Is there a definition of stupidity?

Giancarlo Livraghi – September 2010

Only a few readers (of many commenting on my book, *The Power of Stupidity*) observe that I don't offer a "definition" of stupidity. Most people don't even notice – or, if they do, aren't concerned. But so it is. I am deliberately avoiding a formal definition.

I believe that we can be quite precise on the subject by discussing what stupidity isn't – and how it relates with other behaviors. As well as what it does, how it works, the nature of its causes and effects, the ways in which it can be understood and its hideous influence can be prevented or reduced.

This isn't as uncommon as it may seem. It is so in several developments of science and philosophy. For instance, the multitude of "particles" or "forces", etcetera, in physics isn't about what they "are" (which nobody seems to know) but how they relate to each other (and with the observer) in a complex and ever-changing multi-dimensional time-space environment.

If that sounds difficult, it's because it is. Things are inherently simple, close to home or in remote galaxies. But understanding *how* they are simple isn't an easy task. Especially when we start (as we can hardly avoid doing) from an anthropocentric point of view – or from the nearsighted perspective of our mental neighborhood.

However, the question is there: how can we define stupidity? The best answer I know is in the introduction to *Understanding Stupidity* by James Welles. His observations are quite elaborate and they deserve to be read in their full extent. [1] His definition of stupidity is *«the learned corruption of learning.»* And this is how he explains the "mechanism."

> *«Stupidity is a normal, dysfunctional learning process which occurs when a schema formed by linguistic biases and social norms acts via the neurotic paradox to establish a positive feedback system which carries behavior to maladaptive excesses.»*

Is that a good definition? I think so. In any case, it's the best that I have read or heard. But it leads to some questions. How can something be "normal" and "dysfunctional" at the same time? That is, indeed, a peculiarity of stupidity. It isn't an illness, a disease, a weakness of some individuals (or groups or categories of people) that we call "stupid" (while, quite often, the problem isn't their stupidity as much as it is our inability to understand them).

1 The text is also online – stupidity.net/story2

(Another relevant way of identifying stupidity is Carlo Cipolla's "Third Law." [2] But it it's about what stupidity *does*, not what it *is*).

The first (and somewhat embarrassing) thing that we need to learn, in the process of understanding stupidity, is that it's part of human nature. Or, more broadly, of any form of life. As James Welles observes in another part of his book. «*Stupidity is an incongruity inherent in life. Humans have developed, expanded and promoted it*.»

It's explained in a different way by Douglas Adams. «*Human beings, who are almost unique in having the ability to learn from the experience of others, are also remarkable for their apparent disinclination to do so.*»

The necessary starting point is as simple as it is generally ignored. We are all stupid, in one way or another. If we don't understand our own stupidity, we are unable to cope with everyone else's.

The "neurotic paradox" stems from the ambiguous meaning of "neurosis". It is is generally perceived as a disease, to be treated as such. But the fact is that all "normal" people are, to some extent, "neurotic". If we don't understand that it's part of human nature (more broadly, living beings) we can spend all our life under psychoanalytic treatment (or, worse, drugs) that we don't really need (some people do so, and it rarely makes them any better).

It isn't simply a matter of "living with it". The issue is, here again, understanding. And that starts with listening and learning. But, as James Welles explains, stupidity can be also defined as

> *«… a commonplace process by which learning corrupts learning. … Let us note that stupidity usually manifests itself in two interacting functions of the human psyche – the self-deceptive inability to gather and process information accurately and the neurotic inability to match behavior to environmental contingencies.»*

So it's "a commonplace process", not a disease. But if we don't understand it we get into a lot of unnecessary trouble.

> *«In an epistemological context, stupidity is the failure to gather and use information efficiently and therefore is aided and abetted by self-deception. Traditionally, self-deception has been considered only in terms of the use or abuse of information present within a cognitive system – that is, a person would have to "know" something in order to deceive himself about it. However, we must acknowledge it is also self-deceptive (i.e., misleading) and usually stupid for one to refuse to gather new, relevant information about matters of importance.»*

2 See chapter 7 of *The Power of Stupidity* – online gandalf.it/stupid/chap07.pdf

It's an unfortunate fact that we are "overloaded" with often irrelevant, or confusing, information. "Too much" information is definitely better than "not enough", but the problem is that both are happening at the same time. In the maelstrom it becomes more and more difficult to find and understand what really matters.

> «*Thus, when considering stupidity in relation to knowledge and data processing, it is imperative to distinguish between the related phenomena of "agnosticism" and "ignorance". Both words may be used to indicate the condition of "not knowing", but they describe different ways of maintaining that condition. Pure, innocent agnosticism is not really stupid, in that it does not indicate an inability or unwillingness to learn.*»

The other side of the coin is that in spite (or because) of the clutter the appropriate information can be (or appear to be) unavailable.

> «*Agnosticism is the cognitive state when information is physically inaccessible (unavailable) to an individual or organization. Relevant data are simply not present in the environment in a form discernible to the sensory apparatus of the living system (person, group, etc.). For example, humans cannot see light in the ultra-violet and infrared bands, so we are agnostic (rather than stupid or ignorant) for missing any such environmental cues.*»

This isn't a good reason for giving up. There is a lot that we are learning by using instruments to detect non-visible light frequencies. And we are actually using those "invisible" waves for a number of practical purposes, including communication.

Information that "doesn't seem to be there" is rarely "impossible" to find. If we can make a seriously scientific description of a remote planet that we can't see, by looking at what happens in its environment, we can make equally useful assumptions about all sorts of things that appear "unknown", but relate to something that we know – and double-check them every time we run into information that is only apparently unrelated and can help us to set a different perspective, look from a different angle. And thus confirm our hypothesis, or improve it, or lead us to understand that we should put it aside because we have found a better one.

> «*Ignorance, on the other hand, usually indicates stupidity in that important data are present and gatherable but unheeded. The reason that ignorance does not always indicate stupidity is that some information could seriously disrupt existing psycho/social systems were it to penetrate the cognitive defenses so exclusion may sometimes be somewhat adaptive.*»

«This is really a rather complex process, as stimuli must be at least superficially perceived (i.e., screened) before being rejected by the system as being threatening to the existing belief structure or "schema". Thus, motivation can play a role in ignorance if some relevant, available information is prevented from getting "into the system" (i.e., accepted and incorporated into the cognitive program). This is likely to occur when a person senses that learning more about a particular matter might force him to undergo the most traumatic, terrifying experience one can be called upon to endure – he might have to change his mind.»

"Fear of knowledge" is one of the greatest (and most dangerous) causes of ignorance – and stupidity. Finding out that something isn't as we thought can be discomforting. But, for those of us who enjoy mental exercise, it can be exciting, attractive and pleasant. Also quite amusing and "enlightening".

As Mark Twain used to say, «*It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble, it's what you know for sure that just ain't so.*» Discovering what "ain't so" doesn't have to be distressing. Quite to the contrary, it can (and it should) be intriguing and encouraging. It's good for us to "get into the habit" of changing our minds, or learning something that we didn't know or – at least – having doubts. And that is a jolly good way of learning and expanding our horizon.

I very often ask myself: "what did I learn today?" And if a day goes by without any – large or small – discovery, or hint that prompts me to think, I feel uncomfortable about missing the opportunity to find something that surely was there, somewhere, but I couldn't t see it.

Doubt isn't a problem, it's a tool. Voltaire said «*Doubt is uncomfortable, certainty is ridiculous.*» And Bertrand Russell «*The trouble with the world is that the stupid are cocksure and the intelligent are full of doubt.*»

Knowledge is a basic resource, but the abundance can be confusing.

«While "knowing is good", there can be so much knowledge that it becomes paralyzing. People must therefore compromise on both the quantity and quality of their information. When buried in the "new age" bane TMI (too much info), people limit themselves by specializing – sacrificing breadth for depth, with each doing well if he knows something about anything. In terms of quality of information, people debase themselves by qualifying their standards – sacrificing validity for appeal, with each accepting whatever is suitable often leading to counter-info – i.e., misinformation. Unfortunately, these compromises not only fail to protect people from an overload of trivia but can keep them from knowing what is going on in their world.»

“Specialization” can be a disease. Of course it is necessary to have special depth in one’s particular work, trade or study. But “overspecialization”, losing sight of a wider perspective, leads to mental myopia, if not blindness. An old and wise irony about career development tells us that the ultimate peak of specialization is “knowing everything about nothing” while the highest generalization (i.e. “top management”) is “knowing nothing about everything”. And those are two ways of being stupid.

The problem of stupidity (and intelligence) is basically connected with information, communication and knowledge. The basic tools are listening, curiosity and doubt. They can (and should) be cultivated, developed and enjoyed.

We should never see learning as merely a task. When our taste is well developed, it’s a pleasure. And, like good food, it’s even more so when it’s shared.

A case of my own stupidity is that, in the early stages of working on this subject, I wasn’t aware of two remarkably interesting books by James F. Welles: *Understanding Stupidity* and *The Story of Stupidity*.

Luckily my “insatiable curiosity” caught up with them when I was beginning to write *The Power of Stupidity* as a book. And so I was able to include some very useful quotations.

I want to encourage my readers, if they don’t have already done so, to discover them both. This is why I am offering indications on how to find them. gandalf.it/stupid/welles.htm