

The Self and Stupidity

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A crucial factor contributing to the development of stupidity is a false sense of the “Self”. [1] The theoretically ideal self is an organized, consistent set of perceptions and beliefs. Unfortunately for idealizing people, most selves are disorganized and inconsistent. This just happens to be the invariable result of the compromise nature of the schema. People live in a gritty world of real, immediate problems which must be solved pragmatically, and in coping, they are somewhat restricted in perception by the language of and in means by the norms of their reference group. When there is conflict among these interacting aspects of the human condition-when one perceives the necessity of acting in a manner not condoned by society, the self will blend short-term immediate survival with some kind of justification comprehensible to anyone concerned enough to care but not objective enough to be critical.

Along with the basic duality of the individual/social self is the duality of the static/dynamic self. The intrinsic compromise in the latter case is one of balancing self-preservation against self-seeking behavior. [2] Self-preservation is a basic, fundamental aspect of life: in human terms, it is expressed as a conservative dedication to the status quo. Self-seeking behavior, on the other hand, is directed toward self-enhancement by providing for the future. Many crucial decisions in life require a person to take a self-conscious risk in trading off security for opportunity. In general, younger people tend to be self-seekers; older people tend to be self-preservers, since their schema tends to favor its established ways as it becomes more entrenched through the years. At the moment of decision for an individual confronting a particular problem, the only thing clear to an observer is that this is but another of the very arbitrary/subjective dimensions of the human condition. Just which strategy will be employed or how much risk will be taken depends very much on who is making the decision and especially who is taking the risk.

Oddly enough, self-seeking is promoted by social support. Enhanced self-assurance encourages people to assert themselves as individuals, so when the reference group provides favorable reinforcement (approval) to members, it makes independence more likely. The self-confidence engendered by commonly perceived success makes one willing to attempt further endeavors. [3] This may in fact disrupt the group and can lead an individual to overreach his ability, but this is the price that must be paid for being open to the possibility of individual enhancement.

The motivation for such difficulty stems largely from the self-approval made possible by the biased structuring of the feedback system. Data contradictory to a flattering self-image are blocked or interpreted so that behavior can be viewed in an emotionally acceptable context. [4] It is noteworthy that one’s emotional need sets the standard to which reality is molded. It is difficult to overestimate the role that such a mechanism can play in misdirecting behavior. Sustaining reinforcement can be generated internally so as to maintain the

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independence of a particular pattern of behavior from moderating influences of the environment, while much of the potential negative reinforcement from the environment simply does not penetrate the system. [5]

The worst result of this disruption of feedback for the sake of self-image is that it really can motivate people to make errors. It separates people from their environment and makes them relatively independent so that they can pursue their own notions without regard for their relevance or the negative consequences engendered. A classic example of this process in action is the manner in which dissidents are suppressed by totalitarian regimes. Such tactics are usually simply denied by the establishment or, alternatively, justified because of the disruptive nature of the criticism. Policies of suppression may do nothing to solve existent social problems, may even promote internal hostility against the rulers but also may promote a positive image for leaders, so long as knowledge of such suppression can also be suppressed.

Notes

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