

CONSTRUING HUMAN STUPIDITY: A PHILOSOPHICAL OUTLOOK

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ABSTRACT

In Psychology Stupidity is not considered merely as the result of lack of commonsense or brilliance but an act performed willfully without any rational thinking or analysis. In Science as well as Eastern Philosophy, in particular, the conclusions drawn through experiments are not as any formality but to serve as a guideline for the future. No doubt everything is subject to a transient nature yet certain proven facts have a lasting life. Defying this truth with a wishful thinking has no meaning and is bound to lead to a disaster. Similarly sticking on to the nonsensical ideas vehemently serving own voluntarily nurtured ego is a clear sign of Stupidity although the owner may take a supreme pride in pursuing the same. This may also be considered as a deliberately defying reason giving preference to own idiosyncrasy and also an extension to rejoice it. Therefore it is an act performed with rigid thinking. It may also be looked upon as a destructive force conveniently utilized expecting desirable results that are theoretically calculated. One can expect such attempts from maladjusted personalities or those immeasurably pampered without any exposure to the existing reality. Lack of genuine knowledge, non-adaptability to the surface reality, acknowledging or subscribing to the faulty analysis, serving egoistic attitude, never deviating from the defective path despite knowing, adamant nature, never taking into consideration or appreciating others views that are in vogue and so on, can be some of the causes for the monumental pride built up which eventually results into an incorrigible wave of Stupidity. All that we need to understand is the basic difference between Ignorance, Innocence and Stupidity. There are indeed remedies for Ignorance and Innocence but repairing the deliberately constituted Stupidity is a Herculean job and may remain highly improbable. We have a very few theories of Stupidity, Viz.; Theories of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Carlo Cipollo to quote, who have gone into the details and presented even certain laws related to Human Stupidity. This paper attempts to bring forth the gist of these two and for a comparison/reference, philosophically speaking common man's views or outlook.

KEYWORDS : Stupidity, Ignorance, Bonhoeffer, Cipollo and Common man's experience.

INTRODUCTION

There is no exclusive theory to define or accurately delineate human nature because of various influencing factors. The social factors have a thorough influence in molding human nature but at the same time there are certain genetically transmitted traits or codes which are of utmost importance and quite responsible in their own ways. Human personality is individualistic and needless to say, there are umpteen factors to shape it. A general comparison may be made based on social norms and taboos thereof but that cannot be an exhaustive study. Therefore, we need to check out the other possibilities and the potent contributing components that are actively involved. Weaknesses and strengths in any personality have their own specific reasons and in a justifying mode. The major problem is because many times they are in the dormant stage owing to which not easily detectable. For an onlooker the only available source for estimating this is through experience and or knowledge for discerning. However, the major danger here is prejudice or rigid outlook or viewpoint. Any analysis cannot be claimed to be universal or handy for drawing quick conclusions. On a strict and impartial perusal we realize that such analyses lead to certain concluding remarks but that may not be covering all the aspects of any personality as a whole. At best the supporting factors may be brought forth. The major issue, in fact, is owing to the nuances which are dominating but are in an obscure state. One of the queer facts is that those who are

engaged in the typical acts of Stupidity are always moving with supreme confidence and their faith in own convictions is so firm that nothing can dislodge it or dampen their spirits. Nothing can discourage them in pursuing their faulty aims. It is, of course, a fact that percent wise such personalities are in minority yet they are highly spirited and have own well carved or defined world. They have misgivings, so to say, which ultimately become a sort of fuel to kindle their hopes and remain unaffected by failures. They assume themselves to be a special A RARA AVIS (a rare bird) and belong to a special creed. They are the architects in creating a false self image both intrinsically and extrinsically putting on masks to cover their false notions. But then surprisingly it is observed that seldom they are very lonely, however, would not admit the truth. We may find generally lack of intelligence or being stuck up in some set of theoretical values make the owners or adherents rigid but they may not confess. They rather would prefer to seek shelter under falsehood in addition to the self created zone of abstruse ideas. Their nature shapes up steadily into an exceedingly complicated design. Albert Einstein said, "Only two things are infinite, the universe and human stupidity and I am not sure about the former." So it is such a large canvas that it is inexhaustible and always new shades or mixed shades would appear.

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER (1906 – 1945)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German theologian and had to pay very heavily for being anti-Nazi. His writings were very popular and influencing. His typical theological writings leaned more towards secularism and indicated Christianity's tendency in shouldering the responsibility. He could not tolerate the Nazi dictatorship, with any compromise, and therefore being vocal about his views finally met a death penalty at a young age by getting mercilessly hanged. He wrote quite extensively but had a few titles to his credit like The Cost of Discipleship, Sanctorum Communio, Act and Being etc. Around 25 years he moved to America but was disappointed by the American Theology's preaching. It is on record that though initially he was a nationalist to the core, later he shifted his interest towards pacifism. This brought in a sea of changes in his personality and intent too. The only tragedy which ended his life was chiefly because of his openly involving in Ecumenical Christian Movement and rigorously opposing Adolf Hitler.

According to Bonhoeffer, Stupidity is more detrimental than what is generally considered as an act of evil doing. This may sound to be quite an extreme and exaggerated statement or view. However, the reasons furnished by him in defense seem to be surely convincing. This is because his analysis has an edge of rationality or an output which is aligning with purely logical consistency. Let us see his argument stepwise.

Societal Norms

Stupidity as such can be individualistic as well as carried by a specified group with some unqualified idealism. Just as in mob psychology every member is so much impressed or brainwashed and tuned to the typical thinking pattern that distancing from that stream becomes an impossible task. Initially it could be an individual thought or subsequently an act but later on it may assume a joint effort or rather plain representation. In order to seek and confirm an affiliation the individual gets easily trapped but enjoys the cage or assumed sense of belonging, without any regret.

Rigidity

When we compare evil intent or act and Stupidity, the former seems to be less detrimental because people on the morality ground can easily make out and manage to be away from it. On the other hand Stupidity is a self-accredited act and has no check, and therefore no stopping. Evil acts are far away from the ethical and moral grounds and have a self-destructive tendency. On the other hand Stupidity never accepts its faults or faulty presumptions but rather enthusiastically continues because it has an absolute disregard to the critical thinking. It is miles away from the rational platform and therefore always gets misled. Surprisingly Stupidity with age gathers more strength, enthusiasm and pride. Therefore, with experience it grows more firm, confident and naturally adopts it as a perfect path for leading life.

Historical Connection

Boenhoeffer had a very strong cogent argument or rather reasoning because it was the Nazi government with its stupid ideology that had totally destroyed the society. What was more painful to him was to see a class of well educated people also getting trapped into such an ideology and the devastating fact was that they even went to the extent of justifying the

Stupidity which was looming large. They preferred to join hands despite knowing that it was absolutely and openly unjust. Morality had lost total governance over their mentality and that was for sure the cause of a disaster.

Encouragement

Ultimately it is the human weakness to defy even basic morality on personal and social grounds when a deviation from the path proves to be highly beneficial or advantageous as such a situation arises. People, though not all, usually fall prey to such temptations and therefore easily desert the righteous path. What disappointed Boenhoeffer was to witness helplessly the moral degradation among the well informed and educated class. Individuals preferred surrendering meekly than protesting for the sake of personal and social security on all fronts. Owing to this there was visibly an indifference to morality itself. That is why this was an open exhibition of Stupidity.

External Factors

Ultimately the modern society loses its interest in the age old scriptures which somehow fail to provide the desired goods. Naturally the shortcuts are given preference when the much publicized theoretical principles clearly fail to stand to our expectations in the actual mart of the mundane world. Obviously it becomes a natural propensity to drift away from the much revered moral or ethical grounds. In spite of the trust in the scriptures when the results do not reflect in practice, it eventually forces common man to seek a shelter somewhere else. Finally functioning is more important than the reverence because merely a regard for the defunct values have no longevity. Michel de Montaigne described this class of human nature as “Stubborn and ardent clinging to one’s opinion is the best proof of stupidity.”

CARLO M CIPOLLA (1922-2000)

Cipolla was an Italian. He was the member of American Philosophical Society as well as American Academy of Arts and Sciences. However his name is more commonly referred to for his interest in Economic history. He was an Alma Mater of the Universities of Pavia, Paris and in addition London School of Economics. In fact he was very keen to teach History and Philosophy but later on deviated to Economics. He was a Fulbright fellow and visiting Professor at the University of California. He was known for his writings which are in fact popular essays related to the systematized Basic Laws of Human Stupidity. That apart he has other titles to his credit, the most popular one being, “The Economic History of World Population”.

Cipolla’s famous Five Laws

The five laws suggested by Cipolla can be summarized as those dealing with 1.Faulty Estimation 2. Probability 3.Causing Loss 4.Damage and 5.Danger

It is a fact that most of the times we refuse to accept the fact that there are many people in the society being Stupid. Usually we think only a few or a minor percentage of our population has this characteristic behavior. However, with this outlook we underestimate the existing large number of people under the influence of Stupidity. It may be because we are either too generous in overlooking or fail to catch the tendency which is in vogue at large in the society or number of people around us in circulation. The next point is we always go wrong in judging this disposition because we are impressed by the other characteristics. Much owing to this quality such people may get a protective cover and therefore even suspecting the possibility of Stupidity becomes very difficult. Further, such a person’s behavior causes a kind of insecurity to all, which he may not know. Stupid people definitely cause losses to the group they are associated with and also to the society they live in. Their consistent ignorance and vehemently carried acts become an instant source causing an irreversible damage to self, which they fail to know, and all those connected to them.

Those who claim and are recognized as non-stupid also commit the mistake rather even a blunder of inferring the behavior of Stupid people as a casual flaw or result of a rare unintentional act. They also ignore such a behavior as that it was not a deliberate one or took place accidentally. This viewpoint or outlook according to Cipolla is the most dangerous one although apparently it seems to be quite appealing and morally, ethically stuffed with good intentions. Lastly Cipolla is of the opinion that a Stupid fellow is the most dangerous person and thoroughly a risk to all those in contact and the society as such because he is the most unpredictable and harmful than even a pillager. In the view of Martin Luther King Jr., “Nothing in the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity.”

CONCLUSION

Arthur Schopenhauer expressed his idea regarding the prevailing situation in the world that “The doctor sees the weakness of mankind; the lawyer all the wickedness, the theologian all the stupidity.” It is a common experience that everyone at some stage or the other experiences Stupidity in others as well as self too. The only problem is whether the unidirectional attempt towards an aim or ideology is to be concluded as Stupidity or not. In history, we have on record, many great personalities labeled “Stupid” until they proved their point. In Science too, many of the pursued attempts for discoveries or Inventions had initially a lot of opposition and those involved were considered almost mentally deranged. But then, when the results surfaced were with an immense benefit for the society, the same was reckoned as a work of discipline and a clear sign of ingeniousness. The “Stupidity” as expressed through various theories is because of its repeated efforts which yield damaging results for one and all, leading to an incorrigible damage to the society completely. Affiliation to any group with no worthy purpose but merely out of vengeance or being on ego-trip, is definitely a clear indication of nurtured “Stupidity”. Lack of critical thinking and getting attached to a group which has no particular class or standard or standing in the society may be concluded as a phenomenal “Stupidity”. Similarly absence of intelligence, voluntarily sticking to dogmatic thinking and above all resisting to new changes or disregarding variations fall under cent percent Stupidity. It is in fact, clearly and intently promoting self-deception while at the same time getting encouraged to perform acts which are full of malice is a sure sign of Stupidity. “Delusions are generally diagnosed as a symptom of a psychotic disorder. A delusion is defined as a fixed, false belief that is considered abnormal within the person’s culture. Nonetheless, it is not always easy to separate a delusion from a belief that has become acceptable within a certain subculture. This can be the case even with very bizarre beliefs.”¹

It is observed that there is no unanimity with regard to the theory or a generalized view about Stupidity. Without a bias attitude if we look at it then impartially speaking every human being howsoever well informed or has a rational outlook invariably at some point of life does come under the grip of Stupidity. Therefore if someone has a continuity or consistency in sticking on to an unusual or queer act, then, it could be read out as a sign of proven “Stupidity”. In order to overcome this temperament the very pattern of thinking must be reformed. This purposefully adopted activity has to be outsmarted by the universally acknowledged values. In addition to this, accepting the fact that we are totally responsible for our actions and subsequently the results is a must. Deviating from a risky path leading to a disaster is not at all a sign of timidity but rather an act of prudent nature and courage too. All the accumulated knowledge, howsoever rich, often or at least periodically needs pruning and therefore revising the same is an intelligent step. Combating individually the social ills always may not be possible. Therefore, it would be wise and a pragmatic approach to get attached to a group that has laid down the principles which are ethically clean and morally uplifting our personality and desirable social values in an altruistic way. “Even though a mental illness must cause distress or dysfunction, to some extent we judge the pathology of behavior by its relationship to cultural norms. Therefore our concept of mental illness is tied in art to our ideas of what is normal. This raises the question of whether all abnormal behavior is pathological and whether all normal behavior is mentally healthy. Clearly, people can engage in unusual behavior that is not pathological. We do not want to diagnose any kind of original or unconventional behavior as mentally ill. Nor is all normal behavior healthy....Thus, although it can be very easy to recognize mental illness in the most extreme cases (such as acute psychosis or severe depression), there are many circumstances where the boundaries between mental health and mental illness are not so clear.”²

References

- 1) Cohen Lisa J., The Handy Psychology Answer Book, Visible Ink Press, Detroit, 2011, p.344)
- 2) Ibid, p.343)