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Bonhoeffer's "theory of stupidity": We have more to fear from stupid people than evil ones

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6-7 minutes

There's an internet adage that goes, "Debating an idiot is like trying to play chess with a pigeon — it knocks the pieces over, craps on the board, and flies back to its flock to claim victory." It's funny and astute. It's also deeply, depressingly worrying. Although we'd never say so, we all have people in our lives we think of as a bit dim — not necessarily about everything, but certainly about some things.

Most of the time, we laugh this off. After all,

stupidity can be pretty funny. When my friend asked a group of us recently what Hitler's last name was, we laughed. When my brother learned only last month that reindeer are real animals — well, that's funny. Good-natured ribbing about a person's ignorance is an everyday part of life.

Stupidity, though, has its dark side. For theologian and philosopher Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the stupid person is often more dangerous than the evil one.

The enemy within

In comic books and action movies, we know who the villain is. They wear dark clothes, kill on a whim, and cackle madly at their diabolical scheme. In life, too, we have obvious villains — the dictators who violate human rights or serial killers and violent criminals. As evil as these people are, they are not the biggest threat, since they are known. Once something is a known

evil, the good of the world can rally to defend and fight against it. As Bonhoeffer puts it, “One may protest against evil; it can be exposed and, if need be, prevented by use of force. Evil always carries within itself the germ of its own subversion.”

Stupidity, though, is a different problem altogether. We cannot so easily fight stupidity for two reasons. First, we are collectively much more tolerant of it. Unlike evil, stupidity is not a vice most of us take seriously. We do not lambast others for ignorance. We do not scream down people for not knowing things. Second, the stupid person is a slippery opponent. They will not be beaten by debate or open to reason. What’s more, when the stupid person has their back against the wall — when they’re confronted with facts that cannot be refuted — they snap and lash out. Bonhoeffer puts it like this:

“Neither protests nor the use of force

accomplish anything here; reasons fall on deaf ears; facts that contradict one's prejudgment simply need not be believed — in such moments the stupid person even becomes critical — and when facts are irrefutable, they are just pushed aside as inconsequential, as incidental. In all this the stupid person, in contrast to the malicious one, is utterly self-satisfied and, being easily irritated, becomes dangerous by going on the attack.”

With great power comes great stupidity

Stupidity, like evil, is no threat as long as it hasn't got power. We laugh at things when they are harmless — such as my brother's ignorance of reindeer. This won't cause me any pain. Therefore it's funny.

The problem with stupidity, though, is that it often goes hand-in-hand with power. Bonhoeffer writes, “Upon closer observation, it becomes

apparent that every strong upsurge of power in the public sphere, be it of a political or of a religious nature, infects a large part of humankind with stupidity.”



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This works in two ways. The first is that stupidity does not disbar you from holding office or authority. History and politics are swimming with examples of when the stupid have risen to the top (and where the smart are excluded or killed). Second, the nature of power requires that people surrender certain faculties necessary for intelligent thought — faculties like independence, critical thinking, and reflection.

Bonhoeffer's argument is that the more someone becomes part of the establishment, the less an individual they become. A charismatic, exciting outsider, bursting with intelligence and sensible policies, becomes imbecilic the moment he takes office. It's as if, "slogans, catchwords and the like... have taken possession of him. He is under a spell, blinded, misused, and abused in his very being."

Power turns people into automatons. Intelligent, critical thinkers now have a script to read. They'll engage their smiles rather than their brains. When people join a political party, it seems like most choose to follow suit rather than think things through. Power drains the intelligence from a person, leaving them akin to an animated mannequin.

Theory of stupidity

Bonhoeffer's argument, then, is that stupidity should be viewed as worse than [evil](#). Stupidity

has far greater potential to damage our lives. More harm is done by one powerful idiot than a gang of Machiavellian schemers. We know when there's evil, and we can deny it power. With the corrupt, oppressive, and sadistic, we know where we stand. You know how to *take* a stand.

But stupidity is much harder to weed out. That's why it's a dangerous weapon: Because evil people find it hard to take power, they need stupid people to do their work. Like sheep in a field, a stupid person can be guided, steered, and manipulated to do any number of things. Evil is a puppet master, and it loves nothing so much as the mindless puppets who enable it — be they in the general public or inside the corridors of power.

The lesson from Bonhoeffer is to laugh at those daft, silly moments when in close company. But, we should get angry and scared when stupidity takes reign.

*Jonny Thomson teaches philosophy in Oxford.
He runs a popular account called [Mini
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