



The Stupidity of Image

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In the process of promoting a positive self-image at the expense of accuracy, both negative and positive reinforcement systems are at work. There is ample experimental evidence that negative feedback lowers self-esteem making further confrontations with the self aversive¹ and less likely, thus making further criticism less likely. On the other hand, positive feedback enhances self-esteem and promotes self-confrontation in situations where one excels. The net result of these two factors is that positive feedback is increased and criticism reduced, thus distorting the self-image toward one more favourable than warranted. Although this may make people feel better about themselves, it does not help them adjust their behaviour to their overall environment. At best, image enhancement is accomplished and accompanied by specialization, so that people deliberately limit their experiences to situations with which they can cope effectively. Thus, a degree of success is achieved by circumscribing reality.

Of course, one of the great stumbling blocks to understanding is the presumption of the "Reality principle".² This is a legacy of the rationalist tradition which posits that people live in a real world which they test to decide logically when and under what conditions they can safely satisfy their needs. If there ever was a fantasy, it is the reality principle. The schema keeps people ignorant toward and therefore uninformed about certain undesirable aspects of the environment. More important, negative feedback about one-self tends to be subverted or disrupted. Naturally, a certain amount of objective information passes through the perceptual and ideological filters so that people can cope with culturally approved problems. Finally, there is the element of fantasy in the schematic world which makes behaviour potentially independent of actual circumstances. To the extent that the schema tests reality, reality often fails the test. As for logic, people usually resort to that only

after an act or decision so as to rationalize an emotionally preferred, preselected response.

As misleading as the rationalists' reality principle is the liberals' principle of "Open-mindedness". The inhuman ideal that people are or should be equally open to all information presented to them must necessarily be compromised so that they can achieve some kind of balance between a decent exposure to potentially good ideas and a wasting of time. Not only may a system be too open or too closed to communication, but the compromise struck is usually more biased than balanced. Communication is a selective process with the schema ignoring offerings deemed irrelevant and snapping up pleasing material all before evaluation. There is something of a Catch-22 in this situation, in that one must, for example, waste time reading a book in order to determine that it was not worth reading. Worse yet, the pre-screening techniques people commonly employ are usually based on irrelevant criteria—like the book cover. As for personal communications, people self-consciously committed to the pecking order of life are often prejudiced to ideas according to the status of the source: the higher-ups have good ideas; lower-downs do not.

When the ego interferes with effective learning, it serves itself poorly. Stupidity is a common result when the schema imposes itself on reality or disrupts contact with it. The problem is that these are things the schema routinely does. It sustains its integrity by distorting perceptions and selecting information according to maladaptive ideologies. If the brain is not a sewage system but a Darwinian ecosystem, with groups of neurons competing to pass their messages on,³ the grand selector is not the external environment but the schema. The Development of such a semi rational system of ideas for screening out data and inhibiting

communication may be self-serving in an immediate sense, just as it may also be self-defeating over the long haul. When information is rejected by a schematic defines for being inconsistent with existing ideas or when its content is judged more by the communicate-tor's prestige than its own inherent worth, a case of stupidity is probably in progress [1-3].

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