

FROM THE EDITORS

THE SHADES OF FOOLISHNESS

The owl, which was associated with Minerva and considered as a symbol of wisdom and knowledge in the Roman mythology, in the medieval times was believed to symbolize stupidity—it was a common opinion that daylight blinded and ‘stupefied’ the bird of the night.¹ The owl was seen as a symbol of foolishness also later in history and depicted as such in the Dutch painting of the Golden Age, among others, as in Frans Hals’s *Malle Babbe*, where the night bird seated on the drunken woman’s shoulder reflects the proverb, “drunk an as owl,” thus pointing to the unfortunate consequences of inebriety. The Janus-faced nature of the symbol of the owl well reflects the ambiguity of stupidity, as well as a close relation between stupidity and wisdom, the latter considered as an absence of foolishness or its polar opposite, and the former occasionally bearing the appearance of the latter or even regarded as a higher form of wisdom. Thus the range of the mental representations of the concept of stupidity is vague and its meaning cannot be precisely defined. The adjective ‘stupid’ is normally used to describe a person who is either ignorant or intellectually handicapped, thoughtless or dumb. However, Immanuel Kant was of the opinion that stupidity, which he thought to be “the lack of the power of judgment,”² denotes inability to “distinguish whether a case *in concreto*”³ belongs under “the universal *in abstracto*”⁴ and as such is an irreparable deficiency exhibited also by very learned individuals. However, the description in question may also be used to point to special cognitive competence. The phrase, “Fools on Christ’s account” (1 Cor 4:10), coined by St. Paul, refers to the cognitive order of faith which makes it possible to discern divine wisdom. Used in the colloquial sense, in turn, words such as ‘stupidity’ or ‘foolishness’ might describe naivety, gullibility or a lack of resourcefulness. Given negative

¹ See Michael Ferber, “Owl,” in Michael Ferber, *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 153. See also Władysław Kopaliński, “Sowa,” in Władysław Kopaliński, *Słownik symboli* (Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna, 1990), 396.

² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 133 / B 172, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge, UK, and New York, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 268.

³ Ibidem, A 134 / B 173, 269.

⁴ Ibidem.

emotional emphasis, phrases of this kind may simply express a pejorative attitude to someone's views or actions.

In his *Encyclopedia of Stupidity* Matthijs van Boxsel writes that stupidity is inscrutable in its essence and, once it is pointed to and given a name, it loses its astounding identity.⁵ The only way to define it is by contrasting it with its opposite, and, consequently, the difficulties involved in interpreting such an ungrateful concept make those attempting it—apparently van Boxsel among them—not infrequently fall into the ‘madness of cataloguing’: they tend to collect various manifestations of stupidity appearing in various areas of life and among various social strata. The effort in question sometimes involves recourse to ridicule, of which van Boxel's book might be an instance, and the attitude of the kind is approved of already by Erasmus's Folly: “At what rate soever the World talks of me (for I am not ignorant what an ill report Folly hath got, even amongst the most Foolish), yet that I am that She, that onely She, whose Deity recreates both gods and men, even this is a sufficient Argument, that I no sooner stept up to speak to this full Assembly, than all your faces put on a kind of new and unwonted pleasantness.”⁶ Indeed, cataloguing stupidity has a long tradition in Western culture and is frequently the subject matter of satires, which focus on identifying human faults or corrupted social structures: catalogues of stupidity can be found not only in Erasmus's *Praise of Folly*, to which we have already referred, but also in earlier works, such as Sebastian Brant's satirical allegory *The Ship of Fools*,⁷ as well as in artwork, for instance in Albrecht Dürer's woodcut illustrations to Brant's poem,⁸ in Hieronymus Bosch's painting bearing exactly the same title,⁹ and in Peter Bruegel's *Netherlandish Proverbs*¹⁰ or in his *Fight Between Carnival and Lent*.¹¹

The astounding diversity of the manifestations of stupidity, folly, and foolishness inspires attempts at cataloguing their various generic varieties. In Polish literature, a systematization of stupidity has been recently proposed by Jerzy

⁵ See Matthijs van Boxsel, *The Encyclopedia of Stupidity*, trans. Arnold Pomerans and Erica Pomerans (London: Reaktion Books, 2003).

⁶ Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, trans. John Wilson, ed. P.S. Allen (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1913), 7.

⁷ See Sebastian Brant, *The Ship of Fools*, trans. Edwin H. Zeydel (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2011). See also Sebastian Brant, *Das Narrenschiff* (Basel: Johann Bergmann von Olpe, 1494).

⁸ Albrecht Dürer, woodcut series *Narrenschiff*, 1494, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Albrecht_D%C3%BCrer_woodcut_series_-_Narrenschiff.

⁹ Hieronymus Bosch, *The Ship of Fools*, c. 1490-1500, Louvre Museum, Paris.

¹⁰ Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Netherlandish Proverbs*, 1559, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

¹¹ Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Fight Between Carnival and Lent*, 1559, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

Stelmach.¹² In this context, however, it is worth revisiting the typology of fools we find in Michał Wiszniewski's work entitled *Charaktery rozmów ludzkich* [The Conversation Types].¹³ Wiszniewski, a 19th century scholar, was both a philosopher and a psychologist, and his descriptions of the seventeen "shades of foolery"¹⁴ are based on the correspondence between the dispositions of a person's mind and the personality traits she exhibits. The "gawk," for instance, shows not only dumbness, but also indifference to what goes on in his or her life, which is accompanied by crudity. In the case of the "interrogative fool"¹⁵ the inability to focus and understand what the interlocutors are saying is combined with persistence and compulsive need to ask questions simply for the sake of asking them. The "weeping fool"¹⁶ tends to overestimate his or her potential, feels undervalued and not infrequently muddles. The "fabricator"¹⁷ is in turn characterized by a kind of mental deficiency, but also by eloquence and excessive imagination, which make him or her employ falsehood and tall tales in whatever they say. "Half-wits"¹⁸ mask their comprehension deficiencies and fallacious reasonings with their perfect memories and stand out among other fools due their recklessness. The "conceited fools,"¹⁹ as well as the "bigheaded"²⁰ and the "overlearned"²¹ ones, have been made stupid by hubris. However, according to Wiszniewski, not every type of fool will show negative traits: the "half-wit,"²² for instance, lacks conceit and is kind and cordial towards everyone; the "simpleton," while somewhat limited mentally, is also incapable of slyness: he or she is not evil and has a pure and immaculate soul. Similar values are characteristic of the "kind-hearted, that is simple-minded"²³ ones, who Wiszniewski does not really consider as fools; rather, he points out that the quality they share with the stupid is gullibility coupled with the resulting lack of independent judgment. The latter three kinds of fools are indeed captivating due to the goodness of their hearts.

¹² See Jerzy Stelmach, *Systematyka głupoty*, in Bartłomiej Brożek, Michał Heller, and Jerzy Stelmach, *Szkice z filozofii głupoty* (Kraków: Copernicus Center Press, 2021), 11–58.

¹³ See. Michał Wiesński, *Charaktery rozumów ludzkich*, ed. Julian Dybiec (Warszawa: PWN, 1988).

¹⁴ See ibidem, 85–104. The relevant chapter is entitled "Głupstwo i rozmaite jego odcienie" [Foolery and Its Various Shades]. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by Dorota Chabrajska.

¹⁵ Ibidem, 94.

¹⁶ Ibidem, 96.

¹⁷ Ibidem, 98.

¹⁸ Ibidem, 99.

¹⁹ Ibidem, 97.

²⁰ Ibidem, 101.

²¹ Ibidem, 94.

²² Ibidem, 100.

²³ Ibidem, 101.

While Wiszniewski believes stupidity to be a consequence of “weak reason”²⁴ (and of “reluctance to reason”²⁵ involving conceit), the definition he proposes does not even include all the “shades of foolery” he enumerates, since both the “kind-hearted” and the “half-wits” are humble and do not show any hubris. In the introduction to his typology of stupidity, Wiszniewski addresses the issue of the moral appreciation of foolishness. He holds that although, rather than contribute something to the society, the fools tend to bring harm to others and be a nuisance to the wise, they are not to blame for their condition, since being “mentally crippled”²⁶ is an inborn trait and nothing can be done about it. Wiszniewski argues that “we need to forgive the fools, because ‘they know not what they do.’”²⁷ He believes that instead of being condemned, they need to be surrounded with Christian love. However, by taking such a radical position, Wiszniewski once again shows inconsistency, since his characterization of the particular types of fools indicates that, for instance, the “ignorants” are what they are due to their own negligence rather than to an inborn “incapacity”²⁸ of reason. In the same vein, the “conceited fools” and the “superstitious fools” might well be capable of reasoning, did they not make a bad use of their reason.

Conceit is frequently considered as a symptom of stupidity, and the opinion of Socrates might be considered as ‘fundamental’ in this respect. Referring to Diotima’s account, he says, “Nor ... do the ignorant love wisdom and desire to be wise, for the tiresome thing about ignorance is precisely this, that a man who possesses neither beauty nor goodness nor intelligence is perfectly well satisfied with himself, and no one who does not believe that he lacks a thing desires what he does not believe that he lacks.”²⁹ Wisdom is a condition for a good moral conduct: an ignorant, who does not have sufficient knowledge on virtue and merely shows an opinion on it, cannot practice virtue.

On the other hand, Dietrich von Hildebrand proposes a thesis which is opposite to the one put forward by the followers of moral intellectualism: “In goodness there shines a light which bestows on the good person an especial intellectual dignity. The truly good man is never stupid and narrow, even though he may be slow intellectually, and not gifted for intellectual activities. The man who is not good, in any of the fore-mentioned ways, is, in the last account, always limited, even stupid.”³⁰

²⁴ Ibidem, 89.

²⁵ Ibidem, 101.

²⁶ Ibidem, 89.

²⁷ Ibidem, 91.

²⁸ Ibidem, 103.

²⁹ Plato, *The Symposium*, trans. Walter Hamilton (n.p.: Penguin Books, 1956), 83.

³⁰ Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Fundamental Moral Attitudes*, trans. Alice M. Jourdain (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1950; <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/fundamental-moral-conscience-attitudes-10042>).

The problems regarding the moral evaluation of stupidity also point to the polysemy of the concept. The way we conceive of stupidity determines whether it might be subject to a moral appraisal and—in the theological perspective—whether it can be considered as a sin or as a pathway to holiness. Tomas Aquinas, for instance, states that folly denotes, among others, dullness of sense in judging, chiefly as regards the highest cause. Commenting on the standpoint of Augustine, who holds that every sin is voluntary, Aquinas says that if a man wishes things of which folly is a consequence and withdraws his sense from spiritual things to plunge it into earthly things, his folly is a sin.³¹

The aporias described above are clearly demonstrated in the papers collected in the present volume of *Ethos*, which scrutinize various aspects of stupidity, foolishness or folly, as well as the contexts in which these qualities and states affect us. We offer this volume to the readers, convinced that every insight into the nature of stupidity will be helpful in identifying its manifestations, and thus in overcoming it.

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³¹ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Part 2, q. 46, a. 2.