

## 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, mulling 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 cross 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 that 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 reproving 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 other great characteristic of our age is that, even if we admit that stupidity has not yet reached its pinnacle, we know that it has never before been so visible, so unabashed, so outspoken, and so peremptory. It's enough to make you despair of your benighted fellow man. On the other hand-who knows?-it might inspire you to turn to philosophy to address the situation, given how hard it is of late to deny the vanity of everything and the narcissism of everyone, not to mention the inanity of appearances and the prevalence of sweeping judgments. If only a second Erasmus would write us a new *In Praise of Folly* (but in 280-character bursts, to save us from migraines)! If only a new Lucretius would arise to bring us relief, and perhaps joy-which we could relish, safe on shore, as the ship of fools sinks in the swirl, sabotaged by its passengers, who cry for help as they drown. Like a greedy gourmand, we lick our lips at the prospect of that desirable nectar: the war of fools among themselves, hackles raised, egos cocked. Great minds think alike, small minds collide. As you struggle to remain a spectator, not an actor, in this battle scene, it would be foolhardy to imagine yourself less vulnerable to stupidity than your bitter, braying, miserable, agitated contemporaries. But if by chance you turn out to be right, what a victory! It's wiser to be modest; if you try to rise above the throng you won't be forgiven. Escape from the herd and you'll still be led to the slaughterhouse. Howl with the wolves, bleat with the sheep, but never go it alone; everyone will cry foul. Needless to say, if you truly believe yourself to be smarter and more admirable than the average joe, the fateful diagnosis is near at hand: you yourself are most likely an unwitting carrier of stupidity.

Given the immensity of the catastrophe, the project of this book, which is to attempt to investigate stupidity, can hardly be anything but another act of folly. To tackle such a subject is

to reveal yourself to be presumptuous, touchingly naïve, or at the very least, exceedingly foolish. I know this very well, but it's time that a brave idiot entered the breach. With a little luck, this endeavor will prove merely ridiculous. And ridicule is not fatal. But stupidity is! And it will outlast us. At any rate, it will bury us. That is, unless it follows us into the grave....

One final point: these reflections on fools are not restricted to the male of the species. Let female fools take comfort! Neither sex has a monopoly on stupidity. And so I proclaim, O idiots of every stripe and morons of all kinds-blowhards and bitches, genial dumbasses and silly twats; dirty bastards and nasty ballbreakers, pathetic ninnies and evil louts, dunces and ditzes, oafs and space cadets, poor slobs and dizzy dames, lunkheads and airheads, scatterbrains and dingbats, lummoxes and nitwits, imbeciles, boobies, numbskulls, dolts, wastes of space, blockheads, zeros, clowns, dummies, dim bulbs, raging assholes, and empty-headed rubes, dickheads, pipsqueaks, lowlifes, daydreamers, mouth-breathers, pains in the ass, and motormouths-this is your moment of glory: this book speaks only to you. But you will not recognize yourselves....

Your devoted dumbass,

Jean-François Marmion

The Scientific Study of Idiots

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"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"), and studies on pointless jobs that have no social value and bring little personal satisfaction; 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 scripts 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, 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 control 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."