

Theory of Stupidity—Bonhoeffer

Taken from a circular letter addressing many topics, written to three friends and co-workers in the conspiracy against Hitler, on the tenth anniversary of Hitler's accession to the chancellorship of Germany.

'Stupidity is a more dangerous enemy of the good than malice. One may protest against evil; it can be exposed and, if need be, prevented by use of force. Evil always carries within itself the germ of its own subversion in that it leaves behind in human beings at least a sense of unease. Against stupidity we are defenseless. Neither protests nor the use of force accomplish anything here; reasons fall on deaf ears; facts that contradict one's prejudgetment simply need not be believed — in such moments the stupid person even becomes critical — and when facts are irrefutable they are just pushed aside as inconsequential, as incidental. In all this the stupid person, in contrast to the malicious one, is utterly self-satisfied and, being easily irritated, becomes dangerous by going on the attack. For that reason, greater caution is called for than with a malicious one. Never again will we try to persuade the stupid person with reasons, for it is senseless and dangerous.

'If we want to know how to get the better of stupidity, we must seek to understand its nature. This much is certain, that it is in essence not an intellectual defect but a human one. There are human beings who are of remarkably agile intellect yet stupid, and others who are intellectually quite dull yet anything but stupid. We discover this to our surprise in particular situations. The impression one gains is not so much that stupidity is a congenital defect, but that, under certain circumstances, people are made stupid or that they allow this to happen to them. We note further that people who have isolated themselves from others or who live in solitude manifest this defect less frequently than individuals or groups of people inclined or condemned to sociability. And so it would seem that stupidity is perhaps less a psychological than a sociological problem. It is a particular form of the impact of historical circumstances on human beings, a psychological concomitant of certain external conditions. Upon closer observation, it becomes apparent that every strong upsurge of power in the public sphere, be it of a political or of a religious nature, infects a large part of humankind with stupidity. It would even seem that this is virtually a sociological-psychological law. The power of the one needs the stupidity of the other. The process at work here is not that particular human capacities, for instance, the intellect, suddenly atrophy or fail. Instead, it seems that under the overwhelming impact of rising power, humans are deprived of their inner independence, and, more or less consciously, give up establishing an autonomous position toward the emerging circumstances. The fact that the stupid person is often stubborn must not blind us to the fact that he is not independent. In conversation with him, one virtually feels that one is dealing not at all with a person, but with slogans, catchwords and the like, that have taken possession of him. He is under a spell, blinded, misused, and abused in his very being. Having thus become a mindless tool, the stupid person will also be capable of any evil and at the same time incapable of *seeing* that it is evil. This is where the danger of diabolical misuse lurks, for it is this that can once and for all destroy human beings.

'Yet at this very point it becomes quite clear that only an act of liberation, not instruction, can overcome stupidity. Here we must come to terms with the fact that in most cases a genuine internal liberation becomes possible only when external liberation has preceded it. Until then we must abandon all attempts to convince the stupid person. This state of affairs explains why

in such circumstances our attempts to know what ‘the people’ really think are in vain and why, under these circumstances, this question is so irrelevant for the person who is thinking and acting responsibly. The word of the Bible that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom declares that the internal liberation of human beings to live the responsible life before God is the only genuine way to overcome stupidity.

‘But these thoughts about stupidity also offer consolation in that they utterly forbid us to consider the *majority* of people to be stupid in *every* circumstance. It really will depend on whether those in power expect more from people’s stupidity than from their inner independence and wisdom.’

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, from ‘After Ten Years’ in *Letters and Papers from Prison*
(Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works/English, vol. 8) Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010.

In the 1970s, Carlo Cipolla, a social psychologist, developed FIVE LAWS OF STUPIDITY. The term itself, he said, wasn’t a description of intellectual acuity, but of *social responsibility*. A stupid person is a person who causes losses to another person, or to a group of persons, while deriving no gain for himself, and possibly incurring losses. Cases in which someone takes an action by which both parties gained, was deemed *intelligent*. *Stupidity* is independent of any other characteristics of that person: whether nationality, ethnicity, sex, economic status, or even education. The frequency in a given group is independent of the size of the group. This too indicates it’s a *social* phenomenon, a spontaneous mob mentality. So Cipolla warns that we will *always* underestimate how many there are in a group.

Stupid people are dangerous and damaging because reasonable people find it difficult to imagine and understand unreasonable behavior. An intelligent person may understand the logic of a malicious person — his actions follow a pattern of rationality. But a stupid creature will harass you for no reason, for no advantage, without any plan or scheme, and at the most improbable times and places. You have no rational way of telling if, when, how, or why the stupid creature attacks. Because the stupid person’s actions do not conform to the rules of rationality, it follows that we are generally caught by surprise by the attack. We cannot mount a rational defense, because the attack itself lacks any rational structure. Non-stupid people constantly forget that at all times and places, and under any circumstances, dealing with or associating with stupid people *always* turns out to be a costly mistake.

Yet, our naiveté, compassion, and mercy for these stupid creatures, may lead us to put them in positions where they can exercise authority over others. We enable them to hurt themselves and others. We hope to give them a sense of self-worth that will overcome their stupidity. We think it’s an issue of education or life-experience — that they’re victims of circumstance, and not innately stupid. Thus we help them rise to power, as with Hitler and Stalin, even allowing them to make our regulations and laws, and to enforce them. But in truth, this never accrues to the welfare of a society; instead it leads to its downfall.

This is as true in the church as in the world. So those who would lead must first demonstrate they can manage their own households well. They must make *intelligent choices* that benefit others as well as themselves, *ethical choices*, showing that they are servants of all.