

Playing Dumb



by Theodore Dalrymple

Recently, I read a splendid book, titled *Homo cretinus*, by the French science journalist and writer Olivier Postel-Vinay, on the subject of human stupidity, a subject as perpetually amusing as murder, and eternally relevant to the situation we are in.

Stupidity is a much-underestimated factor in human history, perhaps because stupidity is the characteristic to accusations of which we all feel most vulnerable. If someone were to say, "I have never done anything stupid in my life," the only possible reply would be, "That must be because you have never done anything at all in your life—which is stupid."

Stupidity is like measles in the old days: Everyone has to go through it. But there is no possible immunization against stupidity. If anything, its prevalence seems to have risen with tertiary education and yet further with the so-called social media. Artificial intelligence will boost it to new heights, or depths.

Of course, stupidity is like beauty: It is in the eye of the beholder. While I commit understandable mistakes, you behave stupidly; but, as Postel-Vinay reminds us, stupidity is not the same as the absence of intelligence, certainly not intelligence of the IQ variety. Indeed, the stupidity of the intelligent and educated is worse and more dangerous in its effects than that of the unintelligent and ignorant, inasmuch as it is the former who are more likely to have power and make decisions that affect multitudes.

A precise definition of stupidity is not possible, though we all (apart from the person who commits it) recognize it when we see it. And if to make choices in the absence of good reason for them is stupid, life itself, at least in its modern form, forces stupidity upon us.

Recently, for example, I received an invitation from my doctor, or at least from a computer standing in for my doctor, an invitation to be immunized against flu and COVID. I had either to accept it or not to accept it; there was no third way. On what basis could I make my decision?

For quite a time, I followed at least some of the research on the value of such vaccines. I tried to separate the signal from the noise, which was very difficult because there was so much noise, and so many preposterous or ill-founded assertions. I came eventually to the tentative conclusion that the value of the vaccine was that it reduced the chances of death in someone like me but was not otherwise valuable. A reduced chance of death, however, is something not entirely to be sneezed at.

My chances of dying were not very high in the first place, however, so the vaccine was unlikely to have been my savior, and I probably do not owe my life to it. But still I took it, because I estimated that the benefit outweighed the possible harm. Oddly enough, for reasons that I cannot quite fathom, the process of immunization has aroused passions from the very

beginning of its history, sometimes with disastrous effect. I suppose it has something to do with a subliminal and quasi-pagan feeling that Nature knows best, and to interfere with Nature invites trouble.

Be that all as it may, my situation has changed since the COVID epidemic was at its height both medically and in the panicky official response to it. I have since had an unpleasant but not mortal illness with a recrudescence twice when suffering from a minor viral illness such as a cold. For the moment I am free of it.

The recrudescence might have been caused by the viral infection or might have been a mere coincidence (there is no worse argument in medicine than that something stands to reason). It is impossible to judge the truth from a single case, and while there were in the medical literature similar anecdotes of cases such as mine, there was no proof one way or the other.

The vaccine might itself be an immunological challenge sufficient to cause recrudescence, or it might be sufficient to reduce the immunological challenge of the illnesses should I contract them. The vaccines might therefore protect me, or the reverse. Certainly, I have friends who have recently suffered very unpleasantly from a new outbreak of COVID. As far as I know, there is no definitive evidence either way. I am therefore forced to choose, yea or nay, but in the absence of evidence. Moreover, I am aware that were I to study the question more closely, I might come to a semi-reasonable, but not therefore correct, decision, for science is not a matter of laying down definitive doctrines. Given the vastness of the scientific literature, moreover, and given also that I have many other things to do than study it, I shall have to make my decision in a condition of ignorance.

This is how we make many, if not most of our decisions. I invest my savings, but I have neither the time nor inclination

to study how best to do it. I am not even sure that there is a knowable best way to do it. The best way to do anything also depends on one's goals: in my case, not the achievement of wealth but the avoidance of poverty (as I define it for myself). I have an adviser, but I have no idea whether he advises me in my interests or his own, or both. I am not sufficiently interested to find out whether there is someone better to advise me, or if that someone better, that is to say with a better record, is better by chance or by skill. There is probably a normal distribution of financial advice, and whether good performance is a matter of luck or judgment is a complex question that I am neither qualified nor willing to investigate. I have to hope that my adviser is good enough, or at least better than nothing. I do not want to spend the rest of my days poring over the financial data, though an American of my acquaintance says it is irrational of me not to do so, since an hour a day would be enough (the same as I am supposed to devote to physiotherapy, in fact). I suppose you might call it a matter of financial physiotherapy.

So I return to my stupidities like a dog to its vomit. The unexamined life might not be worth living, but the too closely examined life is not worth living either. Therefore, seize the hour, seize the day—within reason, of course.

First published in [*Taki's magazine*](#).