

Stupidity as a Positive Feedback System

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Abstract

As the learned inability to learn, 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 becomes first self-sustaining and then renders behavior irrelevant to the environment by carrying detached actions to maladaptive excesses.

INTRODUCTION

In terms of intellectual development, stupidity may justly be viewed as both adaptive and maladaptive. In the short run, it is adaptive in that it helps an individual adjust to his cultural group's values by permitting him to accept any obvious contradictions between the real and ideal.¹ As a means to short-term adaptation, stupidity is a classic example of the "Neurotic Paradox" which promotes behavioral patterns which are subject to immediate short-term reinforcement although the long-term results will be negative.² A related drawback is that short-term errors may be hard to overcome in the long run¹ if the immediate decision sets you off on a bad behavioral pathway which becomes progressively more and more difficult to escape from later. Addictions to drugs or "Pleasure" would be commonplace examples of this basic physio/psychological principle of learning and life.² As philosopher Honoré de Balzac noted, "Pleasure is like certain drugs, to continue to obtain

1a The Psychotic Paradox, on the other hand, is a psycho/cultural mechanism of delayed gratification which blocks short-term, immediate presumed advantages for the sake of possible rewards to be gained later—as when a worker goes on strike, thus sacrificing the all but tangible reality of the next paycheck for the sake of a potentially bigger one in the future. Corporation founder Walter Chrysler personified this principle: He was always willing to accept a short-term risk for a long-term pay-off. (Cochran, T. "Walter Percy Chrysler". **Dictionary of American Biography**. Vol. 22; Supplement 2 p. 103. Charles Scribner's Sons; New York. 1955.)

the same result, one must double the dose, and death or brutalization is contained in the last one".³ In practice, it thus becomes a positive feedback system reinforcing itself.

DISCUSSION

If stupidity is adaptive in helping one fit into his immediate surroundings, it is maladaptive over the long run, as it inhibits innovations and constructive criticism of the social environment. Individuals adjust to the group, but the group loses its capacity to adjust to its surroundings as members sacrifice their individual integrity, insight and ideas and conform to prevailing mores for the rewards of social acceptance.

Of course, the bottom line, long-term net effect of stupidity is negative, but its universal presence cannot be understood without recognition of its role in helping people adapt to their immediate, short-term social situation. Thus, it becomes clear how there can be so much stupidity around although it is, in the long run, maladaptive. Survival within the system is promoted if one is so stupid as to accept the system's stupidities. Also, short-term survival of the system (institution, group, etc.) is promoted through enhanced social cohesion. However, these immediate gains are countered by the long-term loss of induced inefficiency of information processing. Our cultural life is really a very human trade off among these three dependent features: 1.) objective, rational, logical processing of information; 2.) psychological gratification and self-image of the individual and 3.) group cooperation⁴ and social cohesion.

CONCLUSION

With the qualification of arbitrariness in mind, it should be noted that most people who find stupidity in others judge efficiency of processing information and usually do not even consider the emotional and social dimension of decisions affecting individual and institutional life. Accordingly, what might be regarded as stupidity may in fact be a healthy, short-term compromise with psychic satisfaction and group cohesion. Real stupidity comes when one factor (information processing, psychic comfort or social cohesion) disrupts the others.

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