How stupidity can be useful

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In sixteen years of thinking and writing about stupidity (and many more being uncomfortably aware of the problem) it never dawned on me that it might be "useful" (or maybe even necessary).

But with more listening, reading and learning I am beginning to feel that it can be worthwhile to consider it also in this perspective.

This doesn't mean praising it – not even ironically as Erasmus did in his *Encomium Moriae*. It's a matter of trying to understand if and how, sometimes, stupidity can have a meaningful role that isn't only harmful.

I don't intend to repeat here what I wrote in *Errare humanum* (chapter 29 of *The Power of Stupidity*) about the importance of learning from mistakes and the use of deliberate errors in testing scientific procedures or project development. Nor on the mischievous exploitation of other people's stupidity (*Stupidity and Cunning* chapter 17).

(Both chapters are also online – gandalf.it/stupid/chap29.pdf and gandalf.it/stupid/chap17.pdf).

A way of confusing the issue is to believe that stupidity is simply funny. Useful, above all, to have a good laugh. Thus falling into the trap of treating as ridiculous any opinion (or fact) that doesn't agree with our prejudiced way of thinking. It's true that irony is a resource, amusement is pleasant, laughing about silliness can be relaxing. But it's self-defeating when it becomes a subterfuge to avoid facing the problem.

"Ignorance is bliss", the saying goes – "not knowing" can be comforting. But it's dangerous. So here is an example of how stupidity can be useful. Every time a mistake (our own or someone else's) forces onto us the unpleasant task of understanding why and how it happened, if the consequences aren't catastrophic we have a learning opportunity that otherwise we could have missed.

The history of science and knowledge shows that many of the most useful discoveries were made by mistake. This isn't only because of the intentional discipline of deliberately exploring unlikely, or unreasonable, alternatives. It is also, quite often, the unexpected result of apparently stupid errors.

Not only in biology, but also in the evolution of culture, without stupidity we wouldn't have those "mutations" that lead to many failures, but also generate fertile developments that otherwise may not be available.

How many painful accidents were caused by prehistoric experimenters before they understood how to tame fire? How many brave, but incautious explorers drowned before the art of sailing was developed?

How stupid was considered the first person who (probably in very old, unrecorded times) thought that the earth may not be flat? Or may not be the center of the universe? How many people in our current environment are likely to stumble into a faulty experiment from which we may learn something extraordinarily important?

In addition to understanding stupidity, in order to avoid or reduce its damage, it isn't such a bad idea to find the ways in which it can be useful.

For instance we could allow a thought or a doubt that we perceive as stupid or useless to wander for a while before we rub it out. If we let it grow a bit in a secluded greenhouse in the back of our mind, maybe it could turn, unexpectedly, into something worth considering.

Many things that we read and hear are stupid. False, or misunderstood, or poorly explained. It's a troublesome, but necessary, task to doubt, recheck, rethink, correct. But it can also happen that somewhere, even in phony or superficial information, something is hidden that can be quite relevant. If we are motivated by keen curiosity, we may notice a tiny signal leading beyond obvious appearances to an interesting unexplored path.

It can happen in countless ways that the solution to a difficult problem suddenly turns out to be quite simple. After it's found, it's obvious. But it remains hard to understand why nobody had thought of it before.

A vitally important resource is the study of stupidity in history. A science in never-ending evolution, because the discovery of sources that were missing or misunderstood – as well as new archaeological findings – are helping to improve understanding and change perspectives.

The extraordinary usefulness of history (especially when it isn't "recent") is that we know the outcome of past events. It's interesting to find varying and contrasting explanations of what, how and why led to the consequences we now know – that are often very different from the intentions and expectations of whoever was involved at the time.

 It's a problem that stories of (real or apparent) success tend to prevail. We can learn more from mistakes, failures an defeats.

The glories of winners are shining bright (or are made to appear so after they have won). It is less comfortable, but more useful, to explore the timid, scared and shameful shadows hiding the humble history of human stupidity, from its remote origins to everyday news.

This doesn't mean that we can afford to cultivate, admire, imitate (or even tolerate) stupidity – as is done too often, from the depth of remote past to today's troubled times. But it's worth understanding how it can be useful.