



Factors Contributing to Stupidity



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Commentary

In searching for intrinsic causes of human imperfections, it is most reasonable to begin with a consideration of genetics, and indeed a genetic model for maladaptation has been proposed by evolutionary psychologists Cosmi-des & Tooby [1]. They attribute some maladaptation to a mismatch between the mandates of a human gene pool shaped during the Pleistocene but expressed in a modern, urban environment. For example, they allege some digestive maladies and emotional problems are due to the fact that we evolved in and for an age of hunting and gathering. Although they do not specify whether they are considering normal, abnormal or vestigial human behavior, they suggest a phylogenetic model [1] which explains some maladaptive human behavior in terms of the time lag between an evolving genome and the constantly changing social/intellectual environment¹. Another example has been described by psychologists Nueberg & Cottrell [2], who posit that bias toward out-groups, was of survival advantage in the past, when others often were a threat, but creates friction now in cosmopolitan, diversified cultures. Although stupidity is a behavioral universal, this cannot be taken as proof of a genetic basis for the trait, as it could be the legacy of a common culture or, more probably, a function inherent in language². Most emphatically, stupidity is not mental retardation, which is caused by the many factors which limit the cognitive skills of those who test poorly on conventional IQ tests. Such factors may be genetic or chemical, as in the cases of drugs (alcohol) or poisons (sodium fluoride) [3]. Retardation may also be caused by head injuries at birth or otherwise and infections [4]. According to the Chinese, a baby's intellect is compromised if the afterbirth is eaten by dogs or swine [5]. However, all such restrictions on the development of normal mental functions (along with the infirmities of old age) [6] are irrelevant to the topic at hand. Stupidity is not a restricted form of intelligence but a normal

mental function in its own right and an expression of our cultural not our genetic heritage. Or, as comic Bertrand Russell put it, "Men are born ignorant, not stupid; they are made stupid by education" [7] or failure thereof.

Education aside, there are any number of environmental factors which promote maladaptive behavior, but they really do not contribute directly to stupidity, as caused by an irrelevant schema [8]. Some of the environmental factors which reduce adaptability are climate, diet and disease. In addition, other factors, like fatigue, age and drugs may play roles as well [9]. It is interesting to note that all the above factors hit the smartest hardest. The dull may get a bit duller, but the brilliant can suffer greatly. Thus, society loses not only by a drop in general responsiveness of everyone but particularly from the loss of the most helpful, creative ideas from the very bright [10]. In these ways such factors foster general stupidity. Geography, for example, can play an indirect role in the development of stupidity [11]. Usually, seacoasts are areas of cultural interaction. Where transportation is difficult, as in the mountains, or where distances are forbidding, as on the plains, beliefs are less likely to be challenged and become more firmly entrenched [12]. Of course, in a constant environment, fixed beliefs may be quite functional for the long haul, but when change does come, adaptation is then all the more difficult. Climate has a more direct role in effecting stupidity. The oppressive heat and humidity in the Middle East and much of India no doubt played a role in the development of the fatalistic indigenous religions. An accepting, passive life style is adaptive to such stultifying and sultry conditions in that it keeps one from overheating, but it hardly encourages inventive enterprise. The tropics are disease ridden [13] and stupefying in that they afford too much food and comfort naturally and provide too little stimulus for people to develop their potential [14].

¹This principle of a time lag may be applied also to the formation of a Belief system/schema—that is, by the time we learn something, it may be dated—but my model for stupidity goes beyond this by emphasizing that the formation and more so the application of any schema is likely to be warped by language and cultural mores to the detriment of the formers and applicers of the belief system.

²Co-discoverer of the structure of the genetic material (DNA) James Watson regards stupidity as a genetic disease which can be cured by gene therapy. Although my approach differs from his, I applaud and support anyone who can reduce the amount of stupidity in the world however it is caused or defined. JFW There is also the possibility of a stupidity virus which affects perception.

By way of contrast, the moderate and varying climates of the temperate zones encourage people to interact vigorously with the environment as they make continual adjustments to changing seasons. In the past, for much of the year, work was a way to keep warm, so the climate encouraged an active work ethic. As working is a way of learning, a culture actively engaged with the environment tends to thwart the development of stupidity—e.g., the climate of New England challenged those living there to respond positively [15].

On the other hand, the harsher the environment, the more stupidity is promoted, in that one cannot afford to be too sensitive to the rigors of his surroundings [16]. Thus, insensitivity to the point of callousness can be an advantage, with the hypersensitive sometimes breaking down under demanding climatic and work induced stress duller compatriots may hardly, if at all, perceive.

As if cultural stupidity is not enough, people have a tradition of stupefying themselves artificially to help them escape self-imposed stress. While there are reports of birds, elephants and monkeys [17] selectively eating fermented fruit (presumably for the effect), people drug themselves en masse. Alcohol is one of our milder stupefies and may have made civilization both necessary and possible³. The standard saw is that nomads settled down to cultivate grain for food, but an alternative explanation is that they grew grain for the production of alcoholic beverages. The psychological escape afforded by such from the long-term stress of concentrated associations of town life may have facilitated the development of civilization [18]. Even without artificial stupefies like alcohol and narcotics to help them, people routinely achieve irrelevance by adhering to or seeking out a maladaptive schema. When indulging in such stupidity, they usually display certain symptoms characteristic of their condition. As mentioned above, ignorance commonly enjoys a reciprocal association with stupidity: this can take the form of a positive feedback system in which ignorance begets stupidity which begets further ignorance. Other symptoms of stupidity are often opposite extremes bracketing functional means. Stupidity can be due to as well as cause both insensitivity and hypersensitivity. If confusion is a stupid state, clarity in the expression of trenchant thought can be offensive and thus stupidly disrupt social coordination and cooperation. It may be equally stupid for a person to be either too slow or too fast in reacting to a situation. A stupid person might be too fanatical or not determined enough; indifferent or too rigid; overbearing or too casual; ignorant of details or drowned in information; cowardly or too heroic; too far ahead or way behind the times [19].

However, under extreme conditions, any of the normally stupid extremes may be the operational ideal. Sometimes, we must be fast, callous, reckless or otherwise intemperate. Judging when conditions

are abnormal enough to require the abnormal response is one of the ultimate subjective tests anyone can face. In such a situation, the standard rules no longer apply and emergency measures must be adopted if the system (individual or reference group) is to survive. Whatever the conditions, stupidity is the failure to apply the appropriate schema effectively when needed.

While considering extremes, it is noteworthy that humans are extreme in their cultivation of stupidity. It is found in the animal world but is limited in both degree and kind. In more general terms, some students of human nature aver that there is nothing qualitatively distinctive about our species: according to this view, we are just a particular blend of many traits commonly found, although in different proportions, in animals [20]. Our nutritional needs, bodily functions and behavioral habits are all considered typically animal—perhaps extreme in some cases, as with learning, aggression and stupidity—but not distinct in kind from our fellow creatures.

An alternate view is that we are indeed distinctive. Just what the distinction is has long been a subject of speculation. The “Soul” is one of the longest-lived attributes which is alleged to separate us from beasts which seldom kill their own kind and never en masse. More notably, language is thought to be a distinguishing human characteristic, and it is—as long as it is defined as the way humans communicate. Stupidity happens to be one of those many types of behavior which we share with our relatives. We have just perfected it and, thanks to language, given it a distinctly human twist.

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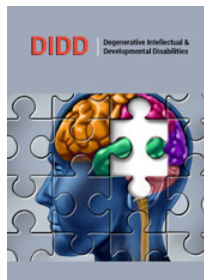
³A point somewhat underscored by F. Scott Fitzgerald's observation that the stories he wrote while sober were stupid. (Undated but appear edu on p. 38 of *GQ.com*. Jan.2014).



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