

On Covidiotics and Covexperts: Stupidity and the Politics of Health

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the significance of the politics of health as an ongoing interpretative event. The effectiveness of delivering prevention strategies is in negotiation with day-to-day arguments in the public sphere, not just by “experts” in peer-reviewed papers, but also in the everyday interpretations and discussions of available expertise on print and digital media platforms. In this paper, I explore a particular facet of these public debate over the politics of health: the deployment of the commonplace of *stupidity*. I argue that the growth of this commonplace within discussion is rooted in particular models of interpretation which limit self-understanding, by over-emphasising certain points of significance within the interpretative horizon over more banal (and “stupid”) aspects that are, nevertheless, influential on health interventions.

Keywords

Stupidity, agnotology, knowledge, expertise, post-truth, uncertainty

Analysing the advent of what he terms our current “Burnout Society,” Byung-Chul Han points to the problematic role of immunology as a framework for interpretation. “The past century was an immunological age,” he argues. “The epoch sought to distinguish clearly between inside and outside, friend and foe, self and other. [...] The object of immune defense is the foreign as such.” (2015, pp. 1-2) The “fundamental category” of immunology is the Other (2015, p. 2), and immunization has thus served as an interpretative category which links together otherwise disparate concerns in medicine, politics, and technology (see Esposito, 2011, p. 1). Yet for Han, this immunological model is insufficient to describe the workings of 21st century late capitalism with its globalised networks and dissolution of boundaries. If the model of immunology leads to

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disciplinary responses – the type of organisational control which was described so well by Foucault’s account of institutions such as hospitals and factories – for Han, we now live in an “achievement society.” Here, negative control is replaced by an excess of positivity, and “prohibitions, commandments, and the law are replaced by projects, initiatives, and motivation.” (2015, p. 9) The problem is no longer an external Other, but rather the demands of self-fulfilment requiring immune responses to be suppressed “so that information will circulate faster and capital will accelerate” (2017, p. 83). Amid the mass exchange of knowledge via communication networks which are no longer concerned with borders and have absorbed all forms of otherness, Han suggests “the idiot, the fool” – the one who performs an “inner contraction of thinking to make a new beginning,” who “wants to turn the absurd into the highest power of thought” – has “all but vanished from society.” (2017, pp. 81-82) The idiot, Han argues, being “un-networked and uninformed,” would stand opposed to “the neoliberal power of domination: total communication and total surveillance” (83); if only the achievement society allowed for the stupid.

It is fair to say that the COVID-19 pandemic has necessarily and pointedly re-introduced immunology into our models of thinking, while simultaneously retaining the hallmarks of Han’s achievement society. Consequently, it should be no surprise the extent to which the pandemic has highlighted the significance of the politics of health as an ongoing interpretative event. That is to say: the effectiveness of health delivery is in negotiation with day-to-day arguments in the public sphere, not just by “experts” in peer-reviewed papers, but also (and perhaps predominantly) in the everyday interpretations and discussions of available expertise on print and digital media platforms. There is no separation of communication networks. Hence, the emergence of a pandemic of a previously unseen virus is not only, as Carley et al. suggest, “arguably [...] one of the greatest challenges to EBM [Evidence-Based Medicine] since the term was coined” (2020, p. 572). For clinicians, they note that the emergence of a new pandemic in a digital age is problematic because of:

the sheer volume of new “evidence” that we are faced with. On the one hand, this research can be both informative and hypothesis generating, but on the other hand, it is prone to selective promotion and can overwhelm the user by the nature of volume and the frequency of publication. (Carley et al., 2020, p. 574)

The same issue is at hand in the public discussion of how best to deal with the virus: the lack of clear and well-established protocols, the variations in approaches taken by different countries, and, particularly of note in the UK, the ways in which its key themes – global travel and border control, state-sanctioned lockdown and welfare provision, considerations of society’s “vulnerable” and the legacy of downgraded public health investment – interweave into existing political arguments. As a result, discussion amongst the “general public” around whether to accept or reject a particular health intervention frequently take place in the same public forums, and particularly on social media, in which these existing political debates take place. In this way, one can easily suggest that the decisions made by members of the public whether to wear a mask, whether to visit a general practice, and whether to conform to social distancing rules is mediated at least in part by interpretations of the volume, frequency, and promotion of certain views, on social media no less than in the world of EBM. Precisely because of this, the debate over public health and individual behaviour within the COVID-19 pandemic has been framed by the longer-

term interrelationship between politics and health (see Bambra et al., 2005; Oliver, 2006) and, in this case, in particular the critical discussion over the role of expertise in the times digital media saturation, one which has challenged the health professions as much as any other (see, for example, Hawkes, 2017; Heinrich, 2020; Hopf et al., 2019). This is what Paul and Haddad describe as a “new truth regime, [where] politics seems to have unilaterally withdrawn from the social contract and appears to operate, once again, primarily on the basis of a stubborn will to ignorance and blatant forms of denial” (2019, p. 300).

What, though, of Han’s “idiot”? Do they return, like the immunological model, and if so, in what form? In this paper, I want to explore a particular facet of these public debate over the politics of health, or rather, a particular commonplace line of reasoning, a particular topic of discussion which situates COVID-19 at the centre of the so-called “post-truth” mediasphere battleground. This is the deployment of the commonplace of *stupidity*. As with any discussion of the pandemic in 2020 and 2021, my paper here can only be schematic at this point: we lack any finality, and the interpretative connections I want to suggest may yet take unexpected turns. Nevertheless, the role of stupidity in public debate has been an increasingly febrile one. The interpretative distinction between the stupid and the intelligent, the unreflective with the rational and the conspiratorial with the informed has long been found in arguments against the more general, pre-COVID “anti-vaxxers,” the United States presidential elections in both 2016 and 2020, and, either side of the Brexit divide in the United Kingdom. It is within the context of COVID-19, though, that specific questions for applied hermeneutics are brought to the fore.

It seems appropriate to illustrate the commonplace of stupidity through some examples of their primary vehicle for communication, the internet meme.



COVID denialism exists in **opposition** to science based medicine **not** because denialists don't understand science (although they **don't**). It exists because they confuse **unreflective** defiance of **elites** with independent thinking.



The Skeptical OB

These are images and texts that are easily shared and viewed, at speed, across digital media platform, in order to spread a message or viewpoint. In this way, the internet meme operates on a level of what Aristotle termed the enthymeme: that is, a unit of cultural transmission embedded within an audience's ability to accept similarities across situations (see Grimwood, 2021, p.180). Similarly, memes appeal to the manifestation what Gadamer turns to as the *sensus communis* underlying interpretative judgement (2004, pp. 28-29). In this sense, these meme examples appeal to a clear argument: following science is the antithesis to being stupid. Those who do not "follow the science" are, therefore, stupid. Accompanying the concern for the decline in the value of expertise, and the associated ascent of fake news and post-truth, the line is very clearly drawn in social media between those with intellect and those without, those committed to the value of fact over the allure of conspiracy. In such a context, the aim of the arguments around applied responses to the pandemic revolves around an established commonplace of digital rhetoric, encapsulated in a popular pre-COVID meme which asserted "science: it reduces the stupid."

The Ethos of the Stupid

Isn't this obvious? Perhaps too obvious: the readymade accessibility of this form of critique renders stupidity a cliché. It is merely stating what we (the non-stupid) already know; the equivalent of showing a picture of a globe to a flat-earther (and typically with much the same effect; that is, none). But much like the use of clichés, something more is being appealed to than tautology. If the medium for these accusations is often irony or humour, the sentiment is certainly not flippant. This is not the "oh, don't be so stupid!" that we might say to a partner or sibling. Instead, the mud is very much supposed to stick. After all, in the midst of a pandemic, the stakes are very real: a reasonable, evidence-based approach to public health initiatives is key to the prevention of further spread and deaths from the virus. This is not the "idiotism" which Han borrows from Deleuze, a celebrated instigator of new thought by virtue of their idiosyncrasies (Han, 2017, p. 81). Clearly, so-called "Covididiots," while sometimes declaring opposition to various notions of neoliberal domination, are nevertheless entirely networked, fuelled by communication access, and *au fait* with the language of reason and evidence. At the same time, the prevalence of this specific trope and its specific concern with expertise suggests it is something more than an *ad hominem* attack (even if it *is* that as well). And in that sense, it

seems right to ask: what *kind* of stupidity is being referred to? If, as I have already suggested, these accusations of COVID-19 behaviours are embedded within the wider concerns for the fate of expertise in contemporary culture, then what are the wider interpretative systems used to frame them?

To complicate this question, stupidity itself bears an etymological relationship to the idea of a “type.” The Latin *stupēre* root term (to be stunned or numb) gives rise not only to *stupidus*, with its sense of stultifying astonishment, but also to *typos*, an impression or model, and to *typtein*, to strike or beat. In antiquity, then, stupidity carried the sense of being stunned still, whether by amazement or by violence. It was only in the 17th century that the notion of halting came to refer to a slowness of mind; and only later still that stupidity was defined as ignorance. Indeed, in the 19th century Nietzsche describes stupidity not as an error or misunderstanding, but rather thoughts which are true but “base” (see Deleuze, 1962/2006, p. 98) This alignment is also at work in Gustave Le Bon’s *The Crowd*, a 1895 treatise on mass psychology, which remains so persuasive it is reprinted almost every year. For Le Bon, stupidity is exemplified by the formation of the crowd: once inside, individuals become incapable of logical argumentation, and instead allow their behaviours and attitudes to change via the contagion of suggestibility. This is, in effect, the spreading stultification of critical thought, and it is clear that on this view stupidity – much like a virus – needs containment and reducing. Indeed, as Ernesto Laclau has shown, Le Bon’s line between social organisation and mass crowds “coincides [...] with the frontier separating the normal from the pathological” (Laclau, 2005, p. 29).

Nevertheless, while Le Bon’s dated views might still be entreated in discussions of the decline of expertise in the face of political populism, they do not in themselves shed much light on the meaning of stupidity as a trope: not just because of Laclau’s argument that Le Bon woefully fails to account for the myriad of ways people might group together and communicate whilst also thinking relatively logically, but additionally because Le Bon insists that mass psychology requires anonymity, and the loss of self. However, the targets of the memes above are not anonymous; if anything, COVID-deniers and anti-vaxxers are prominent not just in identifying themselves, but in their displays of (apparent) reason and evidence to support their claims. It is perhaps for this reason that another answer to has become particularly prominent, which is the invocation of “confident idiocy,” or what has become known as the Dunning-Kruger effect. In a small experiment in social psychology, David Dunning and Justin Kruger asked participants to report on their confidence in carrying out a task, and then compared this to how the candidates actually performed. They argued that there was a direct correlation between confidence and performance: the more confident a participant was, the less well they had performed. The study concluded that incompetent people were unable, and unwilling, to acknowledge their lack of competence, because this would require the very expertise that they lacked; instead, they will become more belligerent in their view of their own abilities. Arguments by anti-vaccination advocates and claims that COVID-19-deniers are seen as fine illustrations of this, as the direct reproach to established evidence-bases is precisely what buoys the arguer. The louder one shouts about one’s expertise, the less one is likely to know.

Unlike Le Bon, Kruger and Dunning’s work is notable for its emphasis on the individual at fault: arguing that “the miscalibration of the incompetent stems from an error about *the self*, whereas the miscalibration of the highly competent stems from an error about others” (1999, p. 1127, my

emphasis). This particular aspect of the Dunning-Kruger account of stupidity is often picked up by its proponents. For example, US blogger and obstetrician gynecologist Amy Tuteur, argues that the “disparagement of expertise may boost the self-esteem of its promoters, but often harms everyone else. What confident idiots know rarely represents the sum total of all knowledge on the subject; that’s why real expertise is worthy of respect” (Tuteur, 2016, on-line). Writing for *Forbes*, Ethan Siegel concludes that the Dunning-Kruger effect can only be challenged by a response based on one’s *ethos* rather than *pathos*. It:

requires a kind of transformation within yourself. It means that you need to be humble, and admit that you, yourself, lack the necessary expertise to evaluate the science before you. It means that you need to be brave enough to turn to the consensus of scientific experts [...]. If we listen to the science, we can attempt to take the best path possible forward through the greatest challenges facing modern society. We can choose to ignore it, but if we do, the consequences will only increase in severity. (Siegel, 2020, on-line)

This focus on character traits serves to cement that stupid people are not simply mistaken on the facts, they are also *morally* wrong. The change to be made is within the individual, in order that they are better able to “listen to the science.” And clearly, in many instances of public debate, the emphasis on choice is one of moral imperative: to not wear a mask is to risk the lives of others; so is avoiding a vaccine. These are individual choices about our behaviours which have effects on the people around us, just as refusing to self-isolate or taking a holiday to North Wales are. In some cases, choice is emphasised precisely to frame an action *as* moral, rather than, say economic (as in the case, for example, of the person who refuses to self-isolate because they work in the gig economy and can’t afford to take the time from work). But more fundamental to our concerns here is the role of choice in accepting or not accepting knowledge. Inherent to this version of confident idiocy is a working assumption that we can pick up and use information as it passes us by, as we please. Therefore, if we choose wrong, we are stupid, and probably immoral for that.

Of course, this can be very convincing, especially when faced with the stream of sometimes bizarre claims and conspiracy theories which one can encounter on social media regarding COVID-19. But the more interesting aspect of the Dunning-Kruger research is that it bears significant marks of the *production* of expertise (“real expertise” that is “worthy of respect”). For example, it is referred to as “Dunning-Kruger,” when the original paper has Kruger’s name first. But it is not the Kruger-Dunning effect, because Kruger was at the time only a graduate student, whilst Dunning was the professor. Hence, when the Skeptical OB blog declares in relation to the confidence we might have in expert views, “that’s why professional qualifications are so important,” the wider implications of that claim are unwittingly reflected in the Dunning-Kruger example: that is, the darker side of what Jason Brennan has championed as “epistocracy” (Brennan, 2016), or the advocacy of elite knowledge over and against democratic representation (McGoey, 2019). Titles matter. Furthermore, Dunning and Kruger’s original studies were of students at University. It is perhaps not surprising that over-confidence was a problem here: students who had reached tertiary education, often at great financial cost to themselves, may well be disposed to feeling a certain elevated confidence in their abilities. The use of students as participants is common practice in much social psychology simply because they are more readily available and easier to recruit than others, and this keeps the costs of an experiment down

considerably. While it is therefore problematic to scale up these findings to those participating in internet debates – the self-confidence of the original participants was not *opposed* to expertise but embedded in the same system that produces it – such choices of data subjects represent what Paul and Haddad term “convenient uncertainty” (2019, p. 306): a choice made less out of intentional exclusion of non-students, but rather from “agnotological convenience” (see also Proctor, 2008, p. 24).

For some, these points are insignificant; the evidence still stands and the observation is still astute. However, both points demonstrate the cultural and economic aspects of expertise which a simple line between confidence and competence does not attend to; as well as how convention and tradition is a key determinant to which forms of reasoning and illustration are used. What *is* significant is that the contemporary invocation of “confident idiocy” takes place against the backdrop of a specific (though notoriously ill-defined; see Keane, 2013, 2018, Vogelmann, 2018) cultural context: that of “post-truth.” This, too, is a context beset with agnotological convenience. The term “post-truth” has become, amid the genuine concerns over its political and cultural effects, a *de facto* victory of a positivistic certainty; and accompanying this victory is an industry of conferences, academic papers, and even research centres that have arisen in its wake to determine who are the intelligent ones and who are the confident idiots. But in this response, “post-truth” rather too quickly becomes merely “non-truth,” and the complexity of the “post” prefix is lost. Too quickly, post-truth is shaped into a shorthand straw man figure to be bested by conservative epistemological mantra, a figure uncannily similar to older enemies of that same mantra, such as radical feminism, post-modernism, or the hermeneutics of suspicion (see, for example, Haack, 2019). Too quickly, the complexities of “post-truth” becomes a cipher for nothing other than a yearning for an ideal model of academic institutions of truth and readily graspable “facts.”

This is not to dismiss Kruger and Dunning’s argument, and certainly not to deny that ignorance can be damaging to public health efforts. Instead, I would argue that there are certain rituals, processes and cultures of knowledge production which *remain* at work when peer-reviewed research becomes the content of public debate. And if it might be tempting for the epistocrat to suggest that the invocation of Dunning-Kruger by a wider population leads to misrepresentation because, ironically, it is being utilised by non-experts, this merely repeats these rituals, processes, and cultures once more. As such, this case highlights the way in which a beacon of reference for framing “stupidity” carries with it a number of less manifest aspects of “intelligence” in our time, which nevertheless constitute an interpretative horizon in the Gadmerian sense of combining cognitive, normative, and reproductive aspects of interpretation (Gadamer, 2004, p. 309). As such, if we are to interpret the impact of these commonplaces of public debate on applied health interventions within the pandemic, then we need to attend to how such horizontal aspects facilitate the shorthand of “reducing the stupid” which turns epistemology into moral requirement: that is, what cultures and rituals are maintained or perpetuated, and what this speed of judgement leaves out, or steps around.

Stupidity on (and in) the Horizon

A prime reason that the pandemic brings this shorthand into focus is that, as Carley et al. argue, the pandemic provides “a time when we can experience first-hand the journey from ignorance

about the disease through to a better understanding and approach to diagnostics and interventional therapy.” (2020, p. 574) As such, one could argue that COVID-19 has shone a light on the processes of knowledge-production which are more usually obscured either by a form of site-exclusivity (hidden behind the pay walls of academic journals or the real walls of the university and the laboratory), or the length of time such production usually takes due to funding, access to resources, ethical approval, and so on, all of which has been accelerated in COVID-related research during 2020 and 2021. Furthermore, the political machinations of evidence – from the micro academic rituals of Dunning-Kruger to the macro policy decisions, funding allocations, and presentation of data of national government (see Ashton, 2020, pp. 160-179) – have also been manifest. If this is the case, then it becomes increasingly clear that the invocation of stupidity is not a simple reliance on the “facts,” however popular the positivist revival in public (and large parts of academic) debate might be. The rhetoric of “*the* science,” in need of defending from the stupid, masks the complex yet entirely functional ways in which such science is *made meaningful*, and consolidated from a myriad of data into one single “*the*.” Or, in other words: to judge something as stupid requires interpretation.

The word ignorance stems from the Latin *ignorantia*, a lack of knowledge, but its long journey – via Middle English and Old French – to today’s usage leaves a number of ambiguities in it. Arfini (2019), for example, notes that “to be ignorant” and “to ignore” are two quite distinct perspectives: the former suggests being uninformed or unlearned, the latter suggested an intentional refusal to take notice of something. This is echoed in the work of both McGahey and Paul and Haddad, who note in their respective fields of practice (sociology of health and policy studies) that rather than aligning ignorance with misinformation or falsehood, *choosing* to ignore aspects of a certain horizon can form “very tangible effects of selective processing of research-based knowledge,” where “ignorance emerges as a by-product in knowledge-making processes.” (Paul & Haddad, 2019, p. 308) On these arguments, ignorance is not the “other” to knowledge, as the scientific memes might suggest, but rather a material part of it. Knowledge itself depends on a level of “strategic ignorance,” if only to reach something like a “conclusion” in a manageable form. As before, this begins to reflect something like a performance of what Gadamer terms the ontological “effective-historical consciousness” which situate our interpretative acts: the horizon for understanding which is not universal in reach but rather a “range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 301). This fluctuating frame of reference is shaped and changed by the limits of our situation and knowledge, and the ways in which such knowledge is significant to us. Our horizons are not simply operational knowledge of the world, but also our expectations, projections and hopes. Like prejudice, the strategic ignorance raised by McGahey and Paul and Haddad is not necessarily an obstacle to understanding. It is, rather, a condition of understanding itself: such “fore-understanding” is “what determines what can be realised as a unified meaning and thus determines how the fore-conception of completeness is applied” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 294).

In this light, it is noticeable that, like many in the field, Carley et al. utilise a narrative structure for ignorance whereby the concept emerges from a sense of assumed completion: in other words, ignorance is only a step on the way to proper knowledge. Hence, this is a “journey,” not an errant adventure. We start with nothing, in order that we finish in possession of understanding. This notion of possession – from not having knowledge to having it, from not having an appropriate

therapy to carrying out an intervention with it, and so on – is instructive, and not just typical of health research. Indeed, in analytic epistemology possession is the keystone of both dominant views of ignorance: what is known as the “Standard View on Ignorance” refers to it as a lack of knowledge (one cannot both be ignorant and have knowledge of a certain thing, whereas the “New View” argues that it is the absence or lack of true beliefs (one cannot be ignorant and have a true belief about something). Both assume that knowledge, beliefs, and truth are things that people possess, and subsequently excludes one from holding both at the same time.

But if possession is at the centre of knowledge, it cannot be a literal “possession”: after all, one does not physically pick up knowledge in their hand. Storing memories is not exactly the same as storing real books (if it was, surely the distribution of photocopied handouts would have been far more successful in Higher Education over the years). Indeed, as Paul Mason has argued (2015), in an age where digital files can be infinitely reproduced, premising possession on scarcity – one has it or one doesn’t – ceases to make sense. Instead, in all of the cases above possession serves as a practical – and highly traditional – illustrative structure. It is, in this sense, not just a description but also a trope in which certain conditions for understanding are established via the imagery of possession. Key to the effect of this trope is a binary rhetoric: one possesses something, or one does not, just as one has knowledge, or one does not. Hence, when we read that “science reduces the stupid,” we are clearly not meant to ponder on those parts of the history of science we would now think of as “stupid,” and whether that should be considered a longer-term part of the reduction. In this sense, such non-stupidity is both historical, in that it follows a temporal path in achieving its goals, whilst also being outside of history (both because its focus on “fact” contests the hermeneutic effective-historical consciousness of a situated horizon, and because the *achievement* of its goal is always assumed: a vaccine, a herd immunity, etc.). This is what Vattimo and Zabala once referred to as “the Winner’s History” (2011, pp. 37-39): it was, because it was always going to be.

In this sense, we may well stop and pause before the assumed “completion” at work in the narrative structure of ignorance’s journey to knowledge. Gadamer’s account of the horizon and fore-understanding allows us to unpick some of the problems with this binary rhetoric; in particular, the modality of what Gadamer refers to, following Scheler, as “knowledge as domination,” (2004, p. 447) which hermeneutics is opposed to. Instead, the responsibility of the hermeneutic encounter is to establish the relationships between the kind of ignorance or stupidity in play, and the wider concerns around expertise and methodological rigour. It is precisely the domain of the commonplace – the enthymeme, the *sensus communis*, the internet meme – in which the persuasive work of the tropes underlying claims to understanding are at their most effective, but also at their most bare in terms of the limits they reveal.

At the same time, while Gadamer’s argument that fore-standing determines our sense of how this journey can or will be completed, there is reason for caution around moving from this general account of ignorance as constitutive of knowledge, and what is at stake in the *specific* COVID-related invocations of stupidity, and of knowledge production in the time of pandemic. The caution revolves around this: for Gadamer, “a person who has an horizon knows the relative significance of everything within this horizon, whether it is near or far, great or small” (2004, p. 301). In this way, our understanding is formed out of an acknowledgement of our ignorance, the gaps or incompletions in our horizons, which requires a necessary open-ness to other horizons:

“working out the hermeneutical situation means acquiring the right horizon of inquiry for the questions evoked by the encounter with tradition” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 302). This knowledge of significance is especially important to the clinician-patient relationship, and why Gadamer aligns medicine with rhetoric, with both requiring to know when to speak and when to remain silent, and “the right kinds of discourse to exercise an effect on the soul in the right kinds of way” (Gadamer, 1996, p. 41). I have suggested earlier in this paper, though, that while the interpreter being aware of the relative significance of what is within their horizon, it is precisely the formative aspects of knowledge which are both pointedly *insignificant* yet banally effective which trouble the simplicity of this “journey” from ignorance to knowledge. Not only is this a symptom of Han’s “achievement society” – where interpretation is less a dialogue and more a constant curation of information exchange – but furthermore, within the COVID-19 pandemic specifically, it is the question of significance which underlies the very effectiveness of certain public health interventions: from what constitutes a significant number of deaths or vaccinations, to how significant leaving one’s house twice for exercise or washing the car during national lockdown. In this way, one might suggest that, if only for the moment, measures such as national lockdowns which affect the entire experience of being (see Žižek, 2020, p. 129) raise some interesting problems for Gadamer’s account of “relative significance” as differentiated from the insignificant, and consequently the understanding of one’s horizon from the open-ness to others, into question. As such, I think there is more to say about the construction of an interpretative horizon and the specific way in which stupidity is playing its role within the pandemic.

Models of the Non-stupid, or “Colonial Interpretation”

In his critique of the UK’s handling of the pandemic, John Ashton points out that the discourse around the virus has been dominated by limited forms of knowledge; namely, laboratory-based epidemiology and data modelling (2020, p. 213). In the main body that advises the UK government, the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), there is a notable absence of public health experts, as well as historians of disease outbreak and anthropologists, whom Ashton argues would provide lived context – particularly of the interconnection between health, economy and society – for interventions.

The issue I want to take from this observation is not to question which discipline is best suited to support the COVID response, but rather how a narrow model of “knowledge” affects the interpretations of stupidity under consideration. This, I think, suggests the adoption of a particular model of immunology which, unlike Han’s account, is intrinsically related to both practices of health intervention and its requirements of “knowledge”: that is, how the binary relationship between knowledge and ignorance is figured. Whereas Foucault described immunology in terms of disciplinary institutions, this re-introduced immunology, idiosyncratically placed within technologies that have, if Han is correct, outgrown it, can be described in terms of interpretative horizons that have already internalised the recognition of what is “significant” and what is not.

It seems clear that a reliance on a narrow horizon of expertise risks what Charles Mills once referred to, in the context of race relations, as a “closed circuit of epistemic authority” (2007, p. 34), whereby the structures of approval reinforce their own narratives. Politically, when governments in the midst of a pandemic argue that they are “following the science” or being

“guided by the data,” the singularity of this claim – *the science, the data* – insists on a binary line between official intelligence and what might be cast as “alternative facts.” The question becomes fixed on whether the science says x or y; or whether *this* science is better than *that* science (for example: the science of herd immunity versus elimination strategies). Within a digital mediasphere where both *the* data is there, alongside any number of YouTube conspiracy theories and re-presentations of that evidence, the circuit of epistemic authority is only closed tighter: regardless of whether I am supportive of COVID interventions or suspicious of them, I am right because of the data, and the data makes me right.

This is why Chris Anderson’s polemic that the transparency and availability of data would lead to “the end of theory” – “with enough data, the numbers speak for themselves” (quoted in Han, 2017, p. 58) – is troubled precisely by the prevalence of so much information. For the “right data” to be identified as such, interpretation frequently falls back on the traditional means of demarcating truth from everyday thinking, even when the complexities of “post-truth” problematize such means. We are therefore left with an awkward juxtaposition of a complicated pandemic in need of complicated answers (research, policy, intervention, vaccine, and longer term social measures) next to a brute and simplistic view of stupidity. Yet this is not just an unfortunate by-product of internet aggression, or a careless insult used once too many times. The themes that we have identified so far – embedding facts in a system of elite institutional practices, the alignment of intelligence with possession, the spread of knowledge as a moral duty through tropes of journey and travel, and an aggressive distinction between all of these and an under-developed, “stupid” other – all echo a spirit of interpretation that utilises the notion of ignorance as core to its own value, a spirit which we might have once described as *colonialist*. Such an interpretative colonialism borrows the motifs of binary distinctions (civilised versus stupid) and traversing borders (the “journey” of knowledge about COVID, and specifically of vaccinations, is expected to consolidate in the Global North before finding its way to the poorer nations).

Stupidity thus becomes not only a display of ignorance, or an act of immorality, but one of barbarity: a wilful destruction of evidence, and consequently the health of a population. Barbarity, as we know, is the hallmark of the barbarian: a term originally coined for those who did not speak Greek in the classical world, the name mocking the uncivilised noises that came from their mouths. In the history of stupidity, insults are always intertwined with interpretative strategies. There is also a colonial resonance with the nostalgia for interpretative certainty, and indeed the tropes which present ignorance and stupidity as mere steps towards their obliteration – journeys, possession, binary moral choice – are imposed at the expense of the tensions and contradictions within the pandemic’s social, cultural, and political effects. If such nostalgia may appear anachronistic within the present context, it is supported only by the revelations which repeat the legacy of real history: that the impact of COVID-19 up racial and social disparities (see, for example, Greenaway et al., 2020; Nafilyan et al., 2021; Van Dyke et al., 2021); or that the line between legislation to prevent the spread of the virus and the curtailing of civil rights and protests is often difficult to discern (see Civicus Monitor, 2020). Indeed, if the “reducing the stupid” that was promised turns out to be what Vattimo and Zabala describe as “nothing else than the ‘silencing’ of other interlocutors through an apparent dialogue,” then “truth and violence will become interchangeable” (2011, p. 19).

It's a Pandemic, Stupid

These are all big issues to pass over so quickly. My suggestion here is merely that these echoes of the colonial seem to order the significant from the insignificant of an interpretative horizon, at a time when making that judgement is increasingly difficult. Furthermore, the difficulty of making this judgement is rooted in part in the inevitable link between the politics of health (how to deal with the pandemic) and the politics of expertise (how to deal with post-truth, alternative facts and fake news), as well as in part a consequence of attempting to think through immunology in the context of public health, when, as Han suggested at the start of this paper, immunology is no longer the appropriate modality for understanding a late-capitalist “achievement society” of digital communication networks.

But what do we do when confronted with genuine ignorance or misdirected understanding – be this a person travelling too far from their home, a patient refusing a vaccine, or a protestor outside of a clinic warning of global conspiracies? The answer is clearly not found in the imperative for people to simply make their own minds up (or “do your own research!” as below-the-line comments so frequently call for). This would merely continue the models of possession and choice lying at the heart of the traditional disdain for ignorance, which we have already called into question. Likewise, any banal recourse to liberal rights (“everyone has the right to an opinion,” etc.) or arguments about negative freedom (“who are we to call another person stupid?”) should be dismissed, because rights are not the ethical problem at hand. Nor would this answer address the obvious *need* for speed and urgency in public health responses to the pandemic. I take as granted that, in such times, collective and unified responses by a population are more effective and preferable. The risk, though, is that a binary model of knowledge as possession overlooks the production of knowledge, *not* in terms of interpreting the “evidence” or “data” (which is where COVID conspiracies speak at odds with government advisors using the same language), but rather in terms of the flow and circulation of interpretation at work in any form of understanding.

This is the nub of the issue. When deployed in public health debates, it becomes clear that the accusation of stupidity carries an interpretative commitment that goes beyond a simple identification of lack of knowledge. Instead it becomes a key trope for maintaining certain economies of practice which are, in turn, embedded within a range of contexts that can and should be questioned. Paul and Haddad thus rightly note that dismissing (or ignoring) ignorance can be significant. “A merely defensive move animated by the desire to restore the shattered fabric of science and policy is [...] *not enough*” (2019, p. 300, my emphasis). Instead, attempting to reconstruct the hermeneutic horizons in play can bring into focus the ways in which this trope moves so easily through matters of applied health to wider political and epistemological concerns. In this sense, it is perfectly reasonable to accept that accusations of stupidity are effectively throwaway insults, and that the study of memes and on-line debates are perhaps the least significant concerns in the current global health situation. My argument is simply that what is considered insignificant in one’s horizon – whether this be social psychologists using students in experiments, the ways in which immunological models support approaches to epistemology, or the uncomfortable resonances with past cultural practices of domination – can yet be telling, *precisely* because of its insignificance.

If these insignificances are what are passed over in silence when stupidity is invoked, then engaging with them may offer alternative ways to speak about the experience of an immunological struggle in an achievement society. And this, I think, is an issue: when we insist on the primacy of knowledge as a possessed determinant of morality, what we lack is a way of speaking which falls in-between knowing and not-knowing. Not quite Han's idiot, but more a way of articulating experiences within and beyond the pandemic which are not as easy to categorise as "other" or "alienated" along the traditional immunological models of society. This would be to interpret what one might fear in a vaccine, or how one may feel about distance from loved ones, when the pandemic has inflicted an excess of *same-ness*: from the dreary repetition of lockdown to the same public health problems and socio-cultural inequalities. It would also involve the mindfulness of what broader structures and politics of meaning – and their effective histories – are invoked when insisting, through a throwaway meme or in-depth research paper, on the completion of knowledge, the triumph of achievement, or the certainty of what stupidity is.

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