

Thoughts on Stupidity
(Excerpt from [this book](#))
By Chris Wright

One of the books I'd like to write someday is a comprehensive investigation of stupidity. I want to demonstrate its ubiquity, from politics to philosophy and so forth, and then try to explain it in various ways, using biology, psychology, and commonsense reasoning. It's just astonishing how *bad* people are at certain kinds of thinking (such as empathy and abstract reasoning), and I want to understand this. In part it's a result of contemporary social structures, but in part there must be biological and psychological causes.

I'm not talking about things that require real talent, such as quantum physics or hyper-abstract philosophical reasoning or even being good at reading maps. I'm talking about common sense. Very few celebrated philosophers have philosophical common sense (for example, they ask idiotic questions like "Can computers think?" or "Can machines understand language?,"¹ etc.); [feminists](#) and [postmodernists](#) have ridiculous radical-empiricist ideas about biology's irrelevance to gender norms or the mind's being a nearly blank slate; [intellectuals](#) tend to have naïve conceptions of how politics works, and they often have little institutional self-understanding; Leninists think it's possible for "the working class" to simply take over the national government, while many anarchists are convinced that if we can just abolish the government, things will be great. And then there's the political right wing, and ordinary people everywhere (including in the educated elite). Wherever I turn, I'm suffocated by this miasma of stupidity.

The first task is to distinguish between the types of stupidity. As I said, I don't find a simple lack of talent to be particularly interesting. Everyone lacks some talents. I myself am a moron at activities that require visual-spatial intelligence or kinesthetic intelligence, and I'm pretty bad at mathematics. Such facts are in large part a function of one's genetic endowment, and so there is really nothing that needs explaining. A lack of social intelligence, which has much to do with a subtle deficiency in empathy, is a little more interesting: I've always been intrigued by people who talk about themselves endlessly, unaware of how boring they are. Or people who act awkwardly without knowing it. (Introverts, on the other hand, are often aware of their occasional awkwardness but can't do much about it. Sometimes they just don't know what to say, or they're *too* aware of themselves as viewed by others, and so end up being uncomfortably quiet.) But this isn't so mysterious: aside from its being obviously, in part, a reflection of straightforward genetic factors, social unintelligence is somewhat explainable by the fact that people are more interested in themselves than others. Necessarily so. With some, this manifests itself partly in a lack of sensitivity to other people's reactions. They enjoy talking so

¹ In recent decades an incredible amount of "research" in philosophy, the cognitive sciences, and artificial intelligence has been devoted to answering questions like these. As Chomsky says, it all consists of "confused attempt[s] to answer a question that has no meaning." Chomsky, *Powers and Prospects* (London: Pluto Press, 1996), 40.

much more than listening that it can seem as though all you have to do is shove a person in front of them and, like a pigeon responding to a stimulus, they'll launch into an extended monologue.

Incidentally, a lack of “sensitivity” (physical, emotional, and cognitive) is of course one trait—even a defining trait—of broadly unintelligent people. Arthur Schopenhauer understood this when he said, in his curmudgeonly way,

The truly stoical indifference of ordinary persons to noise is amazing; no noise disturbs them in their thinking, reading, writing, or any other work, whereas the superior mind is rendered quite incapable by it. But that very thing which makes them so insensitive to noise of every kind also makes them insensitive to the beautiful in the plastic arts, and to profound thought and fine expression in the rhetorical arts, in short, to everything that does not touch their personal interest... Actually, I have for a long time been of the opinion that the quantity of noise anyone can comfortably endure is in inverse proportion to his mental powers, and may therefore be regarded as a rough estimate of them. Therefore, when I hear dogs barking unchecked for hours in the courtyard of a house, I know what to think of the mental powers of the inhabitant. The man who habitually slams doors instead of shutting them with the hand, or allows this to be done in his house, is not merely ill-mannered, but also coarse and narrow-minded. That “*sensible*” in English also means “intelligent,” “judicious,” accordingly rests on an accurate and fine observation.²

Schopenhauer exaggerates here, but it does seem that, for whatever reason, the different kinds of sensitivity tend (though not always) to exist together in a particular person. Someone highly sensitive to physical stimuli will also likely be sensitive—or will have the mental potential to be sensitive—to artistic and/or intellectual stimuli, and to people’s reactions to him, and to the thoughts and emotions behind people’s facial expressions (a capacity that amounts to a kind of empathy). From what I gather, neuroscience isn’t advanced enough yet to explain why this may be so—if indeed it is so.

While the psychologist Howard Gardner has famously described eight or nine different kinds of intelligence, including musical, linguistic, interpersonal, intra-personal, and so on, people usually have in mind something more general when thinking “He’s smart!” or “He’s a little slow.” This broad impression that one gets of someone’s intelligence evidently involves various modalities, including his empathy or interpersonal intelligence, his intra-personal intelligence or awareness of his own feelings, thoughts, and motives, and his linguistic intelligence or ability to verbalize thoughts, memories, feelings, etc. Together, these seem to be the main determinants of our opinion of another’s general intelligence. Of course in specific contexts other things come into play; for instance, as I said a moment ago, someone might well

² From *The World as Will and Representation*, Vol. II.

conclude that I personally am not very smart if he observed my absentmindedness or my forgetfulness.

But the general mental “slowness” of many people, such as the elderly or some working-class people you see in public buses, is mildly interesting. It must have to do with the brain’s slower processing of information, or a less efficient neural circuitry than in “intelligent” brains. What role does one’s social environment play in this? Surely poor education during youth may contribute to mental slowness, or a low IQ, later in life. Physical health is certainly important: research shows that malnutrition severely hinders cognitive development in children.³ Insofar as people in the lower classes lack the money to eat as healthfully and buy as good an education as those in the upper class, they’re at a clear disadvantage. Nor are they helped by the frequent necessity of parents to work two or more jobs—intellectually stultifying jobs—or by the unhealthy and un-nurturing home environment that may result from this fact and other stresses of low-income life.⁴ Moreover, with a low income one likely has less easy access to books, high culture, varied social experiences, and other intellectual stimulation than the middle-class or well-off, which may cause innate potential to atrophy. Living in dilapidated, crime-ridden neighborhoods, or in culturally barren trailer parks or low-income suburbs, may foster certain types of intelligence but rarely the kinds valorized by mainstream society. —I’ll return to the “working class” in a moment, for, despite all these disadvantages, in some respects its members show more intelligence than their supposed betters.

What I’m most intrigued—and disturbed—by is not low IQ but rather three very common deficiencies: a lack of empathy, a lack of self-insight, and a deficiency in the capacity to reason or “think abstractly.” These deficiencies seem to be spread fairly evenly throughout the U.S. population and aren’t obviously distributed by class—with the partial exception of the empathy deficit, which appears to be more common among the wealthy than the middle class or the poor.⁵ This particular finding is an example of science confirming common sense. People are influenced by their social environment, which, to a great extent, amounts to their class position, since one’s economic resources largely determine where one lives, whom one interacts with, what kinds of institutions one identifies with, etc. Or, from a different perspective, in order to rise in the ranks and become “wealthy” one is often compelled to act in a generally selfish and greedy way. However you look at it, therefore, the wealthy face many pressures to develop

³ See, e.g., Hasanain Faisal Ghazi and Syed Aljunid, “Eating for Intelligence: Breakfast and IQ among Iraqi Children,” United Nations University, <http://unu.edu/publications/articles/eating-for-intelligence-iraqi-children.html> (accessed April 1, 2014).

⁴ Such stresses in themselves appear to affect intelligence, according to research. See Amina Khan, “Poverty can sap brainpower, research shows,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 30, 2013. As for the home environment, research confirms the obvious: “the family in general, and the mother in particular, need to provide a *varied* amount of stimulation, to allow exploration, play and varieties of perceptual experience... In rearing the child, the ‘climate’ seems important—democratic but demanding, a home which encourages resourcefulness and independence. These probably lead to clearer and richer concepts, not to mention a belief in one’s ‘self.’ This all strengthens the ability to ‘cope.’” David W. Pyle, *Intelligence: An Introduction* (Boston: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1979), 58.

⁵ See Daniel Goleman, “Rich People Just Care Less,” *New York Times*, October 5, 2013.

unsympathetic character traits like arrogance, greed, and a lack of empathy. The human tendency to rationalize everything one does and justify one's social existence further tempts the rich into adopting Social Darwinistic ideologies, such that they may have contempt rather than compassion for the poor.

Conversely, it is well-known that the poor are far more generous than their "betters." They give relatively more to charity than the rich do, and studies have shown that they're "more attuned to the needs of others and more committed generally to the values of egalitarianism."⁶ No surprise there: knowing hardship firsthand, the poor have more compassion for the suffering. And they may well live in a more communal environment than the rich, which itself fosters mutual understanding and concern—especially since this ethic of mutualism helps the poor survive. If empathy can be called a kind of intelligence—an emotional understanding of others, an ability to imagine oneself in their shoes and see the world through their eyes—then it would seem that in this respect the poor are more "intelligent" than the socially esteemed.

On a broad scale, the dearth of empathy and the pervasiveness of stupidity throughout history have often dumbfounded progressives and radicals. The socialist Einstein famously remarked, "Two things are infinite: the universe and human stupidity. And I'm not sure about the universe." (Another fun quotation of his is, "The difference between stupidity and genius is that genius has its limits.") One can be sure that he was, at least in part, thinking of Nazism, the very epitome of a lack of empathy. And its lack of empathy made possible—indeed, was a component in—its unbelievable stupidity. Its racist thinking exemplified one classic psychological source of the empathy deficit, namely humans' categorization of particular others as *other*—and an inferior or hateful other at that. This affective labeling evidently interferes with cognitive functioning, such that one may become insensitive to rational considerations. No amount of science or philosophy could have convinced most fervent Nazis that their hatred of "the Jew" (or the Slav, the Communist, the Gypsy, the homosexual) was idiotic; their hate was a brutal and stupid primitive "structure of feeling" in their minds that caused them to act in brutal and stupid, primitive ways. Emotional impulses directed *against* people or types of people, as opposed to impulses of openness and compassion, seem to be dangerously susceptible to a disregard of facts and logic if they contradict the content of the impulse.

In short, it is surely the case that much of the stupidity, or inability to reason objectively, that Einstein lamented is directly related to an absence of empathy and openness, and a knee-jerk psychological defensiveness. Comments on the internet, for instance, frequently provide evidence for this. These reflections of mine from a few years ago give an example:

Chomsky recently wrote an article describing how the rights enshrined in the Magna Carta have been shredded in the last five hundred years. Naturally, in the "Comments" section under the article online are observations to the effect that Chomsky, that horrible Commie, wants to take us back to the year 1215. Etc. An

⁶ Paul Piff, quoted in Ken Eisold, "Why Are the Poor More Generous?," *Psychology Today*, August 23, 2010.

eight-year-old would understand Chomsky's point(s), but apparently these people can't. They've been indoctrinated into a pre-eight-year-old level of intelligence and rationality. They can't interpret statements from "Commies" except through a fog of "Fuck you." Virulent hostility toward people who challenge them so colors their mind that they *can't understand what is being said*. It becomes impossible to consider arguments on their merits; all that really registers (implicitly) in these people's minds is that "This horrible guy is saying 'Fuck you!' to me—his very existence is a 'Fuck you!'—so I have to defend myself [i.e., my opinions and sense of self] by attacking him." It's a fascinating phenomenon, which gives clues as to how Nazism and concentration camps are possible. Hatred of the Other, whether Commie or Jew or whatever, *consumes the mind*, so that any capacity for lucid reasoning is lost and the other's humanity is barely recognized. The kind of mind susceptible to this descent into semi-madness must be deeply paranoid, anxiously sensitive, insecure, prone to feeling as if it is beset by all kinds of demons that have to be destroyed. Commies, socialists, Muslims, terrorists, gays, big government, immigrants...the whole world is against me! All these evil forces have to be destroyed! Thus: far-right conservatives.

There's a continuum, of course; not everyone who hates Chomsky has a thoroughgoing fascist, authoritarian, paranoid mindset. But most have traveled some distance down that road. (Actually, everyone to some extent shares these traits—subtly categorizing certain people and disliking them as instances of that category, etc.)

Affective and cognitive capacities are thus inextricably tied together, to the point that behavior called "cognitive," such as abstract reasoning about politics, history, and societal functioning, incorporates and is grounded in affective attitudes—acts of valuing, of caring, of implicitly sympathizing with other points of view. The more broad-minded and inclusive one can be in these affective stances, the more objective, rational, and "intelligent" one will tend to be. (Even Nietzsche, the supposed arch-perspectivist, in the *Genealogy of Morals* recognized the possibility and necessity of such objectivity: "There is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective 'knowing'; [but] the *more* affects we allow to speak about one thing, the *more* eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our 'concept' of this thing, our 'objectivity,' be.") The problem is that our society of atomized relations and bitter anonymity, in producing people who are not only isolated from opposing viewpoints but also lonely, unrecognized, hostile, and defensive, discourages inclusive affective stances. Shallow, stupid, dogmatic thinking, often in the form of cruel and anti-human ideologies, is the result.

There are also more straightforward causes of the stupidity epidemic. Powerful people and institutions don't want the masses to empower themselves on the basis of solidarity and knowledge, so they use their considerable command over resources to fragment people and keep them ignorant. The ideal is that they act and think as irrationally as possible, for instance by

voting against their own economic interests, refusing to unionize, and blaming their woes on people who are even worse off than they (such as blacks or undocumented immigrants). It isn't necessary to dwell on the ways that big business accomplishes its goals of social control; suffice it to say that when business has a virtual monopoly over government and the media, the kinds of information, entertainment, commentary, ideologies, and educational policies on offer will not conduce to rationality and social understanding.⁷ Instead, submissive respect for authority, slavish-mindedness (not questioning what authorities tell you), conformism, thinking-by-emotional-impulse, jingoistic identification with the “home team” (in sports, politics, and other spheres), impatience with sustained analysis as opposed to sound-bites, and lack of interest in substantive issues will be strongly encouraged and valorized—especially in an age of hyper-consumerism and a smashed labor movement. A pronounced intellectual laziness and lack of curiosity about others' beliefs will be widespread, not least because of the self-fixated personality-type manufactured by late-capitalist social structures and consumerist values. And, to repeat, the human tendency to filter out information that contradicts what one believes or wants to believe is accentuated in a society that makes it very easy to surround oneself only with like-minded people and news sources.

It must be said, too, that what someone may unthinkingly interpret as “stupidity” or irrationality is in many cases only *ignorance*. To an academic like me, who has easy access to data, critical studies of society, and left-wing viewpoints, people will seem unintelligent when they engage in the kinds of simplistic discourse that proliferate on the internet and in the media. Doubtless media figures often *are* unintelligent and dogmatic; but the ordinary people one talks to are frequently merely ignorant of certain facts and opposing viewpoints, because the corporate media do not propagate them. It is lazy and elitist to interpret such ignorance as unintelligence or an indication of it.

All this helps explain the disturbing phenomenon of mass irrational and anti-factual thinking, but I'm still not quite satisfied. Despite understanding these factors, I remain surprised and bewildered each time I encounter a new instance of stupidity. For example, it mystifies me that millions of people can think the 9/11 attack in New York was planned by George W. Bush and/or his associates. Even after hearing compelling arguments against the conspiracy theory, they cling to it. They're unmoved by the argument that even to *attempt* such an improbable and certain-to-be-leaked plot would require literal insanity; or that if the goal was to have an excuse to invade Iraq, it would have made much more sense to blame the attack on Iraqis rather than Saudis (especially since Saudi Arabia is an important ally of the U.S.); or that, in fact, there *was* no leak, which is an impossibility if the plot existed (because its complexity is such that many,

⁷ See, e.g., Alex Carey, *Taking the Risk Out of Democracy: Corporate Propaganda versus Freedom and Liberty* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism, 1945–60* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985); Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011/1979); and Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979).

many people would have had to be involved, and someone certainly would have leaked the story). Like so many other believers of odd theories, these people are *committed* to an idea and will let nothing stand in the way of their commitment. *What is it like* to have a mind like that? I want to understand how it's possible, but on some level I simply can't. All I can do is state truisms about these people being unable to reason dispassionately on a particular set of issues, or thinking in terms of faith rather than disinterested logic. But, in fact, that seems to apply to *most people*—ultimately to everyone, in certain ways, but some more so than others. Most people, for reasons having to do with both their genes and their social upbringing (nature and nurture), evidently don't have a rigorously self-critical, logical, "broad-minded rationality"-governed cast of mind. The Chomskys are rare, the Sarah Palins common.

But you don't have to go to the extremes of Sarah Palin and Michelle Bachmann to find examples of a relative lack of interest in logical and evidence-based reasoning, or the kinds of "insensitivity" I mentioned in the context of the Schopenhauer quotation above. They're very common—throughout history.⁸ I have to conclude that nature has designed humans, on the whole, to be creatures less of impartial reason and intellection than of emotion, sexuality, play, self-expression, sensitivity to personal interest, and brute *habit*. This appears to be a trans-historical fact, and thus, probably, is a biologically determined one. In particular, the priority of habit over reason and open-mindedness is striking. We get used to thinking and behaving in certain ways, and it becomes difficult to accept any change. In this sense, humans, like all other species, tend to be conservative, basing their existence on various forms of *repetition*. There is comfort and stability in routine, repetition, habit, the use of already-formed schemata to interpret experiences; and the brain itself evidently prefers to use old neural pathways instead of forging new ones, except when it must. Thus we're averse to changing our minds on an issue or adopting a new affective/cognitive stance—especially if the opinions we already hold have become integrated into our sense of self. In some cases, to change our mind might even necessitate changes in behavior or lifestyle, a very uncomfortable thing. In short, we *value* our beliefs; and to adopt new values, so to speak, isn't easy. Moreover, in this context it means admitting we were wrong about something or were thinking about it in a superficial way, an admission that can be painful, especially if one has a fragile sense of self (as many or most do, regardless of the brave show they put on).

Such considerations help explain why it's frequently so hard to change someone's mind on an issue. In fact, people's beliefs often have the character of lazily held *prejudices*, whether or not we call them prejudices in the narrow sense. Rarely have they been arrived at through processes of disinterested reasoning; more often they're products of socialization, indoctrination, peer-group pressure, and gradual exposure to new views that slowly come to seem less exotic and more familiar, hence "acceptable." For instance, according to Gallup polls, in 2009 only 40

⁸ To give a personal example: all through my years of schooling I was constantly frustrated by the academic dullness of my classmates. Their lack of interest in, and understanding of, everything from mathematics to history to classical music baffled me. Like most people, they were (understandably) more interested in socializing with peers, partying, etc.

percent of Americans thought that same-sex couples should have the same marriage rights as heterosexual couples; by 2014, that number had risen to 55 percent. The reason is probably just that more people got *used* to the idea—it seemed less strange and radical—as media coverage expanded and more states legalized gay marriage. Most of those who changed their mind, I suspect, were persuaded not by specific arguments—they didn’t have an “Aha!” moment—but rather by a process of *acclimation*. The majority of people simply don’t *care* about arguments very much, or even about ideas, in the sense of wanting to rationally evaluate ideas on their merits and so “disinterestedly” accept or reject them. They have other interests, typically revolving around sociality and self-expression. Their lack of interest is probably both a cause and an effect of a lack of intellectual ability/acuity/sensitivity, in part genetically and in part socially determined.

While I haven’t seen any research on this, I suspect that what’s usually involved in adopting a new perspective on a subject is a mostly *unconscious* process of acclimation and assimilation. One’s *inclinations* or *predispositions* change, as it were. For people who are more intelligent and rational than others—that is, who are able to consider ideas relatively disinterestedly, divorced from any emotional valences they may have—the process of “changing one’s mind” is correspondingly under more conscious control, such that they have more free will. But even for these people, once they have decided on a certain viewpoint, they are definitely inclined—“inertially,” so to speak—to persist in it. Their minds are *less* brutally and unconsciously inertial than others’, but no one is immune to these unconscious and inertial influences. We all have an implicit “web of beliefs” in our mind, an affective and cognitive framework of ideology-fragments, background assumptions about people and the world, intellectual and emotional residues of previous experiences, commitments to particular values and social groups. Insofar as this framework is semi-coherent, changing certain beliefs might necessitate changing many others. Besides, the whole “framework” itself, which in its totality is essentially the very cast of one’s mind, tends to be quite rigid (the more so as one gets older). The question is: to what extent is the mental framework with which one interprets the world factually grounded, rationally justifiable, and open to new influences? Given both the authoritarian nature of modern society and most people’s evident lack of intellectual interest and acuity, it’s hardly surprising that the usual answer is “not very.”

Recent research has led to conclusions that are especially unflattering to political conservatives. Supporting the findings of that classic work of social psychology *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950), scientists are discovering that “*liberals and conservatives disagree about politics in part because they are different people at the level of personality, psychology, and even traits like physiology and genetics.*”⁹ As several scholars write, “There is by now evidence from a variety of laboratories around the world using a variety of methodological techniques leading to the virtually inescapable conclusion that the cognitive-motivational styles of leftists and rightists are quite different. This research consistently finds

⁹ Chris Mooney, “Scientists Are Beginning to Figure Out Why Conservatives Are...Conservative,” *Mother Jones*, July 15, 2014. Italics in original.

that conservatism is positively associated with heightened epistemic concerns for order, structure, closure, certainty, consistency, simplicity, and familiarity, as well as existential concerns such as perceptions of danger, sensitivity to threat, and death anxiety.”¹⁰ Liberals tend to be more open to new experiences and more empathetic, while conservatives care more about purity, authority, conformity, and in-group/out-group status. They are more sensitive to negative stimuli, such as disgust and danger, than liberals.¹¹ Inasmuch as empathy, open-mindedness, curiosity, and tolerance of uncertainty can reasonably be thought to correlate with high intelligence and rationality, it would seem, then, that liberals and leftists are on average more intelligent than conservatives. Indeed, research has consistently shown that the socially conservative tend to be less intelligent than the socially liberal.¹² Conservatives also seem more prone than liberals to believing *more strongly* in mistaken beliefs after being shown evidence that these beliefs are wrong.¹³ On the other hand, subjects were more likely to be open-minded if they were first asked to do an activity that made them feel good about themselves—a result that suggests the importance of a healthy, confident sense of self to rational and open-minded thinking. This supports the reasonable idea, referred to above, that dogmatic, irrational, and unempathetic thinking is at least sometimes caused by a deficiency in the sense of self. Thus, to repeat, it’s likely that a society with less anti-social structures and values than our own would produce a more rational and intelligent—and informed—population.

Despite all this research critical of conservatives, liberals and leftists are perfectly capable of being dogmatic and irrational themselves. I’ve already given the example of 9/11 Truthers. Liberal supporters of Obama are another group of people with whom it is frequently futile to argue. They have such an “affective attachment” to Obama that confronting them with evidence and compelling arguments that, e.g., he has too often supported big business over people, presided over an incredibly dangerous expansion of the national security state, been content to *increase* the threat and presence of terror in the world through his global drone-killing campaign, done precious little to address global warming, etc., often only elicits silly rationalizations and *ad hominem* attacks. In these cases it’s hard to avoid the conclusion that the liberal’s affective commitments are making him insensitive to another, more rational perspective (more rational in that, given the liberal’s basic values of freedom, democracy, and social welfare, a consideration of facts makes it more consistent to criticize Obama than to support him).

¹⁰ Quoted in *ibid.* The inclusion of “consistency” in this list is odd, since it is easy to demonstrate that rightwing and fascist ideologies are more or less incoherent.

¹¹ John Hibbing, Kevin Smith, and John Alford, “Differences in Negativity Bias Underlie Variations in Political Ideology,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 37 (2014): 297–350.

¹² See Ronald Bailey, “Are Conservatives Dumber Than Liberals?,” *Reason.com*, June 13, 2014; Satoshi Kanazawa, “Why Liberals Are More Intelligent Than Conservatives,” *Psychology Today*, March 21, 2010; Rebecca Searles, “Intelligence Study Links Low I.Q. To Prejudice, Racism, Conservatism,” *Huffington Post*, February 1, 2012; John Cloud, “Study: Are Liberals Smarter Than Conservatives?,” *Time*, February 26, 2010.

¹³ Marty Kaplan, “The Most Depressing Discovery About the Brain, Ever,” *AlterNet*, September 16, 2013. For example, “people who thought WMDs were found in Iraq believed that misinformation even more strongly when they were shown a news story correcting it.”

Of course, no one is totally immune to stupidity and irrationality, because the human mind is not a rational machine. What's disturbing is the frequency of these things, not their existence. Consider intellectuals again. Upon perusing philosophical scholarship, for instance, an intelligent and rational layman is likely to be struck by the sheer perverseness of many of the ideas he comes across. The theories of extended mind, of eliminative materialism, of modal realism, of anti-realism in accounts of what 'truth' is (accounts that reject the correspondence theory of truth), as well as the (incoherent) postmodern denial that there is such a thing as "objective truth," and the common dismissal of the utterly obvious Chomskian idea that the human brain is *programmed* to learn, or 'grow,' language, and countless other bizarre positions, show how difficult *sensible* abstract thinking can be for intellectuals. Earlier in this book I mentioned the peculiar phenomenon of scholars in political science, history, economics, sociology, and other such disciplines denying the existence of class or class struggle, or that the agendas of government and the media are overwhelmingly the agendas of the rich, or that, in general, [historical materialism](#) is far more realistic and analytically powerful than idealism. And I needn't repeat the arguments I've brought against certain feminist ideologies beloved by liberal academics.

To the question "How is all this woolly thinking possible?," the answers are fairly obvious and have already been suggested. Their premise is that many or most people are somewhat easily indoctrinated and aren't very acute thinkers, who can turn a critical eye on everything and "intuitively," imaginatively analyze it in the light of objectivity. Certainly very few people have Chomsky's razor-sharp logical vision, which somehow can quickly grasp the essence of a matter and parse it clearly. In the extreme form it takes with him, this is ultra-rationality: a minimal determination by (semi-)emotional states of mind, social and ideological conventions, *ad hominem* attitudes, mere *habit*, and a maximal ability to "step outside oneself" and see things in their proper relations to each other by taking—insofar as is humanly possible—a God's-eye point of view, or something like it.¹⁴ This Chomskian hyper-rationality is a very specific *talent*, which people have to varying degrees. Among most intellectuals, evidently, it isn't closely approximated.

Thus, these people have fairly pliable natures: they are taught and socialized to think and act in certain ways, and they willingly do so, assuming that these are the best ways and not devoting much time to critically examining their beliefs and ways of doing things. Or, if they do devote time to that, they must lack a particular *ability*. This seems like the best explanation of why some people, who have been subjected to basically the same influences as others,

¹⁴ This is the meaning, for instance, of Chomsky's precept that we should apply to ourselves the rational and moral standards we apply to others—something that is rarely done—and try to view ourselves as others might view us. As for not being manipulated by emotions: it's of course true that any passionate leftist can get quite emotional about politics. The point, however, is that the emotions (to the extent possible) have to come *after* the reasoning, so to speak. The latter should ground the former, not vice versa.

nonetheless manage to think in more sensible and rational ways.¹⁵ Most philosophers, for example, think mainly on the level of *words*, not “the things themselves” (to quote Edmund Husserl). They discuss concepts and terms like perdurantism and endurantism, dualism and monism, functionalism and emergentism, playing with arguments and modifying them to make them more consistent...never trying to get *beneath* the superficial level of words and think in a deeper, more *intuitive* way.¹⁶ Hence they end up with wildly implausible positions like denial of the private character of consciousness, or they argue endlessly over false and shallow alternatives without trying to “dissolve” the puzzles by showing how they arise out of mistaken ways of thinking.

In fact, the fixation on *words* rather than *substance* is a very common cause and manifestation of stupidity and irrationality. In the broader society it means not only shallow thinking, as with academics, but also such an extreme emotional attachment or aversion to certain words that clear thinking becomes impossible. All it takes is that one invoke terms like free market, conservative, liberal, socialism, communism, welfare, terrorist, big government, Democrat, Republican, Obama—or, among feminists, misogyny, sexism, victim-blaming, “mansplain”—and, as often as not, lucid thinking is thrown out the window. People accept or reject something on the basis of a mere label that serves as a disguised value-judgment, i.e., ‘Bad!’ or ‘Good!’ Emotional content effaces cognitive content. The human mind’s susceptibility to this phenomenon of emotional labeling has been incredibly useful to power-structures’ use of propaganda in the last hundred years, as a way to manipulate people into thinking irrationally.

I won’t give examples of *conservative* label-fixation, since they’re too obvious. (Some given thing or idea is automatically wrong and horrible because of its association with communism or homosexuals or atheists or black people, etc.) Slightly more interesting are those leftists who fall victim to the same pathology. For instance, after Richard Dawkins argued once that some forms of rape and pedophilia are worse than others, feminists and others among the political-correctness police flooded the liberal media with outrage at what a horrible person Dawkins must be in order to have said that. It didn’t matter that even a rational eight-year-old could have seen he was right: it’s obviously worse to, say, anally rape a child than to briefly touch his genitals and do nothing else (which is the example Dawkins gave); it’s worse to violently force oneself upon a screaming, protesting woman than to have sex with her when both partners are drunk and the woman two days later decides she was “raped.” But the words ‘rape’ and ‘child abuse’ are so charged that some people become *unable to make distinctions* when they hear them. They reverse the meaning of Dawkins’ statement, so to speak: while his real meaning was that some kinds of behavior are more horrific than others, they interpret him as saying that

¹⁵ Another factor may be that some people, through accident or mental independence or curiosity, at an early age are exposed to different and more rational ideas than the mainstream, and are to that extent inoculated against indoctrination.

¹⁶ Saul Kripke is one of the few philosophers who appreciates the importance of intuition, as is clear from his books *Naming and Necessity* (1972) and *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (1982). Others include Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Frege, and the twentieth-century phenomenologists, whose method was intuitive and introspective.

some forms of child abuse and rape are okay or not so bad. And then they protest, “No, child abuse is never okay!” and feel good about themselves for taking such a courageous moral stance. In reality, they’re sub-rational morons, at least in that moment of being unable to understand a moral truism.

Anyway, these pathologies fortunately are not universal among the populace, being, probably, more common among the elite than the relatively poor. Since it is the more educated and privileged sectors of the population that are most inundated by propaganda and indoctrination, it should be no surprise that some of the most rational and clear-headed thinking exists among the “lower classes.” The white lower class is a partial exception, to the extent that it identifies with the middle class and has contempt for those lower in status. But, in the U.S., low-income blacks and Hispanics, as groups, probably have a more defensible picture of society than most other socio-economic groups do. For example, a recent poll found that blacks are—justifiably—increasingly pessimistic that progress is being made toward racial equality, an attitude that contrasts with that of the mainstream.¹⁷ A study in 2013 found that higher percentages of minorities say global warming is happening and want the president to take action to address the issue.¹⁸ In general, it’s widely recognized that low-income minorities, and to an extent low-income whites, tend to have more progressive political views than the mainstream—and progressive views (with few exceptions) are demonstrably more rational, evidence-based, and empathy-based than conservative views.

I still haven’t said much about the third kind of unintelligence I mentioned above: people’s lack of self-insight and their (or rather our) remarkable capacity for self-deception. To a degree this phenomenon can be explained by factors I’ve already invoked, such as low introspective ability, emotional or empathic insensitivity, and susceptibility to indoctrination. But in fact the question of self-deception is such a vast and difficult subject, which has inspired so much literature in philosophy and psychology, that it can hardly be touched upon here. Contrary to what Sartre argued, the mind is profoundly opaque to itself; in many respects we are constantly deceiving ourselves (without knowing it), telling ourselves stories to bolster our self-regard, passing lightly over incidents that might contradict our self-interpretations, refusing to probe deeply into matters that make us uncomfortable because we fear what they might reveal about us, and willingly accepting people’s facile approval of us as confirmation of our value. We attribute noble motives to ourselves when a moment of intelligent self-reflection would show that money or power or sex is the deeper motive. We call others cowardly or greedy or selfish without “stepping outside ourselves” to acknowledge that our own behavior is so as well. We tell ourselves we feel a certain way about someone when our real feelings (as shown by how we treat him or her) are quite different. In general, we run on autopilot most of the time, living on the glib and facile level of sociability, not *thinking* about things but just *behaving*, persisting in habits,

¹⁷ Carol Morello, “African Americans are more pessimistic about racial progress, poll finds,” *Washington Post*, August 22, 2013. www.eesi.org.

¹⁸ Margarite Suozzo-Gole, “Fact Sheet: Polling the American Public on Climate Change,” Environmental and Energy Study Institute, April 2013, at www.eesi.org.

refusing to subject ourselves to the ruthless rule of reason. It's an understandable and tempting way to live, but not a productive or healthy one.