

Harpagon's miseries

With deep gratitude to Molière for *The Miser* and to Plautus for the *Aulularia*

Giancarlo Livraghi – August 2011

There is a disease that may seem, though it isn't, only a slight discomfort – or an irrelevant detail compared to the huge problems of poverty and richness that have always been plaguing humanity (and have taken a particularly nasty twist in the current desperate absurdity of financial dementia).¹

While we are flooded by pompous warnings on all sorts of mild manias, or silly habits, described as though they were devastating mental pathologies, it's peculiar that hardly any attention is paid to a less obvious, apparently negligible, affliction that can turn into dangerous poison.

It starts with small misunderstandings in worrying about money. Apparently slight concerns that can confuse people even though they are not basically stingy or greedy.

Harpagon's petty miseries are caused by an insidious mixture of fear and mistrust. An initially mild affliction grows over time, breeds unreasonable anxiety, tension and stress that can cause also physical illness, unleashing a vicious circle in which some small doubt grows to become an obsession.

The intoxication can be caused also by misgivings that aren't (or not only) about money. Ambition, careerism, arrogance, egotism, protagonism, envy, jealousy ... small or large manias that by mixing increase the poisonousness of the nauseating concoction.

This syndrome could also be defined as the art of hurting oneself while becoming unpleasant to everyone else. As well as worrying about irrelevant problems while losing sight of those that really need a solution.

Of course, it's ridiculous. When we notice the early symptoms (it happens, sometimes, to everyone) we can clear the air with a hearty laugh. But when the disease overcomes the immune defenses of good sense it expands like a virus and multiplies with all sorts of complications.

This is, obviously, one of the ways of the power of stupidity. And, as for stupidity, there is no "magic wand" or standard therapy. But it would be a substantial step ahead if we had a better understanding of the problem.

Sometimes the intricate syndrome turns into violent madness, with tragic consequences. In most cases it isn't so obviously explosive. But, anyhow, it's toxic. It doesn't only waste our money, by causing "false savings" that turn into losses. It also poisons human relations, erodes friendship and affection, destroys trust, blurs thinking and awareness.

¹ See *Once upon a time there was the market* gandalf.it/stupid/market.pdf

It isn't as difficult as it may seem to look at ourselves "from the outside" and understand where and how we are upsetting priorities, worrying about what doesn't matter while missing what would deserve more attention. Not only at the beginning, but also after the syndrome has had time to develop, it can always help (when possible) to find a good dose of humor and irony.

We could look at the conflicts and disagreements in a (real or imaginary) chicken pen – or at not much better wisdom in many cases of human behavior. And ask ourselves how silly we can be when we lose perspective.

As observed in chapters 14, 15 and 21 of *The Power of Stupidity*,² it's often enough to change our habits, or look at things from a different point of view, to get rid of irrelevant anxiety and discover which problems or opportunities we were not considering as carefully as we should.

It's unfortunately more complicated, but it isn't impossible, to rescue a friend (or a customer) from drowning in the syndrome.

It isn't easy to uproot the Harpagon disease. But this doesn't mean that we should give up without trying. Sometimes we can be surprised by an unpredictable opening, more probably where and when we least expect it. Are we sure to have our eyes open as often as we should?



If we want an ironic description of this problem... here is a story, more distressing than funny, as was being told in New York thirty years ago. The owner of a stand near Wall Street is well known and liked in the neighborhood for the superior quality of his hot dogs. With a lifetime of savings, he sends his son to university. The young man, shortly after he is graduated in business and finance, says «*be careful, Dad, there is going to be a recession*». His advice is to cut costs – and he eventually persuades the reluctant father to buy some cheaper sausage. Sales decrease. The son says «*see? I was right*». The cycle is repeated several times by downgrading the quality of the bread, the mustard, etcetera, until the historical stand loses so many customers that it shuts down. The poor man has lost not only his business, but also his friends, his reputation and the goodwill in the neighborhood. The apologue is uncomfortably meaningful today.

² *Stupidity and Fear, Stupidity and Habit, Problems of Perspective*. Also online gandalf.it/stupid/chap14.pdf gandalf.it/stupid/chap15.pdf gandalf.it/stupid/chap21.pdf