

the
PSYCHOLOGY
of
STUPIDITY



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MACMILLAN

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NOTES

ON STUPIDITY: A WARNING

Abandon all hope, ye who enter here

“Good sense is the most equitably distributed thing in the world,” wrote Descartes. And what about stupidity?

Whether it oozes or drips, trickles or gushes, it’s everywhere. Without borders and without limits. Sometimes it emerges as a gentle, almost bearable lapping; other times as a nauseating, stagnant swamp. Still other times, it’s an earthquake, a storm, or a tidal wave that engulfs everything in its path, smashing, trampling, befouling. No matter what form it takes, stupidity splatters us all. Rumor has it that we ourselves are the source of it. I am no exception.

The Unbearable Heaviness of Being

Everyone sees bullshit, listens to it, and reads it, every single day. At the same time, each of us is guilty of generating it, thinking it, pondering it, and speaking it aloud. We are all morons from time to time, spouting nonsense as we go about our lives, without any real consequences. The crucial thing is to be aware of it and to feel sorry about it; because to err is human, and admitting your faults is halfway to having them forgiven. There will always be those who take us for fools, but we recognize our own folly far too rarely. Apart from the perpetual purr of idiocy that surrounds us, day in, day out, there’s also, sadly, the roar of the masters of stupidity, kings of stupidity—assholes with a capital A. Those assholes, whether you encounter them at work or at home, do not strike you as anecdotal. They hound you and harass you with their obstinacy in crass wrongheadedness, their unjustified arrogance. They prosper, they sign on the dotted line, and they would happily wipe out all of your opinions, emotions, and dignity with one stroke of the pen. They erode your morale and make you doubt there can be

any justice in this vile world. No matter how hard you try, you cannot detect a speck of kindred connection in them.

Stupidity is an unkept promise, a promise of intelligence and confidence that the idiots among us betray, traitors to humanity. These jerks are like dumb beasts—they're total animals! We might want to indulge them, to turn them into friends, but they're not on that level, which is to say, our level. They suffer from a disease that has no cure. And since they refuse to heal themselves, convinced they are one-eyed kings in the land of the blind, the tragicomedy is made complete. It's no surprise that people are fascinated by zombies—with the simulacrum of existence they embody, their intellectual vacuity, and their overwhelming, fundamental need to drag the living, the heroic, and the simply decent down to their own level. And that makes sense: idiots, like zombies, want to eat your brains: these failed human beings never fail you. The worst thing about them is that they can sometimes be intelligent, or at least make a show of it. They're so skilled at transforming the lineaments of learning to the bars of a cage that they would gladly burn books—along with their authors—in the name of some ideology, or of something they learned from some purported sage (idiotic or not).

Uncertainty Makes You Crazy, Certainty Makes You Stupid

Morons will condemn you instantly, with no appeal possible and no extenuating circumstances admitted, on the sole basis of the appearances they glimpse through their narrow blinkers. They know how to rouse their sympathizers, to goad them to lynching in the name of virtue, custom, respect. The idiot hunts in a pack and thinks in herd fashion. As the Georges Brassens song goes, "The plural is useless to mankind; whenever / More than four are gathered, you'll find a band of fools." He also declared: "Glory to the man who, lacking lofty ideals/ Contents himself with not being a nuisance to his neighbors." Alas! Our neighbors don't always return the favor.

Not content with making you miserable, the irksome idiot is delighted with himself. Unshakably. He is immunized against self-doubt and convinced of his rights. The happy imbecile tramples your rights without a second thought. The fool takes his beliefs for

truths graven in marble, whereas all true knowledge is built on sand. Uncertainty makes you crazy, certainty makes you stupid; you've got to choose your camp. The asshole thinks he knows better than you—not only does he know what you should think, feel, and do with your ten fingers, he knows how you should vote. He knows who you are and what's good for you better than you do. If you disagree with him, he will despise you, insult you, and assault you, literally and figuratively, for your own good. And if he can do that in the name of some higher ideal, he won't hesitate to attack the scum that your existence represents for him, with utter impunity.

And here's a bitter truth: justified self-defense is a trap. If you try to reason with an idiot or to change his mind, you're lost. The moment you decide it's your duty to improve him, the moment you think you know how he should think and act (like you, of course), the jig's up. There it is; now you're the idiot—and you're naïve to boot, since you think you're up to the challenge. Worse, the more you try to reform an idiot, the stronger he gets. He delights in seeing himself as a victim who annoys others—and who must for that reason be in the right. In reproofing him, you allow him to believe in good faith that he's a hero of anticonformity, someone who ought to be defended and admired. A member of the resistance . . . Tremble before the vastness of this curse: if you try to reform a moron, not only will you fail, you will also strengthen him and encourage imitators. Before, there was only one moron: now there are two. Fighting against stupidity only makes it stronger. The more you attack an ogre, the more souls he devours.

The Horsefeathers of the Apocalypse

Thus, there is no way that stupidity can lose its power. It's exponential. Are we living today—more so than yesterday and less so than tomorrow—in the golden age of idiocy? As far back as the written record extends, the greatest minds of their ages believed this to be the case. Maybe they were right, at the time. Then again, maybe, like everyone else, they were just old fools. Nonetheless, the novelty of the contemporary era is that it would take only one idiot with a red button to eradicate all stupidity, and the whole world with it. An idiot elected by sheep who were only too proud to choose their slaughterer.

THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF IDIOTS



› Serge Ciccotti ‹

Psychologist and researcher at the University of Southern Brittany

The ignorant man affirms, the scientist doubts, the
wise man reflects.

—ARISTOTLE

Is it possible to make a scientific study of idiots? It's a provocative question! We know of asinine studies (for example: "Farting as a Defense Against Unspeakable Dread"¹), and studies on pointless jobs that have no social value and bring little personal satisfaction;² but studies on idiots themselves? What would that even look like?

Actually, if you look at the scientific literature in the psychological domain, you'll find that bullshit, in a general way, has been fairly well researched. In this sense, you could say that, yes, it's possible to conduct a scientific investigation of idiots; but in so doing, it's important to recognize that the study of idiots is no more or less than the study of all mankind. A portrait of the idiot can be drawn from some of the variables that different studies have explored. This will allow us to gain a relatively precise idea of the idiot (interfering, stupid, rather limited in attention span or intellect), and of some of their variations, such as the conceited, brutal blowhard, whose stupidity contains an element of toxic narcissism, not to mention a total lack of empathy.

Stupidity and the Short Attention Span

Rather than study the idiot as an object, psychological research focuses on understanding *why* people act like idiots sometimes.

Studies of behavioral scripts³ show that most of the time people do not analyze their environment deeply before they act. They depend on familiar, habitual routine actions, which they execute automatically in response to internal or environmental factors. That's why, if you happen to be crying, there's always some moron standing by who says, "Hey, how are you doing?" That's as stupid as checking your watch a second time, right after you've just looked at it.

When you want to know what time it is, you look at your watch. The script unfolds mechanically. This mechanism allows you to be inattentive, because the effect of the script is to reduce the amount of attention required to complete a task. Consequently, because you're not paying attention and are thinking of other things, you look at your watch without seeing it. The information is not retained; which is why you have to look again to check the time. It's stupid, isn't it?

In the field of research on attentional resources, psychologists have demonstrated that people often are blind to change,⁴ and that even an important alteration is not always perceived by the individual. That's why, if you've lost fifteen pounds on a diet, you always run into some asshole who doesn't see the difference. Research on the illusion of control⁵ allows us to understand why, for instance, you'll always find some jerk pressing the elevator button like a maniac when it's already been pressed. Studies on social influence show that when a moronic driver goes down a dead-end street, some idiot always follows him; and when you ask a contestant on a quiz show if it's the sun or the moon that revolves around the Earth, the moron asks to poll the audience.

Human beings tend to cast aside pure reason and expected values. The dumbest among us, as a rule, is the one whose outlook reflects the greatest divergence from the average of studied effects. Generally, his vision of the world is simplistic: he has trouble with large numbers, with square roots, with complexity, and indeed with the bell curve itself, where he is to be found on the fringes. Stalin once said, "The death of one man is a tragedy; the death of millions is a statistic." As a rule, people are more receptive to anecdotes than to scientific reports stuffed with figures. But the idiot devours anecdotes. He will know someone who fell forty floors and didn't get a scratch . . . anyway, "that's what I heard on the news."

Stupidity and Faith

Studies of belief show that people have faith in justice ("Belief in a Just World"⁶), which is probably the most common shared belief on earth. The worst assholes illustrate how this belief can be misused when they say things like: "Sure, she was raped, but did you see how she was dressed?" The dumber a person is, the more likely he is to blame the victim. Another sort of asshole will deride the poor as "filthy beggars."

Idiots excel in their capacity to believe anything and everything, from folktales to conspiracy theories, from the moon's influence on behavior to the effectiveness of homeopathy (it works on the dog, there's proof!). On May 28, 2017, a motorcycle was filmed driving several miles on the highway without its driver, who had fallen off. Some confirmed idiots attributed this phenomenon to

the supernatural specter known as the “woman in white”; brainier types put it down to gyroscopic effect.⁷ There seems to be a negative correlation between holding mystical beliefs and winning a Nobel Prize.⁸

Studies⁹ in the realm of belief always distinguish between the naïve credulity of greenhorns and the entrenched stupidity of old fools.¹⁰ It’s been proven that negative memories fade with time, whereas positive memories endure. This is why the older a person gets, the greater his tendency to regard the past in a positive light, which is why old fools like to complain wistfully, “Everything was better in the good old days.”

A large swath of irrational human behavior has been scrutinized by psychologists, who have determined that it springs from the individual’s need to control his environment. Every living organism expresses this need (think of how your dog races to the door every time the bell rings, even though it’s never for him). This compulsion can result in absurd actions by members of the human species, like, for instance, going to see a psychic. There are about a hundred thousand people in France who declare themselves to be “psychics”; they earn more than \$3 billion a year. Researchers have never identified any genuine gift in self-styled psychics, but that doesn’t keep these so-called seers from benefiting their clients. It’s estimated that 20 percent of women and 10 percent of men have consulted a psychic at least once in their lives. Generally, psychics report that they don’t regret having chosen this fraudulent line of work to earn their crust; apparently, idiots making other idiots the basis of their livelihood works perfectly well as a business model. The need for control is often accompanied by the illusion of control; and idiots probably delude themselves that they are in control more than others.¹¹ One proof of the power of this illusion can be shown through the everyday example of driving or riding in a car. When you’re a passenger, you fear accidents much more than you do when you are the driver. There are some fools who find it impossible to sleep when they are passengers; apparently they can sleep only when they’re the driver!

The idiot will throw the dice as hard as he can to get sixes; he will choose his own numbers in the lottery. He will stoop to pick up a penny for luck and make sure to avoid walking under ladders. The fool has everything under control: if he wins the lottery, it’s because he dreamed of the number 6 for six nights in a row, and

because $6 \times 6 = 36$, he played the 36 and won. By the same token, it must be accepted that the idiot is in good mental health overall; because the illusion of control is much weaker among depressed people.¹²

Studies About Idiots That Help Explain Your Job

In another area studied widely by scientists, idiots have been found to employ an exceptionally wide range of strategies to shore up their self-esteem. Studies on bias and false consensus¹³ demonstrate that people tend to exaggerate the number of other people who share their faults. This is why, when you point out to some jerk that he has blown past a stop sign, he will retort, “But nobody stops at this sign!”

The typical asshole often indulges in retrospective bias. At the maternity hospital, he’ll say, “I was sure it was going to be a boy.” As he stands in front of the television on election night, he’ll declare, “I was sure Trump was going to be president,” and sometimes when you’re talking with him he’ll tell you, “I knew you were going to say that!” Is the idiot showing bad faith? Is the idiot a fortune-teller? Not at all: the idiot deploys “I knew it” to strategic ends, to demonstrate that he’s better informed than he really is. “I know, I know. . . .” Of course, you must never mention these studies to idiots, as they will deny that they do such things.

To protect their self-esteem, many people overestimate their abilities. This bias has been proved by psychological experiments that demonstrate that, in multiple arenas, a large number of participants rate themselves higher than average in such categories as, for instance, intelligence and everything connected with it. On one side of the axis, you have those humble souls whose human qualities of simplicity, humility, and discretion lead others to perceive them as simpleminded or naïve, and to criticize them for lack of confidence and treat them like dummies who can be easily manipulated. On the other side of the axis, you find the high achievers, which is to say, overconfident idiots. One of these smug morons can exact a high price on society when he (for example) gets lost at sea, or gets stranded in the mountains after off-piste skiing—even if he mostly contents himself with exaggerating his prowess at maintaining speed on the highway.

bias that we find it easier to deal with an idiot than with a genius in a complex social setting. In addition, this bias leads us to read more meaning into a negative event than a positive one. If you're looking for something that you've lost at home, your reflex is to think that you didn't lose it, someone else must have put it somewhere. "Who took my . . .?" Ultimately, when anything fails, there's a tendency to think that there's a reason for it, that some idiot must have wrecked everything.

And finally, let's note that researchers have discovered a fundamental distortion in the attribution process.¹⁹ When you observe someone, you attribute their behavior to deep-dyed character, as opposed to any external factors that may be relevant. In many cases, you come to the natural conclusion: the guy's an idiot. As a result, when a car zooms past us, it must be because the driver is a brute, and not because one of his kids got hurt at school; when a friend doesn't answer an email for two hours it's because he's angry, not because he had an internet outage. If a colleague hasn't handed in a file yet, it's because he's lazy, not because he's overworked; if a professor responds to me curtly it's because he's a jerk, not because my question was stupid. This mechanism increases our tendency to spot idiots everywhere. Those are at least two of the reasons why we are so sensitive to stupidity.

A TAXONOMY OF MORONS



› Jean-François Dortier ‹

Founder and editorial director of the magazines Le Cercle Psy [Psychological Circle] and Sciences Humaines [Social Sciences]

If there are multiple forms of intelligence, as psychologists assert, it stands to reason that there must also be an impressive range of forms of stupidity. Given the embryonic stage of development of this science (to which this book adds a few important milestones) and the dearth of authoritative studies, we should begin with an overview of representative samples.

Backwardness

Backward, slow, ignorant, idiotic, useless, foolish, lug-headed, imbecilic, stupid, witless, cracked, silly, moronic, dippy . . . the vocabulary of stupidity is endless. These semantic riches reflect subtle gradations in meaning, variation in usage, and the effects of social trends.

On the whole, however, the meaning always comes down to the same thing: whatever the variety of epithets and metaphors, the fool is a person who is judged to be of reduced intelligence and limited mental scope. Thus, stupidity is always defined invidiously, as a relative concept. A person is not inherently stupid (if everyone was stupid, nobody would notice it). Put another way, stupidity is measured from a fixed point established by a person who considers himself superior.

Rubes

Also known as rednecks or hillbillies, rubes are stupid, cruel, racist, and selfish. At least that's how the French satirist Cabu, who immortalized their traits in his comic strips, depicted them. They dominate the ranks of the voters who elect populist parties, because they're stupid; which is to say they're incapable of political probity, and they rely on short-term logic and sweeping generalizations. Their thinking is categorical—everything is black or white, with no nuance. They're stubborn and obtuse, and rational arguments hold no sway with them: they won't ever back down from their opinions. They think what they think, period.

They're cruel because, lacking any empathy, they seek out scapegoats and lash out at innocent victims like Arabs, blacks, and migrants in general.

They're selfish because only one thing matters to them: their well-being and comfort; their pocketbook.

But do these rubes conform to an actual psychological profile? If this were the case it would be necessary to demonstrate an organic relationship between stupidity (in the sense of a low level of intellect) and cruelty (defined as selfishness combined with contempt for others).

And yet, the link between these two qualities is only conjectural: a person can be stupid and kind (consider the "village idiot"), just as a person can be intelligent and cruel. Is that not the case of the caricaturists Cabu and Jean-Marc Reiser, who worked for a magazine called *Hara-Kiri*, whose motto was "stupid and nasty"? Those men were not truly stupid (even if the systematic use of caricature and cliché ultimately produces a deadening effect on the wit). Nasty: that they often were.

The Universal Idiot

"They're all morons!" This phrase is uttered, usually rather loudly, by someone sitting on a barstool. But who is this "they"? Politicians, the voters who elect them, bureaucrats, incompetents, and by extension, pretty much everybody—since the phrase does not carry a lot of nuance.

This absence of discernment in analysis, this arrogance that places itself above the common run of humanity to levy judgment on the rest of the world: these are almost foolproof signs that you're dealing with a true idiot. "The peculiar nature of error is that it does not recognize itself," Descartes observed. This is especially true of stupidity. Obviously, a fool cannot recognize himself. On the contrary, he himself constitutes a kind of lightning rod of folly. Wherever you happen to be, if you hear someone declare "They're all morons!" you can be sure that there's a moron in the vicinity.

Artificial Stupidity

"Computers are totally stupid."¹ This assertion doesn't come from just anyone. Gérard Berry teaches computer science at the Collège de France. A specialist in artificial intelligence, he does not

hesitate to challenge the speculations (ill-informed) on the capacity of machines to surpass human intelligence.

Certainly, artificial intelligence has made significant progress in the last sixty years. And certainly, machines can recognize images, translate texts, and produce medical diagnoses. In 2016, the Deepmind computer program AlphaGo succeeded in defeating one of the world's best players of Go, the Japanese game of strategy. While this performance was impressive, we should not overlook the fact that AlphaGo knows how to do only one thing: to play the game of Go. The same was true of the Deep Blue program that beat Garry Kasparov at chess in 1996, more than twenty years ago. All that these so-called intelligent machines do is develop an extremely specialized competence, which is taught to them by their human master. Speculations on the autonomy of machines that can "learn on their own" are nothing but myths. Machines don't know how to transfer skills acquired from one domain into another; whereas one of the basic mechanisms of human intelligence is analogical transfer. The strength of computers is the power of their memories to retain the work they've done, and their electrifying capacity for calculation.

"Learning machines" that work on the principle of "deep learning" (the new generation of artificial intelligence) are not intelligent, because they don't understand what they're doing. All that Google's automatic translation program does, for instance, is learn how to use a word in a given context (drawing on an immense reservoir of examples); but it remains perfectly "stupid" in the process. In no case does it understand the meaning of the words it uses.

This is why Gérard Berry feels justified in saying that, at root, "the computer is completely stupid."

Collective Stupidity

Collective intelligence designates a form of group intelligence, as displayed by ants, or neurons, for example. Each element in isolation is not capable of much; but as a group can produce great feats. By the magic of self-organization, ants are able to build hallways, bridal chambers, pantries, hatcheries, and ventilation systems in their anthills. Some of them practice agriculture (growing mushrooms), animal husbandry (raising aphids), etc.

deemed “imbeciles”), with an IQ of 20 to 34. Still further below, with an IQ inferior to 20, are the “profoundly backward” (formerly classified as “idiots”).

Today, the words “retarded” and “impaired” are out of favor in psychology; they have been replaced by euphemisms. We speak of “learning disabilities” and we avoid the expressions “handicapped” and “differently abled.” In the same way, we no longer speak of “geniuses” or “gifted” children; we speak of “precocious children” or of children with “high potential.” This doesn’t keep anyone, in practice, from using tests to classify children according to their degree of mental disability, so they can be guided to specialized methods of instruction.

Imbecile, Idiot

At the dawn of psychiatry, the terms “imbecility” and “idiocy” were used to describe people who displayed a very low level of intellect, who could not read, write, and in certain cases, speak. Philippe Pinel, the French physician who is sometimes called the “father of modern psychiatry,” considered Victor de l’Aveyron (better known as the “wild boy of Aveyron”) to be an “idiot.” Today the boy would be classified as autistic. In the words of the psychiatrist Jean-Étienne Esquirol, “The idiot is an individual who knows nothing, is capable of nothing, and wants nothing. Every idiot embodies, more or less, the acme of incapacity.”

Dr. Paul Sollier, in his 1891 book *Psychologie de l’Idiot et de l’Imbécile: Essai de Psychologie Morbide* [*The Psychology of the Idiot and the Imbecile: An Essay on Psychological Morbidity*], devoted one chapter to “idiots and imbeciles.” Apologizing for the tardy progress of French psychology, as compared to English and American achievement in the science, he noted that there was no consensus on the right way to define idiocy or imbecility: some use intelligence as the evaluative factor, others rely on language (the inability to speak correctly); still others apply moral considerations (a lack of self-control).

Over time, psychologists would abandon the concept of the “idiot.” The only remnant of this notion that still pops up on occasion is the term “idiot savant,” though even there, the term “savant syndrome” is preferred. The profile, which incorporates certain cases of autism and of the developmental disorder known

as Williams syndrome, is marked by deficits in language or in general intelligence, and also by unusual difficulties with mathematics, drawing, and music.

For centuries, the village idiot was the archetype of a intellectually disabled person, the fool, the simpleton. Not too long ago, every village had its “crackpot” (*fada* is the expression used in the south of France), who would be hired for menial tasks. This oaf was regarded as pleasant and harmless, always smiling and happy, laughing over nothing. He wasn’t considered dangerous. In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Dopey, with his beatific smile, big eyes, and crooked cap, illustrates the type.

Loons

“Loon” is a cute way to talk about fools, not angry fools, but the dreamy kind caught up in a fantasy world. The loon is a step away from the weirdo—that is to say, a loon who does bizarre or excessive things. And the weirdo is not far removed from the freak, who, according to the rigorous National Center for Textual and Lexical Resources, is “generally a fantasist who displays eccentric behavior.” In current French usage, the expression “freak out” can mean horse around, show off, or act goofy; and it also approximates the French expression “*faire le zouave*”: to act like a clown. In English, “get your freak on” recently entered the *Oxford English Dictionary*, meaning, roughly, to engage in uninhibited sexual behavior, or to dance like a maniac.

A THEORY OF ASSHOLES



A Conversation with
› Aaron James ‹

*Professor of philosophy at the University of California, Irvine, and author
of Assholes: A Theory*

Q. According to your theory, what is an asshole?

A. It's a man, or more rarely a woman, who accords himself special advantages in his social life and feels immune from reproach. The typical example is the asshole who cuts in line at the post office, granting himself a privilege that's normally reserved for pregnant women and emergencies. In the moment, he has no justification beyond feeling that he's rich, handsome, or smarter than everyone else, so his time is more valuable than theirs. If you ask him to stand in line like everyone else, either he won't listen, or he'll tell you to get lost. It's not that he despises other people; rather, it's that he doesn't think they deserve his attention. The moment that you don't understand how extraordinary he is, he decides you're unworthy of his interest.

Q. Do assholes behave like assholes in every arena of their lives?

A. Not necessarily. Someone can act like an asshole because he's going through a rough patch, it might be a bad week, or some hangover from his adolescence. But for me, the bona fide asshole, the true asshole, is consistently an asshole in multiple arenas, but not in all of them. He might be an asshole at work and on the road, but not at home, or the other way around. The all-purpose asshole, who's an asshole whatever the context, is rare. Stalin appears to have been not only a genocidal maniac, but also an asshole in every sphere.

Q. Can extremely cultured and intelligent people be the worst assholes?

A. The worst, I don't know; in any case they're as bad as everyone else. Intelligence doesn't keep you from being a serious asshole; it can even contribute to it by planting the idea in the skull of the asshole that he's above the throng. Along with financial prosperity and beauty, intelligence is one of the qualities that make it easier to admire yourself and to attract the good opinion of others. This means that privileged people have a much greater risk of becoming eminent assholes.

Q. So you're saying that assholery has less to do with intelligence or attitude than with the way we conduct ourselves in our social lives?

A. Yes, it has to do with social behavior, but the internal trip wire is the failure to show interest in others. Assholes think it's up to everyone else to adjust to them, no matter what the situation. Oftentimes, some of their friends will humor them in that. And so one part of it is the social dynamic, but the primary cause is something personal and deeply rooted that's very hard to dislodge.

Q. Is an asshole who's aware of his assholery still an asshole?

A. The problem is that an asshole can be well aware that that's what he is, and be proud of it. "Yeah, I'm an asshole. That's your problem!" Awareness isn't enough to change anything. The asshole is so entrenched in his assholery that it's hard for him to question his actions. But it's not impossible: if he has an existential crisis, or a car accident, or a tragedy, he might take stock of himself. Or when he gets old. But by that time, it's mostly because he's low on energy or testosterone! And that's still quite rare; you can't count on it. In any case, awareness in itself is not sufficient to deeply affect the conscience of an asshole.

Q. Can children be assholes?

A. Although you might think so, given the egocentrism they sometimes display, I don't think you can include assholery among their fixed character traits. They change too quickly for that. But adolescents can go through assholeish phases, though most of them grow out of it. It's really only in adulthood that assholery becomes constant and systematic.

Q. How many adults may be considered assholes? One in ten? One in two?

A. Everything depends on the culture, the subculture, and the social sphere. The ratio is much higher in the United States than in Canada, Italy, or Brazil or Japan—for that matter, pretty much nowhere has less assholery than Japan. Of course,

them better, like I felt after I finished my book. But I feel no gratitude, because they do bad things for bad reasons with no consideration for me. They cause too many frustrations and problems. At the end of the day, I might sometimes think I've dealt with them or responded to them well, but I don't give them credit for it: I would have preferred not to have run into them!

Q. In 2016, you devoted a book to the dangers posed by the election of Donald Trump. Do you consider him a supreme asshole, or is he worse than that?

A. Yes, Donald Trump is a supreme asshole, an überasshole, if you like. I mean by that, that he's an asshole who inspires respect and admiration for his mastery of the art of assholery, despite heavy competition from his peers. Assholes generally have to fight for the title of "asshole in chief" or "baron" of assholes, but few can match Trump's prowess at piling assholery upon assholery (Kim Jong-un, in North Korea, being a notable exception). Those who manage it for a time, like Chris Christie, the former governor of New Jersey, often end up becoming more docile.

Q. Were there any assholes among the world's illustrious philosophers?

A. It's funny, but I've written about Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose reflections on self-esteem are very important to our understanding of the mind-set of assholes and the destructive dynamic it produces. But Rousseau himself abandoned his numerous children, and I believe I heard that he practically bought a twelve-year-old girl and installed her in a little cottage to give him sexual favors. Despite his genius, in some ways he definitely resembles an asshole!

Q. Have any assholes congratulated you on the success of your book about them?

A. Yes, readers have written me to say, "Thank you for this book, my children gave it to me, and there's no question that I'm an asshole." Their comments have always been kind. "Bravo, well

played.” And some have even sworn that it was going to change their life and that they were going to behave differently . . . not at all. As for the assholes I know, I don’t know if they’ve read it or not: I try to limit my interactions with them as much as possible!

Interview by Jean-François Marmion.

FROM STUPIDITY TO HOGWASH



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ow shall we classify the various forms of stupidity? Moronic, idiotic, cretinous, silly, dumb, foolish, imbecilic, clueless, inept, and that supreme qualifier, *fucking* stupid? Do they all come down to the same thing? Is *stupid* the genus to which all the other species cling? In France, the word “*con*” could stand in for all the others.

But how can the word “stupidity” even be defined, given the blurriness of its categories and the fact that they so often can be reduced to mere insults? It’s hard to determine if all the different gradations represent actual, distinct qualities. Indeed, the vocabulary of stupidity is so ingrained in language and culture that it seems impossible to establish universal principles at all. Is *tonto* in Spanish really analogous to the French *idiot*? Is *moron* in American English the same as *dunce* in British English? Does *asshole* in English mean the same thing as *connard* in French? So great is the variety of forms of stupidity that, since antiquity, many of those who have taken on the task of attempting to define its essence have given up, choosing instead to give illustrations of it.

Comedy and satire often (or perhaps exclusively) attack human folly; and practitioners of the art from Aristophanes to Lucian, from Persius to Juvenal, from Erasmus to Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope, from Molière to Voltaire, from Feydeau to Alfred Jarry, from P. G. Wodehouse to Flann O’Brien, have contributed so many incarnations of stupidity that it’s hard to find any one unifying element. Ship of fools? Circus? Pandemonium? Zoo? How are they different? Most of the taxonomists of folly have contented themselves with enumerating examples of it, and every time a philosopher tries to propound a theory, it’s immediately disproved by others. Only literary authors, from Gustave Flaubert to Léon Bloy, from Robert Musil to Witold Gombrowicz, from Jean-Paul Sartre to Milan Kundera, would seem to be up to the job; but they don’t go beyond the discouraging conclusion: “That’s the way it is.”

Degrees of Stupidity

Even if the classification of stupidity is difficult, it’s not impossible. Stupidity has degrees, which may be described by composite

portraits of individual types. At the lowest step of the ladder is the dull-witted stupidity, literally bestial, of those whose intelligence is so low that it approaches the animal kingdom (donkey, buzzard, dodo)—perfectly embodying brute stupidity. It also applies to those who react to everything with befuddlement, lower lip drooping. This kind of denseness is earthbound (like the backward Boeotians in ancient Greece) and stony (like the La Fontaine fable about the well-meaning bear who smashes the head of his human friend with a paving stone to protect him from a fly). Among the French, slang has mostly reduced this category to one word: *con*, the vulgar term for female genitalia. For men, though, a couple of other words sometimes come into play: *scrotum* or *dickhead*.

One step higher up the ladder you find idiots and imbeciles, those whose understanding is so weak (aka feeble) that their debility seems almost pathological. This category also includes cretins afflicted by congenital infirmities. Another step higher you find those who, while somewhat sharper than the brute contingent, are nice but bumbling. These are the simpletons, the ninny, dolts, and nitwits.

One step higher still, you find the fools. The fool does not necessarily lack for intelligence, and on occasion may show good judgment. But he deploys it badly, and is undermined by his vanity; he likes to circulate, and he needs the company of others. Whereas brutes are solitary, he is social. He's pompous and full of himself, like a conceited character in a Molière comedy. The fool is not passive. Often, like Flaubert's Bouvard and Pécuchet, he buzzes with activity. He isn't hostile to knowledge, and he's not incapable of acquiring it; his folly resides in the fact that he doesn't know how to apply it or to put it to use.

At a level still higher than simple foolishness, you find what Musil calls "sophisticated" or "intelligent" stupidity, which he claims extends into the highest realms of wit.¹ The intelligent fool can be very learned and cultivated; he may even sparkle in society, but his intelligence does not match his affectations. He comes up with ill-conceived and unwieldy plans, because, Musil tells us, he suffers from "insufficient harmony between the whims of his emotion and the scope of his intellect, which is too small to contain them." Musil contrasts this stupidity, or intelligent foolishness, with "honest" stupidity, which bears "the rosy cheeks of ordinary life." He often caricatures snobs who don't know why they admire something or someone, like Proust's *salonniste*



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