

Quassim Cassam – Transcendental Stupidity

[This handout summarises my contribution to a colloquium on stupidity held at the University of Warwick in May 2018. The other speakers were Miguel de Beistegui and Diarmuid Costello]

1. Two kinds of stupidity:

- (a) Stupidity as lack of intelligence.
- (b) Stupidity as foolishness.

2. Epistemic vices:

- (a) Character traits, attitudes or ways of thinking.
- (b) Blameworthy or otherwise reprehensible.
- (c) Systematically obstruct the acquisition, retention or transmission of knowledge.

3. Stupidity as an epistemic vice:

- (a) Lack of intelligence doesn't satisfy either of the first two conditions; it isn't blameworthy and lack of intelligence *per se* isn't something for which a person can be criticised.
- (b) Foolishness *might* be an epistemic vice. It certainly gets in the way of knowledge. People are blamed or criticised for being foolish, and foolishness might be regarded as a character trait (though this is controversial). Why the difference? Foolishness isn't a matter of luck in the way that lack of intelligence is. It reflects badly on a person that they are foolish and criticism if not blame can be in order.

4. Miguel de Beistegui's claims:

- (a) There is a type of stupidity that is transcendental ('So yes, stupidity is transcendental, and even the condition of emergence (and not just possibility....) of thought; for it is only by extracting itself from its own torpor that thought can cease to be stupid').
- (b) Stupidity gets in the way of *thought* and not just knowledge ('Stupidity is indeed what strangles thought, chokes it, inhibits it').
- (c) Stupidity is 'the faculty of false problems, or badly posed problems'.
- (d) Much of philosophy is, in this sense, stupid ('One could go as far as to argue that the question what is x? - in many ways the philosophical question par excellence – is itself stupid. For the x in question is already given, and given in a kind of obviousness that doesn't call for any questioning').
- (e) The critique of stupidity belongs not to the analytic of truth but to 'dialectic' in Aristotle's sense. Dialectic in this sense 'shows us how to pose a problem, and distinguish between well and badly posed problems'

5. Questions and comments:

- (a) How can stupidity be what strangles thought and a condition of the possibility of thought that and its emergence?
- (b) In what sense does stupidity inhibit thought?
- (c) Why is the question 'what is x?' stupid? Why are questions like 'what is knowledge?' and 'what is justice?' badly posed?

6. Stupidity as inhibiting thought:

- (a) Stupidity 'attacks thought in its ability to *learn*' but 'the process of learning and the art of questions lies beneath the acquisition of knowledge'. If stupidity prevents us from learning, and knowledge is acquired by learning then it follows that stupidity systematically obstructs the acquisition of knowledge.

(b) Sometimes stupidity doesn't get in the way of knowledge-acquisition but results in the pursuit and acquisition of pointless or worthless knowledge (Casaubon). Knowledge isn't always valuable.

7. Medina's class analysis of epistemic vice:

(a) 'The starting point of my analysis is simply that the social positionality of agents does matter for the development of their epistemic character' (p. 40).

(b) Among the typical (though not inevitable) epistemic vices of the privileged are arrogance, laziness and closed-mindedness. Other epistemic vices are more likely to be found among oppressed: 'epistemic insecurity or lack of confidence on cognitive matters' (p. 40).

8. Transcendental stupidity:

(a) There is a kind of stupidity that consists in an inability or unwillingness to ask searching questions about the *status quo* or recognise that one's interests will not be best served by a particular party, policy or political arrangement. It consists in active political ignorance, the maintenance of epistemic attitudes and habits that promote ignorance and lack of understanding in the social and political realm. This form of stupidity is a manifestation of false consciousness. It neither consists in lack of intelligence nor in foolishness in the ordinary sense but it is still an epistemic vice, at least to the extent that it gets in the way of political knowledge.

(b) In conditions of oppression or injustice false consciousness secures the acquiescence of the oppressed. It is actively cultivated by 'ideological state apparatuses' (Althusser) and its function is to secure consent by non-repressive means.

(c) Stupidity as false consciousness is a necessary condition for the continuance of highly unequal or oppressive social arrangements without violence. It is in this sense that stupidity is 'transcendental'. A non-Kantian sense of 'transcendental'.

References

R. Musil, 'On Stupidity', in *Precision and Soul*.

K. Mulligan, 'Foolishness, Stupidity, and Cognitive Values', *The Monist* 2014.

Q. Cassam, *Vices of the Mind*, forthcoming.

J. Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*.

L. Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus' in *Lenin and Philosophy*.