Annals of
Reviews and Research

Juniper Publishers
key to the Researchers

Short Communication
Volume 4 Issue 4 - December 2018

Ann Rev Resear

Intelligent Stupidity

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Submission: January 18, 2018; **Published:** December 20, 2018

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Keywords: Human nature; Intelligence; Realistic; Functionally; Intellectually; Epistemological

Short Communication

Unfortunately, the scientists in their structured roles and carefully controlled labs have been unable to do any more than the rationalists to render analysis of the nebulous concepts of human nature and intelligence realistic, functionally valuable and intellectually valid. In a purely epistemological context, "Intelligence" is the ability to process information efficiently-meaning, in behavioral terms, data being related without corruption by a prevailing schema. [1] Such information is then ideally evaluated on the basis of intrinsic merit and credibility [2] to relevant, effective reaction strategies. The amount of knowledge in a system can by indicated on a scale extending from agnostic/ignorant (having no data) to gnostic (having all relevant data). Overall efficiency of the system is measured relative to the achievement of "Appropriate" goals, whether they are explicitly intended or subconsciously hidden. The functional strategies available as possible coping responses are determined by past experience and perceived circumstances, and people are labeled "Intelligent" when the strategy employed in problem solving suits their skills and proves to be functionally successful.

Thus, in a general sense, "Intelligence" indicates the characteristic ability to apply a relevant schema so as to maximize the probability of a successful solution to a given problem in a particular context. However, as psychologists have been unable to formulate an operational definition of intelligence, they have had to settle for trying to solve the problem of "Problem solving". This presumably indicates intelligence and can be broken down into a number of identifiable components.

First, a situation must be perceived as a problem. The perceived facts must then be coded in a conceptual shorthand (words) which lend themselves to mental manipulations. Relevant facts may then be integrated in an assembly reflecting functional relations. The problem can then be divided into parts through dissociation. Finally, a solution can be found through imaginative integration of verbal symbols into a new synthesis leading to an improved relationship with the functional environment [3].

This concise summary of the problem-solving process contrasts sharply with a comparable consideration of the many faces of stupidity. At the grandest level of generalization, behavior may be guided by an inappropriate schema because the problem is not properly perceived. For example, for the audience watching a magic show, the problem for the magician is to pull a rabbit out of a hat. However, for the magician, the problem is getting the rabbit into the hat. We will ignore the problems for the rabbit and hat.

Even when the problem is properly identified, and a relevant scheme is operative, it may be misapplied in any number of inventive ways. First, information may be ignored. If perceived, the perceptions may be faulty. If accurate, they may be misinterpreted. If correctly interpreted, they may be disorganized. If organized, they may be manipulated in a faulty fashion (not at all or too much) by an imagination which is too weak or too strong. Poor language skills can contribute to the formation of sloppy symbols and clumsy conceptions. Inattentiveness can lead to the confusion of unrelated events; there may be an inability to isolate events which are concurrent but unrelated or the missing connections between apparently unrelated occurrences. The behavioral response may not be tested, or it may be poorly tested. It may be illogical, and ergo irrelevant, or too logical, and ergo unappealing [4].

For a concrete example, consider the uncertainty of the credibility of a nuclear threat. Any violence is a confused, uncertain activity, with the extreme of nuclear war all the more unpredictable because decisions are made by fallible people organized into imperfect governments depending on partial if not faulty communications and are carried out by potential hotheads whose commitments and reputations can take them to unauthorized excesses [5]. Credibility in such a mechanism qualifies as rational fear of a terrifying disaster [1].

Unsuccessful behavior is obviously likely to result from any error in any such problem-solving process. Mistakes might cancel each other out but more probably compound each other. Of

course, failure might also result from the influence of unknown factors on those known and understood. More important, lack of success might be due to the fact that the people involved are not even seeking a solution to the given problem. If they perceive a problem as such, they might simply indulge in end-directed analysis, which is a general cognitive ploy directed more toward finding a gratifying response rather than the best possible to the situation confronting them. Ultimately, failure is due, as philosopher Lawrence Berra noted, to people making "....to many wrong mistakes".

It is crucial to bear in mind that the use of the term "Intelligent" or "Stupid" to describe a problem solver depends on the degree of success or failure perceived: Adolf Hitler made this point when referring the those who tried but failed to assassinate him on July 20, 1944 as "Stupid" [6]. In this matter, as in so many others, humans have proved to be biased judges–with our bias being inherent in our schemas, which make us both arbitrary and subjective. To complicate the matter further, there is a fine line between stupid and clever [7].

If intelligence is a bit too grandiose, let us consider the more pedestrian "Common sense". First, we note Voltaire's pithy observation that common sense is not so common [8]. The explanation for its uncommonness is that it is a compounding of two interactive cognitive principles: objective and morality [9]. Our schemas keep us from being objective, and morality is as slippery as a bucket of eels, so it is surprising to find anyone at a given time capable of rendering awesomely brilliant, commonsensical judgments - "Common sense x intelligence=k". (Meaning, you can safely stop reading now.)

Note: In the 1960's, nuclear game theory reached the sophistication that American advisors proffered irrational modes of conduct predicated on the presumed rationality of their opposite numbers. With armed giants standing eyeball to eyeball, the cheery assumption was that if words did not defuse the situation, shared values and assumptions would. Never mind that people with shared values and assumptions would not be at odds in the first place. Nevertheless, if words did not bridge the cultural gap, the back-up assumption was that adversaries would resort to an in-explicably common imagination which would transcend logic and induce harmony through analogy, precedent, accident, aesthetic geometry and caustic reasoning–whatever that is–based on mutual self-awareness. With such intellects advising the mighty, we were lucky indeed to have survived. (Schelling, T. 1960. The Strategy of Conflict. Harvard University Press; Cambridge MA. 77.)

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