokes are mere habit. This isn't just because old jokes are repeated endlessly. It's also a matter of cultural bias, reinforcement of conventional clichés. Humor opens new perspectives when it breaks away from convention and habit. And when we make fun of our own silliness (and habits.) Taking ourselves too seriously is a way of being stupid.

While I was working on these notes, a question was lingering in my mind. Is laziness stupid? The answer is yes, when it's mental laziness – lack of curiosity, unwillingness to learn, staying with habits. But there are behaviors that can appear "lazy" or "idle" while they are remarkably intelligent.

Staying away from unnecessary and confusing haste. Taking the time to think, to rest, to relax. Letting a problem lay in the back of our mind while we concentrate on something else (or we break away completely for a while, to do something that we enjoy) is often a way of finding the best solution.

Many great discoveries and improvements of thinking were perceived as "idle thoughts" by the prevailing culture at their time. In any case, they were made by people who could afford to be "idle", to be free from the burden of daily toil. But only a few could afford that privilege.

Now that, in modern society, leisure time is much more widely available, a lot of that time is wasted in repetitive behavior that we don't particularly enjoy, that doesn't open our minds to the pleasures of freedom, but keeps us in the slavery of routine and habit.

We should try, every day, to break a habit. Even a small one. Finding a new way of going to the same place (in the streets as well as in our mind) can bring refreshing surprises.

Mental exercise is not the endless repetition of the same calisthenics. It's looking constantly for something that we didn't know or we hadn't noticed. Or finding different ways of thinking about the same things.

As many intelligent behaviors, in addition to being useful it can be amusing and pleasant.

* * *

As noted at the beginning of chapter 13, a list of the "allies" and causes of stupidity could be endless. But I hope these short comments can contribute to understanding how stupidity, ignorance, fear and habit can combine in many unhealthy ways.

As in the case of stupidity, things get worse when these attitudes are shared. Ignorance spreads faster than knowledge. Prejudice and misinformation, as well as ridiculous nonsense, are often taken as "true" just because they are widely repeated.

Fear becomes catastrophic when it's shared by a "mass." Large numbers of people in a frenzy of fear (or anger) can be extremely dangerous.

Even in relatively small numbers fear can spread from one person to another when they have no reason to be afraid – or make things worse in a case of real danger. Social or group habits often become mindless obedience, mental slavery, with results ranging from boring monotony to harmful behavior or serious crime.

The combination of these forces can produce obnoxious results. But, on the other hand, breaking one, or reducing its impact, can help us to limit the effect of another.

When we find ways of being a bit less ignorant, less scared, less conditioned by habit, we have a better chance of being less stupid – and thus more helpful to other people, as well as more comfortable with ourselves.

* * *

A way of overcoming stupidity and its allies is explained in this bright little rhyme by Rudyard Kipling.

*I keep six honest serving-men,
they taught me all I knew.
Their names are What and Why and When,
and How and Where and Who.*

As I mentioned a few pages back (also in chapter 13) and I shall deliberately do again (chapters 28 and 30) and I will never be tired of repeating – curiosity is a talent that can, and should, be constantly developed and improved in many ways.

Curiosity is a habit (if we are lucky enough to have it) worth keeping, growing, cherishing with loving care. If we aren't driven often enough by never-ending, never satisfied curiosity we miss many opportunities to learn and understand. We also fall back into ignorance and stupid habits, as our perceptions become weaker, in narrower and more deceiving perspectives.

A description of the book
is online – stupidity.it