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PRECISION AND SOUL

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## On Stupidity

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Anyone who presumes to speak about stupidity today runs the risk of coming to grief in a number of ways. It may be interpreted as insolence on his part; it may even be interpreted as disturbing the progress of our time. I myself wrote some years ago that "if it were not so hard to distinguish stupidity from talent, progress, hope, or improvement, no one would want to be stupid." That was in 1931; and who will dare question that since then the world has seen still more progress and improvements! And so a question gradually arises that refuses to be put off: Just what *is* stupidity?

Nor do I wish to disregard the fact that as a serious writer I have been acquainted with stupidity far longer, indeed I might even say that many is the time stupidity and I have enjoyed a collegial relationship! Moreover, as soon as a man opens his eyes in literature he is confronted by a barely describable resistance that seems to have the ability to assume any form: whether personal, as in the worthy figure of a professor of literature who, accustomed to fix his sights on unverifiable centuries, creates havoc when he misses his target in the present; or it might perchance be the vacuously general, like the transformation of critical judgment by business, since God, in that goodness of his that is so hard for us to understand, has also bestowed the language of mankind on the creators of sound movies. I have described such phenomena before at one time or another, and there is no need to repeat or add to it (and anyway this would probably be impossible, in view of the penchant for greatness everything has today): it is enough to stress as a definite conclusion that the fact that a people is not artistically inclined does not first express itself in bad times, or in coarse ways; so that it is only in degree that oppression and censorship differ from honorary doctorates, membership in learned academies, and the awarding of prizes.

I have always suspected that this polymorphous resistance to art and the finer things on the part of a people that prides itself on being art loving is nothing but stupidity about art; perhaps of a special kind, a particular art-stupidity, and perhaps also a particular stupidity of feeling, but one that in any case expresses itself in such a way that what we call aesthetic sensibility would at the same time be aesthetic stupidity; and even today I don't see

many reasons to depart from this view. Of course not everything by which such a thoroughly human affair as art is deformed can be dumped in the lap of stupidity; as the experiences of recent years in particular have taught us, space must be reserved for the various kinds of weakness of character as well. But the objection that the idea of stupidity has no business here because it relates to reason and not to feelings, while art depends on feelings, can not be entertained. It would be a mistake. Even aesthetic enjoyment is a combination of feeling and judgment. And I ask your indulgence if I may add to this great formulation, which I have borrowed from Kant, not only the reminder that Kant speaks of an aesthetic power of *judgment*, and a *judgment* of taste, but also if I may repeat the contradictions to which this leads:

Thesis: the judgment of taste is not grounded in concepts, for otherwise it could be the subject of dispute (subject to being decided by demonstration or proof).

Antithesis: it *is* grounded in concepts, for otherwise it could not even be argued about (a striving for unanimity).

And now I would ask whether a similar judgment with a similar antinomy does not also lie at the root of politics, and of the disorder of life in general? And may one not, where judgment and reason reside, also expect to find their big and little sisters, the various kinds of stupidity? So much concerning their importance. Erasmus of Rotterdam wrote in his charming *Praise of Folly*, a work undiminished even today, that except for certain stupidities no one would even be born!

Many people reveal a sense of the domination stupidity has over us, a domination as offensive to modesty as it is powerful, when they show themselves amicably and conspiratorially surprised as soon as they hear that a person in whom they have placed their trust intends to conjure up this monster by its true name. I was not only able to initially conduct this experiment on myself, but soon discovered its historical validity when, in searching for predecessors who had worked on stupidity—of whom I could find strikingly few; wise men apparently prefer to write about wisdom—a scholarly friend sent me the printed version of a lecture delivered in 1866. Its author was J. E. Erdmann, the pupil of Hegel and professor at the University of Halle. This lecture, which is called "On Stupidity," starts right off with the report that even when it was announced it was greeted with laughter. Having discovered that this can happen even to a Hegelian, I am convinced that there are peculiar circumstances connected with people who demonstrate such an

attitude toward those who wish to speak about stupidity, and I find myself quite insecure in the face of my conviction that I have provoked powerful and deeply ambivalent psychological forces.

So when confronted with stupidity I would rather confess my Achilles' heel right away: I don't know what it is. I have not discovered any theory of stupidity with whose aid I could presume to save the world; in fact, even within the limits of scientific discretion, I have not come across an investigation that has taken stupidity as its subject, nor have I found even some kind of unanimity that would, for better or worse, have resulted from treating related things with regard to the notion of stupidity. This might be due to my ignorance, but more likely the question, "What is stupidity?" corresponds as little to our current ways of thinking as do the questions of what goodness, beauty, or electricity are. There is, nevertheless, more than a little attraction in putting together such a notion, and answering as soberly as possible a question as basic as this one, which is preliminary to all life; and for that reason, one day the question devolved upon me as to what stupidity might *really* be—not how it makes a show of itself. (Describing that would have suited my professional duty and skill much better.) But since I did not want to help my endeavor along in a literary fashion, and could not in a scientific one, I have done so in the most naive way possible, which of course always suggests itself in such cases: I pursued the word *stupid* and its relatives, seeking out the most common examples; and then I endeavored to correlate what I had written down. Unfortunately, such a procedure always has about it something of chasing after cabbage-whites: you pursue for a while what you think you are observing without losing it from sight; but since other, quite similar butterflies appear from other directions on quite similar zigzag courses, you soon no longer know whether you are still chasing the same one. So too, examples from the "stupidity" family cannot always be distinguished according to whether they really are related to each other in some fundamental way or whether they lead the observer from one to another only inadvertently and superficially, and it will not be such an easy matter to find a single hat covering all of them of which one could say: This hat *really* belongs to a blockhead.

Under these circumstances it is almost immaterial how one begins, so let us begin somehow; the best place might be with the initial difficulty, which is that anyone who wants to talk about stupidity, or profitably participate in a conversation about it, must assume about himself that he is not stupid; and he also makes a show of considering himself clever, although doing so is generally considered a sign of stupidity! If one investigates this question of

why making a show of being clever should be considered stupid, the first answer that comes to mind is one that seems to have the dust of ancestral furniture about it, for it maintains that appearing not to be clever is the better part of caution. This profoundly mistrustful caution, which today is, at first glance, no longer even remotely comprehensible, probably derives from situations in which it really *was* smarter for the weak person not to be considered clever; his cleverness might be seen as endangering the life of the strong person! Stupidity, on the other hand, lulls mistrust to sleep; it "disarms," as we still say today. Traces of such venerable craftiness and artful stupidity are also still to be found in dependent relationships in which the relative strengths are so disproportionately divided that the weaker person seeks his salvation by acting more stupid than he is: these traces show themselves, for instance, in the peasant's so-called slyness, the servant's dealings with his culture-tongued master and mistress, the soldier's relations to his superior officer, the pupil's to his teacher, and the child's to its parents. It irritates the person who has power less if the weak person is not able than if he is not willing. Stupidity even drives the strong person "to despair," in other words, to what is unmistakably a condition of weakness!

This is most admirably consonant with the way cleverness easily "harnesses" the strong person. Cleverness in the submissive person is esteemed, but only so long as it is connected with unconditional devotion. The instant devotion lacks this certificate of good character, and is no longer clearly serving the advantage of the dominant person, it is less often called clever than immodest, insolent, or malicious; and a relationship often arises that looks as if this devotion were at least opposing the dominating party's honor and authority, even if it poses no real threat to the latter's security. In education this takes the form of a rebellious but talented pupil being treated more vehemently than one who is obstinate out of dullness. In morality it has led to the idea that a person's will must be the more evil, the better the knowledge against which it is acting. Even justice has not been entirely untouched by this individual prejudice, and judges the clever execution of a crime, for the most part with particular disfavor, as "crafty" and "crude in feeling." And in politics examples are not far to seek.

But stupidity also—this objection will probably have to be raised here—can irritate, and is by no means soothing in all circumstances. Put briefly, stupidity usually arouses impatience, but in exceptional cases it also arouses cruelty; and the excesses of this pathological, aversion-instilling cruelty, which are ordinarily characterized as sadism, often enough show stupid people in the role of victim. This evidently comes about because they fall prey to cruel people more easily than others do, but it also seems to have some connection with an absence of resistance that is palpable in every di-

rection, and that drives the imagination wild the way the smell of blood excites lust for the hunt: this entices the stupid person into a desert in which cruelty goes "too far" almost for the sole reason that it loses all sense of limits. This is a quality of suffering in the very bringer of suffering, a weakness embedded in his brutality; and although the priority we give to the indignation of offended sympathy rarely allows us to notice it, cruelty too, like love, calls for two people in harmony with each other.

This would certainly be an important enough matter for discussion in a mankind as plagued as ours is by its "cowardly cruelty toward the weak" (and this is also the most usual conceptual paraphrase for sadism); but with a view to pursuing the main course of the argument, and with the hasty gathering of first examples, what has been said so far must already be seen as a digression, from which, by and large, nothing more is to be gained than that it can be stupid to praise oneself as clever, but that it is also not always clever to acquire a reputation for being stupid. Nothing here can be generalized; or the only admissible generalization would be that the cleverest thing of all is to make oneself as inconspicuous as possible in this world! And this final summing up of all wisdom has in fact not infrequently been made. But more often only partial or metaphorically representative use is made of this reclusive result, and then observation is led into the sphere of the commandments of modesty, and of even more encompassing commandments, without having to leave the realm of stupidity and cleverness entirely.

Many people take themselves to be clever but don't say so, as much from fear of appearing stupid as from fear of offending decency. And if they should feel impelled to speak about it they talk around it, as when they say of themselves, "I'm *no stupider* than other people." Still more popular is to apply the observation, as objectively and matter-of-factly as possible, "I may indeed say of myself that I possess a normal intelligence." And sometimes the conviction of one's own cleverness also appears in a roundabout way, as for instance in the expression, "I won't let myself be made a fool of!" It is even more remarkable that it is not only the secretive individual who in his own mind sees himself as extremely clever and well equipped, but also the person who plays an active public role, who, as soon as he gets the power to, says or has said about himself that he is inordinately clever, inspired, dignified, gracious, chosen by God, and destined for History. Indeed he even willingly says this of another person in whose reflection he basks. This has been petrified and preserved in titles and forms of address such as Your Majesty, Your Eminence, Your Magnificence, and Your Grace, among others, which consciousness hardly animates anymore; but it shows up immediately again in full force today whenever man speaks in the mass. In particular a certain lower middle class of mind and soul is quite shameless toward the

need for arrogance in this regard the moment it can strut within the shelter of the party, nation, sect, or art movement and say "we" instead of "I."

With one reservation, which is obvious and can be ignored, this arrogance may also be called vanity, and in fact today the soul of many peoples and nations is dominated by feelings among which vanity undeniably occupies a privileged position; but between stupidity and vanity an inner connection has existed for ages, and perhaps this connection offers us a clue. A stupid person usually has the effect of appearing vain because he is not clever enough to hide it; but such cleverness is not really necessary, for the relationship between stupidity and vanity is more straightforward: a vain person gives the impression of accomplishing less than he could; he resembles a machine that allows its steam to escape through a leak. This is what the old saying means, that stupidity and pride grow on the same tree, as does the expression that vanity "dazzles." What we really connect with the idea of vanity is the expectation of underachievement, for the word *vain*, in its primary sense, means almost the same as *in vain*. And we also expect this diminution of achievement where in truth there is achievement: vanity and talent are also found together fairly often, but in that case we have the impression that still more *could* be accomplished if the vain person were not getting in his own way. This notion of the diminution of achievement, which sticks like a burr, will later reveal itself to be the most universal notion of stupidity that we have.

But this vain attitude is clearly not avoided because it can be stupid, but principally because it disturbs propriety. "Praising oneself stinks," a pithy saying has it, and this means that boasting and praising and talking about oneself a lot is considered not only not clever, but also indecent. If I'm not mistaken, the demands of propriety that this offends belong to the many forms of those commandments of discretion and the maintaining of distance whose purpose is to spare one's self-conceit, which assumes that this self-conceit is no less in someone else than it is in oneself. Such precepts for maintaining distance are also directed against the use of words that are too frank, regulate forms of greeting and address, and do not permit people to contradict one another without apologizing, or a letter to begin with the word "I"; in short, they demand the observance of certain rules just so that people do not "get too close" to one another. It is the task of these rules to smooth communication, to alleviate loving one's neighbor and oneself and to maintain, as it were, a moderate climate in human intercourse; such precepts are found in every society, even more in primitive societies than in highly civilized ones, indeed even the wordless animal world knows them, as may easily be deduced from its many ceremonies. But according to the sense of these rules for maintaining distance, it is forbidden to praise not

only oneself obtrusively, but others as well. To say to someone's face that he is a genius or a saint would be almost as monstrous as saying it about oneself; and to smear one's face and pull out one's hair would, by contemporary standards of feeling, be no better than cursing another person. As I have stated, one contents oneself with the observation that one is not particularly stupider or worse than others.

In stable circumstances it is obviously extravagant and licentious expressions to which the prohibition is applied. And as I spoke earlier about the vanity in which peoples and political parties today are arrogant about being enlightened, to complete the picture I must now say that the majority that lives life to the full—just like the individual megalomaniac in his day-dreams—has not only commandeered wisdom, but virtue as well, and regards itself as courageous, noble, invincible, pious, and beautiful; and that there is a particular propensity in the world for people, wherever they appear in great numbers, to permit themselves collectively everything that would be forbidden them individually. These privileges of the "we" that has grown so powerful today frankly give the impression that the increasing civilizing and taming of the individual ought to be balanced by a proportionately increasing decivilization of nations, states, and alliances of the like-minded; what obviously emerges in this is an emotional disturbance, a disturbance of the emotional balance that fundamentally underlies both the opposition between "I" and "we" and all moral valuation as well. But is this—one will need to ask—still stupidity, indeed, is it still connected with stupidity at all?

Dear listeners! No one doubts that it is! But before proceeding with our response, let us catch our breath with an example that is not without its charm. All of us, we men in particular, and especially all well-known writers, know the lady who positively insists on confiding in us the novel of her life, and whose soul has, it appears, always found itself in interesting circumstances without this ever having led to success, which she rather expects from us. Is this lady stupid? Something arising from the profusion of our impressions is accustomed to whisper to us: She is! But politeness as well as justice demand the concession that she is not absolutely and not always stupid. She talks a lot about herself, and she talks a great deal. She judges in a most determined way, and judges everything. She is vain and immodest. She often lectures us. Usually there is something amiss with her love life, and in general life has not been kind to her. But aren't there other sorts of people of whom all or most of this would also be true? To talk a lot about oneself, for instance, is also a rudeness of egoists, of the restless, and even of a certain kind of melancholy person. This applies especially to young people, in whom it is one of the symptoms of the growing process to talk a lot about themselves, to be vain, to lecture others, and to have not quite got their lives

together; demonstrating, in a word, precisely the same deviations from astuteness and propriety, without on that account being stupid, or more stupid than is determined naturally by their—just not having become clever!

Ladies and gentlemen! The judgments and anthropology of everyday life happen for the most part to hit the mark, but they usually miss it as well. They did not arise for the sake of some correct doctrine; all they really represent are intellectual gestures of assent and self-defense. So even this example only teaches us that something can be stupid, but doesn't have to be; that meaning changes with the context in which something appears, and that stupidity is densely interwoven with other things, without a thread sticking out anywhere that would allow the weave to be ripped apart with a single pull. Even genius and stupidity are inextricably connected with each other, and by means of the writer mankind has got around the prohibition of being taken for stupid on pain of punishment by talking too much, and talking too much about itself in a peculiar way. The writer may state in the name of mankind that it tasted good, or that the sun stands in the sky; he may bare his soul, babble secrets, make confessions, deliver ruthless personal accountings (at least, many writers insist on this!); and it all looks exactly as if mankind were here permitting itself an exception to what it otherwise forbids. In this way mankind speaks incessantly about itself, and with the aid of the writer has recited the same stories and experiences millions of times, merely changing the circumstances, without producing for itself any progress or intellectual advance: is not, ultimately, stupidity also to be suspected in the use mankind makes of its literature? As far as I can see it doesn't seem at all impossible!

Between the range of application of stupidity and that of immorality—this last term is understood in the broader sense, uncommon today, that is almost the same as lack of spirituality or intellectuality [*Ungeistigkeit*], but not like imprudence or silliness [*Unverständigkeit*]<sup>1</sup>—there is, at any rate, a complex identity and differentiation. And this association is doubtless similar, as J. E. Erdmann has expressed it in an important passage in the lecture I mentioned previously, to brutality's being "applied stupidity." Erdmann says, "Words are . . . not the only manifestation of a state of mind. It can reveal itself in action as well. So, too, can stupidity. Not only being stupid, but acting stupidly, doing stupid things"—in other words, applied stupidity—"or stupidity in action, is what we call brutality." This winning assertion teaches nothing less than that stupidity is a mistake of feeling—for brutality is a feeling! And this leads straight back to that "emotional disturbance" and "disturbance of emotional balance" that were touched upon earlier without our having been able to explain them. But the explanation contained in Erdmann's words cannot entirely accord with the truth, for

aside from the fact that this explanation merely targets the crude, unpolished individual in contrast to "culture," and in no way embraces all the applicable forms of stupidity, brutality is also not just simply stupidity, and stupidity not just simply brutality; so there is still much to be explained in the relationship between affect and intelligence when they combine as "applied stupidity," and this can probably best be brought out, once again, through examples.

In order for the outlines of the notion of stupidity to emerge properly, it is first of all necessary to soften the verdict that stupidity is merely, or particularly, a deficiency of understanding; as has already been stated, the most general notion we have of stupidity, that of failure in the most varied activities, seems to be the fundamental notion of physical and mental deficiency in general. In our Austrian dialects there is an expressive example of this in the characterization of a person as being hard of hearing, in other words referring to a bodily defect, by the word *derisch* or *terisch*, which is probably *törisch* [deaf—trans.], and so is close to stupidity. For in precisely the same way, the reproach of stupidity is also used in other situations among the common people. If an athlete fails at a decisive moment or makes a mistake, he says afterwards, "It was like being nailed to the spot!" or "I don't know where my head was!" although the degree of the head's participation in swimming or boxing may be regarded in any case as rather hazily defined. In the same way, among boys and sports buddies, someone whose actions are awkward will be called stupid even if he should be a Hölderlin. There are also business relationships in which a person who is not cunning and ruthless is considered stupid. All in all, these are the stupidities that go with older kinds of cleverness than the one that stands so high in public esteem today; and if I have been properly informed, in old Teutonic times it was not only moral ideas but also the notions of what was expert, experienced, and wise, in other words intellectual concepts, that were related to war and battle. Thus every cleverness has its stupidity, and even animal psychology has discovered in its testing of intelligence that a "type of stupidity" can be ascribed to every "type of achievement."

If one were therefore looking for the most general notion of stupidity, these comparisons would yield something like the notion of capability or soundness, and everything that is incapable or unsound might then, on occasion, also be called stupid; and in reality this is what happens, if the capability belonging to a particular stupidity is not literally given the name of cleverness. What kind of capacity occupies the foreground in this case, and imparts meaning to the concept of cleverness and stupidity, depends on the

shape life has at a given time. In periods of personal insecurity, the concept of cleverness is stamped by cunning, violence, sagacity, and physical dexterity; in periods of spiritualized middle-class conventions—with the limitations that are unfortunately necessary, one would also have to say—it is replaced by mental work. More accurately, this should be the job of the higher intellectual powers, but in the course of things this has turned into a preponderance of rational achievements, which is written in the empty face of bustling mankind beneath its hard forehead; and so it has come about that today cleverness and stupidity, as if it could not be otherwise, are connected only with the intellect and its degree of capability, although that is pretty one-sided.

The general idea of incapability that has been associated with the word *stupid* from the beginning—in the sense of being incapable of anything, as well as in the sense of any particular incapacity—has a quite impressive consequence, which is that *stupid* and *stupidity*, because they signify general incapability, can occasionally serve for any word intended to characterize a particular incapacity. This is one of the reasons why people's reproaching each other with stupidity is so enormously widespread today. (In another connection, it is also the reason why the concept is so hard to pin down, as our examples have demonstrated.) Look at the notes written in the margins of pretentious novels that have been circulating for a while in the near-anonymous traffic of lending libraries: here, where the reader is alone with the writer, his favorite judgment is expressed in the word "stupid!" or its equivalents, such as "idiotic!" "unspeakable stupidity!" and the like. And when people at theatrical performances or art exhibits take offense and rise up en masse against the artist, these are likewise their first words of indignation. The word *kitsch* also comes to mind, a term of immediate reaction beloved of artists themselves like no other; without, however, at least so far as I am aware, its concept being defined or its applicability explained, except by means of the verb *verkitschen*, which in common parlance means something like "selling below value" or "dumping." *Kitsch*, therefore, has the meaning of wares that are too cheap or throwaway, and I believe that this sense, of course transposed to the intellectual level, lurks in the word every time it is unconsciously used correctly.

Since throwaway goods, junk, enter into the word *kitsch* principally through their associated meaning of unfit, useless wares, but incapability and uselessness also form the basis for our use of the term *stupid*, it is hardly an exaggeration to maintain that we tend to address everything we don't agree with—especially when, apart from that, we pretend to respect it as intellectual or aesthetic!—as "somehow stupid." And in determining what this "somehow" means, it is significant that the use of expressions for

stupidity is shot through and through with a second usage, which embraces the equally imperfect expressions for what is vulgar and morally repellent and leads one's attention back to something it had already once noticed, the fateful conjoining of the notions "stupid" and "indecent." For not only "kitsch," which is the aesthetic expression of intellectual origin, but also the moral words "filth!" "repulsive!" "horrid!" "sick!" and "insolent!" are undeveloped kernels of art criticism and judgments about life. But perhaps these expressions still do contain some intellectual exertion, a discrimination of meaning, even if they are used indiscriminately; then the ultimate term that jumps into the breach for them is the *really* already half-speechless exclamation "how vulgar!" which replaces everything else and which, together with the exclamation "how stupid!" is able to share in dominating the world. For both these terms can manifestly, on occasion, jump in for all other terms, since *stupid* has taken on the meaning of general incapability and *vulgar* that of a general offense against morals; and if one eavesdrops on what people today say about one another, it appears that the self-portrait of mankind, as it arises unretouched from reciprocal group photographs, is simply no more than a mixture of the variations of these two outlandish expressions!

Perhaps this is worth thinking about. Without doubt, both terms represent the lowest level of a judgment that has not crystallized enough to be formulated, a criticism that is still completely undifferentiated, which feels that something is wrong but is not able to indicate what. Use of these terms is the plainest and worst self-protective expression there is; it is the beginning of a rejoinder, and already its end as well. There is something of a "short circuit" in this, and it is more understandable if we consider that *stupid* and *vulgar*, whatever they may mean, are also used as terms of abuse. For the meaning of these terms, as we are well aware, lies not so much in their content as in the way they are used; many among us might well love the donkey, but be insulted if we are called one. The insult does not stand for what it signifies, but for a mixture of ideas, feelings, and intentions which it can not even remotely express, but which it can signal. Incidentally, the term of invective shares this characteristic with the faddish word and foreign words, which is why these appear indispensable, even if there are perfectly good substitutes for them. For this reason abusive language also has about it something unimaginably exciting, which may well be connected with its intention but not its content: this is perhaps most clearly seen in the teasing and kidding words of children: a child can say "monster!" and on the basis of hidden associations throw another child into convulsions.

But what can be said in this fashion about terms of abuse and about teasing words, faddish words, and foreign words can also be said about witty

words, catchwords, and amorous words: what they all have in common, however incomparable they may otherwise be, is that they are in the service of an affect, and it is precisely their lack of precision and absence of referent that enables them to suppress, when they are used, whole realms of words that are more accurate, more relevant, and more correct. Evidently life sometimes needs this, and we have to allow for it; but what happens in such cases is without doubt stupid; it wanders, so to speak, along the same path as stupidity. This connection can be shown most clearly in the biggest public spectacle of mindlessness, the case of panic. If something that affects a person is too overwhelming for him, whether sudden fright or an unremitting spiritual pressure, it can happen that this person suddenly "loses his head." He can begin to howl, basically no differently from the way a child howls; he can "blindly" rush away from a danger or just as blindly rush into it; he can be overcome by an explosive tendency to destroy, swear, or wail. Altogether, instead of purposive behavior that would be appropriate to his situation he will engage in a great many other kinds of behavior that always appear to be, and in reality all too often are, aimless, and indeed counterproductive. We are most familiar with this kind of contrariness as "panic fear"; but if the term is not taken in too narrow a sense, we could also speak of panics of rage, of greed, and even of tenderness; or indeed wherever a condition of excitation cannot give satisfaction in such vivid, blind, or senseless fashion. A man as intelligent as he was courageous noted long ago that there is a panic of courage, which is only distinguished from the panic of fear by its reversal of polarity.

Psychologically, what takes place when panic breaks out is regarded as a suspension of the intelligence, indeed of the entire higher intellectual faculty, in place of which a more primitive spiritual mechanism emerges; but it might well be added that with the paralyzing and ligature of reason in such cases, what happens is not so much a descent to acting instinctively as rather a descent leading straight through this area to a deeper instinct of ultimate necessity and an ultimate emergency form of action. This kind of action takes the form of total confusion: it has no plan, and is apparently bereft of reason and every other saving instinct; but its unconscious plan is to replace quality of action with quantity, and its not inconsiderable cunning rests on the probability that among a hundred blind attempts that are washouts there is one that will hit the target. A person who has lost his head, an insect that bumps against the closed half of a window until by accident it "plunges" through the open half to freedom: in their confusion they are doing nothing but what military strategy does with calculated deliberation when it "saturates" a target with a volley or with sweeping fire, or indeed when it uses shrapnel or a grenade.

What this means, in other words, is allowing a single intentional action to be represented by a great many, and nothing is more human than substituting the *quantity* of words and actions for their *character*. But using imprecise words is very similar to using lots of words, for the more imprecise a word is, the greater the area it covers; and the same is true of irrelevance. If these things are stupid, then through them stupidity is related to the panic condition; nor is excessive use of this reproach and others like it too far removed from attempting spiritual salvation through archaic-primitive methods—which are, as we may doubtless quite properly assert, pathological. And indeed we can recognize in the proper use of the reproach that something is truly stupid or vulgar not only a failure of intelligence, but also the blind inclination to mindless destruction or flight. These words are not only invective, they stand for a whole fit of invective. Where they still just barely manage to express something, assault is not far away. To return to examples brought up earlier, in such cases paintings are attacked with umbrellas (and moreover in place of the person who painted them), and books are flung to the ground as if their poison could in that way be neutralized. But also present is the devitalizing pressure that precedes this action and that the action is meant to relieve: a person “almost suffocates” on his anger; “there aren’t enough words” aside from the most vulgar and senseless ones; one is “at a loss for words,” one must “gain breathing space.” This is the degree of speechlessness, indeed mindlessness, that precedes the explosion! It indicates an oppressive condition of insufficiency, and the explosion is then usually introduced with the profoundly transparent words that “something has finally become just *too stupid*” for one to take. But this something is oneself. In periods when energetic, sweeping action is highly esteemed, it is essential to also be reminded of what sometimes resembles action to the point of being mistaken for it.

Ladies and gentlemen! Today there is a lot of talk about mankind’s crisis of confidence, a crisis that up till now has been located in people’s sense of humanity; it might also be called a panic that is on the point of replacing the assurance that we are able to conduct our affairs rationally and in freedom. And we should not deceive ourselves that both these moral, and also moral-artistic concepts, freedom and reason, which have come down to us as tokens of human dignity from the classical period of German cosmopolitanism, have since the middle of the nineteenth century, or slightly later, not been in the very best of health. They have gradually gone out of circulation, one no longer knows what to “do” with them; and that they have been allowed to atrophy has been due less to the success of their opponents than of their friends. So we should not deceive ourselves: it is most unlikely that

we, or those who come after us, will go back to these unchanged ideas; our task, and the sense of the trials laid upon the spirit, will rather be—and this is the painful yet hopeful task, so rarely understood, of the people of every age—to complete the always necessary, indeed deeply desired, transition to the new with the least possible loss. The more so since, having failed to make at the proper time the transition that those conserving and yet changing ideas must undergo, in carrying out this activity we need help from ideas of what is true, reasonable, meaningful, and clever, and also, by inverse reflection, from ideas of what is stupid. But what notion or partial notion of stupidity can we form when the notions of reason and wisdom are shaky? I would just like to demonstrate by one small example how much views change with time. In a once quite well known psychiatric manual the question, “What is justice?” and its answer, “That the *other* person gets punished,” are adduced as an instance of imbecility, whereas today they form the basis of a much-discussed concept of law. So I fear that even the most modest explanations cannot be ultimately settled without at least indicating a kernel independent of temporary variations. This leads to a few more questions and observations.

I have no right to stand before you as a psychologist, and no intention of doing so; but casting at least a brief glance at this science is probably the first thing we might do in looking for help, given our situation. Older psychology distinguished among sensation, will, feeling, and the ability to form ideas, or intelligence; for this psychology it was clear that stupidity was a lesser degree of intelligence. But contemporary psychology has robbed the basic discriminations among the soul’s capacities of their importance and recognized the mutual dependence and interpenetration of the soul’s various accomplishments, and in doing so has made much less simple the answer to the question of what stupidity signifies psychologically. There is of course, even in the contemporary view, a conditional independence of the rational ability, but according to this view even in the calmest situations attention, comprehension, memory, and other things, indeed just about everything that is part of reason, are apparently also dependent on the qualities of the emotions; and to this moreover is added, in the course of emotional as well as totally intellectualized experiencing, a second interpenetration of intelligence and affect that is absolutely unresolvable. This difficulty in keeping reason and feeling separate in the notion of intelligence is naturally also reflected in the notion of stupidity. If, for instance, medical psychology describes the thinking of feeble-minded people with words such as “poor,” “imprecise,” “incapable of abstract deduction,” “obscure,” “slow,” “easily diverted,” “superficial,” “one-sided,” “stiff,” “laborious,” “overexcited,” or “distracted,” it can easily be seen that these qualities point partly to the understanding and partly to the emotions. So one might well say that stu-

pidity and cleverness depend as much on the understanding as on the emotions, and it can be left to the experts whether there is more of one than of the other, or whether for example in the case of imbecility it is the weakness of the intelligence or the lameness of the emotions, as many rigorous moralists who are highly regarded would have it, that "stands in the foreground," while we lay people must resort to a somewhat more flexible attitude.

In life one usually means by a stupid person one who is "a little weak in the head." But beyond this there are the most varied kinds of intellectual and spiritual deviations, which can so hinder and frustrate and lead astray even an undamaged innate intelligence that it leads, by and large, to something for which the only word language has at its disposal is stupidity. Thus this word embraces two fundamentally quite different types: an honorable and straightforward stupidity, and a second that, somewhat paradoxically, is even a sign of intelligence. The first is based rather on a weakness of understanding, the second more on an understanding that is weak only with regard to some particular, and this latter kind is by far the more dangerous.

Honorable stupidity is a little dull of comprehension, and has what one calls a "dim wit." It is poor in ideas and words, and awkward in applying them. Honorable stupidity prefers the ordinary because the ordinary manages through constant repetition to imprint itself firmly on the slow mind, and once this mind has grasped something it is not in a hurry to let it be taken away again, to let it be analyzed, or to explain it away itself. Honorable stupidity has more than a little of life's rosy cheeks. It is, to be sure, often vague in its thinking, and its thoughts easily come to a standstill when faced with new experiences, but to make up for this it prefers to cling to what is graspable by those senses that it can, as it were, count off on its fingers. It is, in a word, that dear "bright stupidity," and if it were not sometimes also so credulous, obscure, and at the same time so uneducable that it can drive one to despair, it would be a thoroughly charming phenomenon.

I cannot resist the opportunity to furnish this phenomenon with a few more examples illustrating it from other sides, which I have taken from Bleuler's *Manual of Psychiatry*: An imbecile expresses what we would dispose of with the formula "doctor by the sickbed" with the words, "There's a man, he's holding another man's hand, the other man is lying in bed, then there's a nurse standing there." This is the way a savage who paints would put it! Or a housemaid who is not all there considers it a bad joke that she should be expected to put her savings in a bank where it would earn interest; her response is that no one would be stupid enough to pay her something for keeping her money for her. There is in this a chivalric frame of mind, a relationship to money that in my youth one could still find here and there among refined elderly people. Finally, it is put down as a bad symptom when a third imbecile maintains that a two-mark coin is worth less than a

one-mark coin and two half marks, because—his reasoning runs—one has to get it changed, and you would get too little back! I hope I'm not the only imbecile in this hall who heartily endorses this theory of value for people who never pay attention to their change!

But to return once again to the relationship to art, plain, straightforward stupidity often acts like a woman artist. Instead of replying to a stimulus word with another word, as was once customary in many experiments, she immediately answers in whole sentences, and one may say what one will, these sentences contain something like poetry. I repeat a few such responses, first indicating the stimulus word:

Ignite: The baker ignites the wood.

Winter: Consists of snow.

Father: Once threw me down the stairs.

Wedding: Kind of entertainment.

Garden: In the garden the weather is always fine.

Religion: When you go to church.

Who was Wilhelm Tell: He was played in the forest; there were dressed-up women and children in it.

Who was Peter: He crowed three times.

The naiveté and great concreteness of such responses, which substitute the telling of a simple story for higher levels of conceptualization; the serious narrating of superfluous and accessory circumstances; and then too the abbreviating condensation, as in the example with Peter: these are ancient literary practices, and even though I believe that too much of this, such as is now very much in vogue, brings the poet close to the idiot, still one cannot mistake the poetic in the idiot, and it sheds light on the fact that the idiot can be represented in literature, with special pleasure being taken in representing his mind.

The higher, pretentious form of stupidity stands only too often in crass opposition to this honorable form. It is not so much lack of intelligence as failure of intelligence, for the reason that it presumes to accomplishments to which it has no right; and it can have all the bad characteristics of weakness of reason, and in addition all those characteristics brought about by every mind that is not in balance, that is misshapen and erratically active; in short, every mind that deviates from health. To put it more accurately: because there are no "normalized" minds, this deviation expresses an insufficient play of harmony between the one-sidedness of feeling and a reason that is not strong enough to hold it in check. This higher stupidity is the real disease of culture (but to forestall misunderstanding: it is a sign of nonculture, of misculture, of culture that has come about in the wrong way, of disproportion between the material and the energy of culture), and to describe it is

an almost infinite task. It reaches into the highest intellectual sphere; for if genuine stupidity is a peaceful woman artist, then intelligent stupidity is what participates in the agitation of intellectual life, especially in its inconstancy and lack of results. Years ago I wrote about this form of stupidity that "there is absolutely no significant idea that stupidity would not know how to apply; stupidity is active in every direction, and can dress up in all the clothes of truth. Truth, on the other hand, has for every occasion only one dress and one path, and is always at a disadvantage." The stupidity this addresses is no mental illness, yet it is most lethal; a dangerous disease of the mind that endangers life itself.

Each of us should certainly pursue this in ourselves, and not recognize it only in its great historical outbursts. But recognize it by what? And with what unmistakable brand can it be stamped? Psychiatry today uses as a chief characteristic for those cases with which it is concerned the incapacity of a person to find himself in life, giving up in the face of all the tasks life poses, or suddenly when confronted with one that was not expected. Experimental psychology too, which is chiefly concerned with the healthy person, defines stupidity in a similar way. "We call 'stupid' behavior that does not carry out something for which all the conditions except the individual ones are given," a well-known representative of one of the newest schools of this discipline has written. This characteristic of the capacity for objective behavior, in other words soundness and efficiency, leaves nothing to be desired in the unequivocal "cases" of the clinic, or the experimental station where apes are observed; but those "cases" that run around freely call for some additional considerations, because in these cases it is not always so evident what the right or wrong way of "carrying something out" is. In the first place, all the higher ambivalence of cleverness and stupidity is already present in the capacity always to behave the way a person equipped for life actually does behave in given circumstances, for "appropriate," "competent" behavior can either use the affair for personal advantage or to further its aim, and whoever does the one customarily considers someone who does the other stupid. (But only that person is *clinically* stupid who can do neither the one nor the other.) And second, it cannot be denied that behavior that is undirected, indeed pointless, may often be necessary, for objectivity and impersonality, and subjectivity and pointlessness, are related to one another; and as ridiculous as unrestrained subjectivity is, completely objective behavior is of course unthinkable, in both life and thought: how to balance them is indeed one of the major difficulties facing our culture. And finally, the objection might also be raised that on occasion no one behaves as cleverly as is called for: that each of us therefore is, if not always, at least from time to time, stupid. So a distinction must also be made between failing and incapacity, between occasional, or functional, and permanent, or constitutional, stupid-

ity, between error and unreason. This is most important because of the way the conditions of life are today: so unintelligible, so difficult, so confused, that the occasional stupidities of the individual can easily lead to a constitutional stupidity of the body politic. This also ultimately leads observation from the realm of personal qualities to the idea of a society burdened with mental defects. Of course, one cannot transpose to whole societies what happens psychologically in a real sense in the individual, and this includes mental illnesses and stupidity, but still one might speak repeatedly today of a "social imitation of mental defects"; the examples are pretty blatant.

With these additions we have again, of course, left the realm of psychological explanation behind. Psychological explanation itself teaches us that a clever way of thinking has specific qualities, such as clarity, precision, profusion, solubility in spite of solidity, and many others, which can be enumerated; and that these qualities are in part innate, in part also acquired as a kind of dexterity in thinking, along with the knowledge one assimilates: good reasoning and a nimble mind do, after all, amount pretty much to the same thing. All that needs to be overcome is inertia and disposition, and these can be trained; the funny word "thoughtsports" would not be a bad expression for what is at stake here.

"Intelligent" stupidity, on the other hand, has as its adversary not so much the understanding as the spirit [*Geist*], and if one is willing to imagine as "spirit" not merely a little heap of emotions, the sensibility [*Gemüt*] as well. Because thoughts and feelings act together, but also because it is the same person who is expressing himself through them, such notions as breadth, narrowness, flexibility, straightforwardness, and fidelity can be applied to thinking as well as to feeling; and even if the connection arising from this may not be entirely clear, it at least suffices for one to be able to say that understanding too is part of the sensibility, and that our feelings are also not without connection to cleverness and stupidity. This stupidity is to be contested by means of example and criticism.

The point of view represented here deviates from the usual opinion, which is by no means false but extremely one-sided, according to which a profound, genuine sensibility does not need the understanding, indeed is only contaminated by it. The truth is that in simple people certain worthwhile qualities such as loyalty, constancy, purity of feeling, and others like them appear unalloyed, but only because competition from the other qualities is weak; we saw a borderline case of this earlier in the image of amicably assenting feeble-mindedness. Nothing could be further from my purpose than wanting to humble the good, upstanding mind with these arguments—the absence of this kind of mind even has an appropriate share in the higher

stupidity!—but today it is even more important to place the concept of what is significant ahead of the upstanding mind; I will mention this concept only in the most utopian way.

The significant unites the truth we are able to perceive in it with qualities of the feelings that give us confidence for something new: for an insight, but also a resolve, for fresh perseverance, for whatever has both intellectual *and* emotional content and “presumes” a certain kind of conduct in ourselves or in others; this is the way it could be put; and what is most important in connection with stupidity is that the significant is accessible to criticism’s understanding aspect as well as to its feeling aspect. The significant is also the opposite of both stupidity and brutality, and the general disproportion in which, today, emotions crush reason instead of inspiring it also merges with the notion of the significant. Enough about this, indeed perhaps already more than one might be able to answer for! For if anything still needs to be added, it could only be one thing, that with all I have said I have not indicated any reliable sign by which what is significant could in any way be recognized and distinguished, and that it would probably not be at all easy to give a sign that would be quite adequate. Precisely that, however, leads us to the final and most important weapon against stupidity: modesty.

Occasionally we are all stupid; occasionally we must also act blindly or half blindly, or else the world would stand still; and if someone were to try to derive a rule from the dangers of stupidity that would run, “Withhold judgment and resolution in everything you don’t know enough about,” we would all be paralyzed. But this situation, which is creating quite a stir today, is similar to one long familiar to us in the domain of understanding. For because our knowledge and ability are incomplete, we are forced in every field to judge prematurely; but we make the effort, and have learned to keep this error within recognized limits and occasionally improve on it, and by this means put our activity back on the right track. There is really no reason why this exact and proudly humble judgment and activity could not be carried over into other areas as well, and I believe that the principle, “Act as well as you can and as badly as you must, but in doing so remain aware of the margin of error of your actions!” would already be halfway toward a promising arrangement of life.

But with these indications I have already some time ago come to the end of my explanations, which, as I set out by way of apology at the beginning, are intended only as a preliminary study. And with my foot on the borderline I declare myself in no position to go further; for one step beyond the point at which we are stopping and we would leave the realm of stupidity, which even theoretically has an extraordinary variety, and would arrive in the realm of wisdom, a desolate region that is generally shunned.

## APPENDIX A

*These are sketches for an introduction to a collection of his essays that Musil planned, presumably between 1921 and 1923, a project that never materialized. They are taken from his diaries (Tagebücher, ed. Adolf Frisé, Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1976, 663–68).*

Whenever in this introduction—or in what follows—the term *I* is used, it does not mean the private person of the writer; nor is it an invented *I* as in a novel. What is important for me is not the interrelationships of ideas and feelings that present themselves for discussion as they occur in one person, and therefore not in my person either, but only their interrelationships among themselves.

But I am not in a position to make this into a philosophy. The materials I have before me are fragments. Perhaps one can feel the whole to which they *could* belong, and perhaps one piece might be taken in a suggestive way as continuing another; but I am forced to fill out what lies between them with “I believe,” “I state,” “I want.” I can only speak imaginatively, not in realities: therefore it is I who speak and not the matter itself.

This would, of course, be easy to dismiss in a time like ours. What Hume wrote nearly two hundred years ago in the introduction to his *Treatise of Human Nature* sounds strangely contemporary:

Disputes are multiplied, as if everything was uncertain, and these disputes are managed with the greatest warmth, as if everything was certain. Amidst all this bustle, it is not reason which carries the prize, but eloquence; and no man needs ever despair of gaining proselytes to the most extravagant hypothesis, who has art enough to represent it in any favourable colors. The victory is not gained by the men at