

Theory of Stupidity — Bonhoeffer

Taken from a circular letter addressing many topics, written to three friends and co-workers in the conspiracy against Hitler, on the tenth anniversary of Hitler's accession to the chancellorship of Germany.

'Stupidity is a more dangerous enemy of the good than malice. 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 in that it leaves behind in human beings at least a sense of unease. Against stupidity we are defenseless. 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. For that reason, greater caution is called for than with a malicious one. Never again will we try to persuade the stupid person with reasons, for it is senseless and dangerous.

'If we want to know how to get the better of stupidity, we must seek to understand its nature. This much is certain, that it is in essence not an intellectual defect but a human one. There are human beings who are of remarkably agile intellect yet stupid, and others who are intellectually quite dull yet anything but stupid. We discover this to our surprise in particular situations. The impression one gains is not so much that stupidity is a congenital defect, but that, under certain circumstances, people are made stupid or that they allow this to happen to them. We note further that people who have isolated themselves from others or who live in solitude manifest this defect less frequently than individuals or groups of people inclined or condemned to sociability. And so it would seem that stupidity is perhaps less a psychological

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Dietrich Bonhoeffer

than a sociological problem. It is a particular form of the impact of historical circumstances on human beings, a psychological concomitant of certain external conditions. 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. It would even seem that this is virtually a sociological-psychological law. The power of the one needs the stupidity of the other. The process at work here is not that particular human capacities, for instance, the intellect, suddenly atrophy or fail. Instead, it seems that under the overwhelming impact of rising power, humans are deprived of their inner independence, and, more or less consciously, give up establishing an autonomous position toward the emerging circumstances. The fact that the stupid person is often stubborn must not blind us to the fact that he is not independent. In conversation with him, one virtually feels that one is dealing not at all with a person, but

with slogans, catchwords and the like, that have taken possession of him. He is under a spell, blinded, misused, and abused in his very being. Having thus become a mindless tool, the stupid person will also be capable of any evil and at the same time incapable of *seeing* that it is evil. This is where the danger of diabolical misuse lurks, for it is this that can once and for all destroy human beings.

'Yet at this very point it becomes quite clear that only an act of liberation, not instruction, can overcome stupidity. Here we must come to terms with the fact that in most cases a genuine internal liberation becomes possible only when external liberation has preceded it. Until then we must abandon all attempts to convince the stupid person. This state of affairs explains why in such circumstances our attempts to know what 'the people' really think are in vain and why, under these circumstances, this question is so irrelevant for the person who is thinking and acting responsibly. The word of the Bible that the fear of God

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From the Editor

If you do not understand the problem you cannot come up with a solution. Alternatively, you may understand the problem but willfully ignore the solution because it does not fit your political objectives or ideology. The United States of America has run a trade deficit for many years, importing more than it exports. I am not sure if anyone knows the answer to such a trade deficit.

The present policy as explained by President Donald Trump is to impose tariffs on the rest of the world. The news has been full of the consequences of these tariffs. In addition to the tariffs, also as part of his economic strategy he has cut the research grants of public and private universities under the guise that they are pursuing diversity and inclusion policies. I am not sure what is wrong with diversity and inclusion, but President Trump and his advisers do. I am not sure how such policies will improve the ability to produce better products.

The President by cutting research grants is working against the very means by which in the long run trade imbalances could be reduced. It has been reported that many of the redundant research teams will seek positions in rival countries. Thus in the future America will become weaker not stronger. It is noted that at same time China is pumping money into its research institutes and universities, and obtaining more patents, in which new wealth potentially will be generated, that is they are attempting to emulate the American model which has been successful. They are already, for example, leading research in batteries and electronic vehicles. It is known that European electrical vehicles depend on Chinese batteries.

A further policy that bears some scrutiny is giving aid to poorer countries, or for that matter to poorer citizens in America. Taking away or reducing such aid is to everyone's disadvantage, including the people whose interest you claim to serve. By reducing the suffering of poor people, the risk of pandemics is reduced, as well as the risk of illness. A foreseeable consequence of such policies is that many farmers are left with produce which is left in warehouses, unpaid for and left to rot. Their income is reduced and there is an inability to expand and plan for the future.

Geoffrey Cave, Sydenham Life Editor

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is the beginning of wisdom declares that the internal liberation of human beings to live the responsible life before God is the only genuine way to overcome stupidity.

'But these thoughts about stupidity also offer consolation in that they utterly forbid us to consider the *majority* of people to be stupid in *every* circumstance. It really will depend on whether those in power expect more from people's stupidity than from their inner independence and wisdom.'

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, from 'After Ten Years' in *Letters and Papers from Prison*

(Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works/English, vol. 8) Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010.

In the 1970s, Carlo Cipolla, a social psychologist, developed FIVE LAWS OF STUPIDITY. The term itself, he said, wasn't a description of intellectual acuity, but of *social responsibility*. A stupid person is a person who causes losses to another person, or to a group of persons, while deriving no gain for himself, and possibly incurring losses. Cases in which someone takes an action by which both parties gained, was deemed *intelligent*. *Stupidity* is independent of any other characteristics of that person: whether nationality, ethnicity, sex, economic status, or even education. The frequency in a given group is independent of the size of the group. This too indicates it's a *social* phenomenon, a spontaneous mob mentality. So Cipolla warns that we will *always* underestimate how many there are in a group.

Stupid people are dangerous and damaging because reasonable people find it difficult to imagine and understand unreasonable behavior. An intelligent person may understand the logic of a malicious person — his actions follow a pattern of rationality. But a stupid creature will harass you for no reason, for no advantage, without any plan or scheme, and at the most improbable times and places. You have no rational way of telling if, when, how, or why the stupid creature attacks. Because the stupid person's actions do not conform to the rules of rationality, it follows that we are generally caught by surprise by the attack. We cannot mount a rational defense, because the attack itself lacks any rational structure. Non-stupid people constantly forget that at all times and places, and under any circumstances, dealing with or associating with stupid people *always* turns out to be a costly mistake.

Yet, our naiveté, compassion, and mercy for these stupid creatures, may lead us to put them in positions where they can exercise authority over others. We enable them to hurt themselves and others. We hope to give them a sense of self-worth that will overcome their stupidity. We think it's an issue of education or life-experience — that they're victims of circumstance, and not innately stupid. Thus we help them rise to power, as with Hitler and Stalin, even allowing them to make our regulations and laws, and to enforce them. But in truth, this never accrues to the welfare of a society; instead it leads to its downfall.

This is as true in the church as in the world. So those who would lead must first demonstrate they can manage their own households well. They must make *intelligent choices* that benefit others as well as themselves, *ethical choices*, showing that they are servants of all.

Angela Morgan



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Love in a cash-strapped climate

For many people, things are tight at the moment. I mean, financially. From April, most utility bills have gone up, council tax is increasing, goods in the shops are more expensive, the rise in stamp duty has pushed up the cost of moving house and so on. Meanwhile, firms are paying more for their employer's national insurance contributions, which will be affecting their running costs and likely causing lay-offs. This is all manifested in the great demands now placed on food banks and the recent statistics about how allegedly one in four of the population see themselves as in some way disabled. Employment levels have not reached pre-pandemic levels here as they have elsewhere.

On top of all that comes the tariff war initiated by President Trump. Just how this is going to work out isn't clear. The policy is being enacted in such a chaotic way, without apparent advice or consultation, that everything may be different by the time you read this. I am no economist; I am writing this purely as an attempt at Christian comment on the situation. I expect bishops will have more to say on the matter. Or perhaps they won't.

Let's get tariffs out of the way first. Trump's scheme is flawed in concept and execution. He claims they are "reciprocal". But European countries only level a tariff between 1% and 5% on American imports. What Trump is trying to correct is the trade imbalance between the USA and other countries; that is, America imports more from a particular country than it exports to it. But you can't change a trade deficit by imposing tariffs. That's not what they do; they just make the cost of living go up for everyone. Different strategies are required to correct a trade imbalance. For more information, listen to Radio 4's *More or Less* on BBC Sounds, dated Wednesday April 9th.

The world's resources and wealth are not distributed equally and fairly. The world does not seem to be a fair place. Yet there have always been people who are prepared to stand up for the poor and disadvantaged. It was a keynote of the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. And St Francis of Assisi, the early 13th century friar, really exemplified the same message, as has his namesake, Pope Francis, in our time.

A gospel passage that might provoke thought is John 12.1-8. This describes an event which took place when Jesus was staying with his friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus, just outside Jerusalem, a few days before Passover. Mary anoints Jesus with a pound of spikenard, an extremely expensive perfume. Judas Iscariot, one of the 12, protests at what he sees as wasteful extravagance; this perfume could have been sold and would have raised enough to support a poor family for a year.

I expect we are inclined to agree with him. Yet Judas was the betrayer! How can he be right? So whom does Jesus agree with? Well, famously, he praises Mary for what she has done, with the words, "You always have the poor with you, you do not always have me." Now, that verse has often been taken out of context and used to justify expenditure that adorns or beautifies Jesus, or rather, his Church, rather than supporting the disadvantaged. But we know from his track record that Jesus is "for" the poor, not the rich.

Apart from the issue of tariffs and the rise in the cost of



Unsplash / Erik Mclean

living, people have been agonising over the government's changes to how the national budget is allocated. How do we divide the cake? Taking money from the International Aid budget and spending it on Defence looks as though it is going the wrong way. I agree; it is a great shame that it has been taken from the Aid budget, already reduced from its 0.7% target. And yet, Defence is only a tiny part of national expenditure; 2.3%, down from 6% in 1950 (post-War) and 4% in 1990 (end of Cold War). We have already reaped the Peace Dividend; but there is a new threat to world order in the shape of Putin's invasion of Ukraine. In terms of spending money on the poor and those in need, we spend significant amounts on GDP on the care and protection of our citizens: 12.6% Social Protection, 8.3% Health, 5.4% Pensions, 4.7% Education (depending on which website you look at; the figures are indicative, rather than exact).

I don't think any of that wins any arguments. It illustrates how extremely hard it is to divide up the cake fairly. What we really need is a bigger cake! And borrowing is not an option; the national debt already stands at £2.79 trillion and costs 3.8% of GDP to service. I am just glad that I do not have to make the difficult decisions, but have the easy luxury of criticising. Christians should be praying for those who have such awesome responsibility for our lives.

To go back to that story of Jesus, Mary, Judas and the pound of spikenard. I like to see this as a kind of parable, an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. It *appears* to be about money, but it's really about love. Just as the first story in John's Gospel shows the extravagant generosity of God's love by the provision of hundreds of gallons of wine at a wedding (John 2), so here the amount of expensive ointment symbolises the abundance of Mary's love for Jesus. It's about the generosity of love that the disciple shows, in response to the generosity of God's love.

In so far as it is about cost, it reminds us that being a disciple will be costly, because the way of Jesus is an extravagant adventure. We are challenged to renounce wealth and ambition and personal aggrandisement, and put our whole lives in the service of our Lord. And that is a big challenge for most of us, speaking for myself, at any rate; but with grace it can become a joyous act that our Saviour's love for us has prompted.

If Christianity has a distinctive contribution to make to this financial debate, it is the importance of a generous heart.

Michael Kingston

The Front Door

Have you ever had something in life that when you looked at it, it wasn't quite right. Soon you found yourself focusing on it more and more and trying to tell yourself it was inconsequential. The more you told yourself that, the more it bothered you; to the point of becoming bigger than life

Well, that is the story of my front door. We were so delighted with the new door handle on our front door! Every time we left our flat or returned I admired it. I loved the white colour of the door handle. But the more I noticed it upon leaving or returning, the more my eye started to wander and I slowly found myself noticing all the other door hardware was silver, and it just didn't balance.

I convinced myself that if it was half silver and half white it would be balanced. It is amazing what we can sometimes convince ourselves of.

The door had a peephole, a knocker, and a letterbox going down the middle of the door. The door handle on the lower right side was balanced by the number on the lower left side. My solution was to replace the number with a white one, and then I would have a balanced door. Found a white number online that was identical to my silver number – easy enough to swap out as that meant the screw holes in the door were in the same place for the replacement number.

The new arrangement worked well for sometime; until my eye again started wandering. Now I convinced myself that if the door knocker were white that would be all it would take for it to truly be balanced. Replacing the silver door knocker with a white version proved to be a much more difficult venture. I searched the DIY stores and the internet for countless hours before I admitted defeat at finding an identical door knocker only in white so as to be able make use of the same screw holes. My next thought – I would paint the one I had white. Searching for a white paint that could be applied to metal, my inner Scot came out. I was aghast at the price! Especially in comparison to the cost of the same paint in America. I decided to remove the knocker, take it with me to America, paint it there and upon return screw it back onto my front door. TaDah. While in America when I told someone my plan, they suggested I have it powder coated. Brilliant idea. I followed their advice, and did so. Upon return I screwed it back into the front door. Now I had a door with a white knocker, number and handle; and a silver peephole and letterbox. It looked good. At least for the first 100 days.

As time continued the silver letterbox started calling out to me. It just looked out of place. The more I told myself it was all right the way it was, the more it wasn't. Once again I tried searching for an identical one with the same screw holes in white to no avail. The knocker was easily



removed and absent for the couple of months we were in America but removing the letterbox to do the same would mean leaving a large gaping hole in my front door for a considerable time. Needless to say, not a safe idea. My only solution at this point was to find someone here in London who could powder coat my letter box. And so the search began. It ended up with a company in Thurrock agreeing to do it (apparently because this is a small job by industry standards so finding a willing company took some searching). The next adventure involved removing the letter box from the door. Now I am a pretty good hands-on person but removing this letterbox required calling upon our builder friend's expertise to assist with the removal. Letterbox uninstalled and finding a makeshift cover for the opening in the door, we headed off to Thurrock with letterbox in hand. One week later we would make the sojourn back to retrieve our now white letterbox. As we had watched our builder friend remove it we knew what to do to reinstall it. It took a few minor adjustments but in the end we had a white letterbox on our front door. The flap does not lay completely flat but we now have a white front door save for the peephole. (If anyone has a solution as to how to get the letterbox flap to lay flat, please share it with me.)

Does the silver peephole bother me? Let me just suffice to say I am searching for a plan to address it...

Geri Falconer-Ferneau

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What's that rustling sound? I looked round and saw a fox snaffling at my bag of sandwiches, apparently unaware of me only a few metres away. I called out and he looked up, had one more attempt at getting some food and then ambled away.

This happened recently at my allotment. Only about 10 minutes from the South Circular but a haven for wildlife, from wriggling worms to red-breasted robins and the other day, a bird of prey flying overhead. It's just off Grange Lane in South Dulwich, on the edge of Dulwich Wood, with an amazing view over London.

We've shared the allotment for more than 25 years and every season, in growing terms, is different and unpredictable. Last year, a mob of slugs ate almost every shoot as it came up, but we had wonderful apples and plums; the year before was brilliant for French beans but useless for courgettes; the year before that, overnight, parakeets ate every single cherry on the tree.

But there's more than enough for everyone, slugs included. We grow all kinds of beans, spuds, blackberries, sweetcorn; as we go into autumn we get squashes, pumpkins, and delicious, tangy apples.

Of course, I know not everyone has an allotment or a garden but you only need a windowsill for a pot of basil or rocket or even a few tomato plants. Now is the time to get that kind of thing going and most supermarkets are selling seeds. The excitement of coming into the room and seeing a green shoot poking its way out of the soil and day by day getting bigger and stronger, can't be underestimated.

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