

The Point of View of the Stupid Species

Enn KASAK

*University of Tartu, Institute of Public Law,
Tammsaare tee 127-2, 12917 Tallinn, Estonia,
E-mail: enn@kasak.ee*

Abstract

What does it feel like to be stupid? The question has at least three non-exclusive aspects. Leaving aside all other important problems and considering stupidity as the deficiency of knowledge, I ask: what do I feel like if I truly am stupid and what do I think when such a situation has come about? Finally, I propose a solution to the initial problem of what it feels like to be stupid: "As soon as I feel myself to be wise, I am in fact truly stupid." Of course, it is stupid to present such a claim, for it says nothing Socrates did not say about 2400 years ago. If I know what it feels like to be wise, then I know what it feels like to be stupid.

Scientists may still learn from theologians important things. For instance, they may learn how to use concepts of sin or humility. Perhaps they should regret their stupidity and confess. Maybe then, we may find a new way of cognition for western scientists, maybe like to Mahayāna Buddhist *prajñāpāramitā*.

Keywords: Stupidity; Truth; Philosophy of Science; History of Science; Indian logic.

Résumé

Quelles sont les sensations que d'être stupide? Cette question a au moins trois aspects non-exclusifs. Laisant de côté tous les problèmes très importants et en considérant la stupidité comme le déficit des connaissances, je pose la question suivante: comment je me sens si je suis vraiment stupide et que dois-je penser quand une telle situation s'est-il produit? Et, finalement, c'est la question initiale qui mérite une réponse. Dès que je me sens d'être savant, je suis en effet vraiment stupide. Bien sûr, il est stupide de présenter une telle affirmation, car il n'exprime rien que Socrate n'a pas dit il y a environ 2400 ans. Si je savais quelle est la sensation de la sagesse, alors je saurais aussi ce que c'est que d'être stupide.

Les scientifiques peuvent encore apprendre des choses importantes dont parlent des théologiens. Par exemple, ils peuvent apprendre à utiliser les concepts de péché ou de l'humilité. Peut-être ils devraient se repentir pour leur stupidité et de confesser. Peut-être ensuite nous pouvons trouver une nouvelle façon de connaissance pour les scientifiques occidentaux, peut-être comme Mahayāna Bouddhiste *prajñāpāramitā*.

Mots-clés: stupidité; vérité; philosophie des sciences; histoire des sciences; logique d'Inde.

The ages-old question of what it feels like to be stupid gained importance for me as I was asked to give a public lecture on the topic, also to be broadcast on the national radio. To be honest, that was not exactly the task I was given, on the contrary: it was insisted that I speak on how I had come to be so wise and what important things had occurred to me in the light of such fabulous wisdom. Upon hearing that proposal, I felt the desire to speak about what it feels like to be stupid, what it means to be stupid and for whom in general it is possible to be stupid. In the course of the work, a certain point of view on the world suggested itself. Directing one's eye in the opposite direction, it was not difficult to grasp that the point of view departs from that of the stupid creature. It is not easy to tolerate knowledge of oneself as stupid, supported by one's feeling of truth. The mind tends to search for a way out from such a state. However, once one looks oneself in the eye there is no escape from the question whether the hope for this way out could be better grounded by anything else than the mere desire for release.

What does it feel like to be stupid? The question has at least three non-exclusive aspects:

1. what do I feel like when I consider myself stupid?
2. what do I feel like when others consider me stupid?
3. what do I feel like when I truly am stupid and what do I think then?

The first case may also occur on a variety of circumstances, e.g.:

- when I do not know something worth knowing or know less than someone else;
- when I fail to understand something or someone or a situation;
- when I think I have behaved inadequately.

Foolish behaviour may be random or deliberate. Deliberate false behaviour may be due to affect, emotion, lack of knowledge or skill, perceived values, insanity and many other reasons. In this case, it is also important whether others have noticed and understood my inadequacy or not, also whether they comprehended the motives of my behaviour or not (see Ronell, 2003: 35-60).

Incontestably, all the above questions are worthy of closer attention, still I would leave that important range of issues aside, as other matters are of more interest to me.

The second case – other people consider me stupid – may also occur at different circumstances (similar to these of the first case), e.g.:

- when, in other people's opinion, I do not know something worth knowing or know less than someone else;
- when, in other people's opinion, I fail to understand something or someone or a situation;
- when other people think I have behaved inadequately.

An interesting additional aspect emerges when the said "other people" are in my opinion wrong or not. Thus we have found another very interesting range of questions also worthy of closer attention. The society is very attentive at cases when a person acts in a foolish way knowingly but due to convictions deemed wrong by the society. In that case, the partial proposition "you are stupid" may force you to make the first step towards the gallows.

Unfortunately we have no opportunity to study this truly important matter: what it means to act in a foolish manner. I would also leave aside the issues relating to the second case, as those do not seem to be most important to me.

What interests me most is the third case: what I feel like if I truly am stupid and what I think then. Having made my living as a philosopher for some time, I fully comprehend how easy it is to criticize such a question by asking: "how do you know what really is, what is reality altogether and is it possible to claim that reality exists?" I would leave all such third and fourth important questions also outside the scope of this article for we usually perceive that something exists that is not me and that it affects me. We consider it a reality of some kind and act according to it. Arguing as to the nature of reality would leave unwritten what I intended to speak of. For the same reason, I will avoid defining the philosophical concept of reality in the hope that the concept is understood by all. In a linguistic game in Wittgenstein's sense, we could say that when we use the

concept of *reality*, we understand and know what really is spoken of (Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, passage 560).

True stupidity is a universally comprehensible concept. Just such stupidity is lauded by Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam in his famous treatise *Stultiae Laus [The Praise of Folly]*. Of course, we could in every separate case inquire into the matter if the decision '*X is stupid*' is metaphysical or rather axiological. In the latter case, we should not ask if the said decision is true. We should instead be content that, participating in a linguistic game, we generally understand what the sentence '*X is stupid*' means because we all use that sentence, and quite often, too.

Leaving aside all the above important problems and considering stupidity as the deficiency of knowledge, I again ask: **what do I feel like if I truly am stupid and what do I think when such a situation has come about?** Also in this case, I consider less interesting the relative disposition of the question, whereupon the proposition '*I am stupid*' could mean that I know less than someone else. The proposition '*I am wise*' would then mean that I know a little more than someone else. However, I would rather inquire into the absolute aspect of stupidity, not petty foolishness, but stupidity concerning serious knowledge. What is that serious knowledge, the lack of which I have taken the courage to say something about?

For a few thousand years, it has been understood in the Western civilization that true knowledge pertains to great and important matters. If I happen to know at which corner cheap beer is sold, that is not knowledge; however, knowing what beer is, that is already knowledge of some sort; knowing what is drink in general means even more important knowledge and so on. In other words, in the Platonic tradition, it is often said that knowledge is knowledge of universal matters that exist in reality, of universals or ideas. Stupidity would then mean the lack of such knowledge.

Who is then stupid and who is not? Discussing this, we should remind ourselves what Tertullian said of these matters. That philosopher, at the crossroads of classical and mediaeval philosophy, taught us one very wise thing: *credo, quia absurdum* – I believe because it is absurd. (*De Carne Christi*, V.

4). What could that mean to us, how should we understand this?

One possible interpretation is that if anyone is wise, then it is God. Man, on the other hand, is inevitably stupid. If I understand anything, then it can only be stupidity. Or as the collection of Murphy's laws says, "Complex problems have simple, easy-to-understand wrong answers" (Bloch, 1991: Grossman's Misquote of H. L. Mencken). Reality is so complex that man is unable to comprehend it. I am unable to understand the truth, but if it is revealed to me, then I will know it and will perceive it with a feeling of the absurd. Moreover, if I have the feeling that what has been revealed to me or what I have been trying to comprehend is absurd, then according to Tertullian it is evidence that it may be the truth. A similar conception of the absurd in comprehending important matters has been shared by many philosophers. I would like to quote from Wittgenstein's lecture on ethics: "Now when this is urged against me I at once see clearly, as it were in a flash of light, not only that no description that I can think of would do to describe what I mean by absolute value, but that I would reject every significant description that anybody could possibly suggest, *ab initio*, on the ground of its significance". (Wittgenstein 1965).

Tertullian does not seem to contest the existence of truth, he rather doubts the possibility of perceiving the truth. After the example of Aristotle, a Greek might say that if all sheep have four legs and – say – Oswald is a sheep, then Oswald has four legs. That conclusion is based on a catastrophically insolent conception: I have been revealed the knowledge that all sheep have four legs. The insolence of this proposition is not apparent before we start considering what it means. The proposition '*All sheep have four legs*' says something about the whole world and the whole Cosmos. The Greek claims in his insolence that it is true and therefore the ram-sheep Oswald inevitably has four legs. The truthfulness of the conclusion is concluded from the truthfulness of the general presumption. If the general proposition '*All sheep have four legs*' is considered true, then it will be easy to believe the particular conclusion '*Oswald has four legs*'. In other words, the Greeks claimed to comprehend universal great truths. That claim is there even today, that claim moves along with contemporary science.

Time and again, I am astounded by people who say they do not understand their own cat or child or father but are convinced that they understand the Universe. They claim the Universe to be finite or infinite, twisted, straight or whatever. They say that such or such laws hold in the Universe. But look, this cat is a damn funny creature, it is next to impossible to see what's the thing with this cat. How can one think such things at once? I think this exemplifies the scientist's deeply religious mentality. Only if it is supported by very firm belief, a confident, sincere and steady belief, can I believe the stupid claim that while not understanding my cat, I can understand the Universe. This belief we have is very old and dates back to Ancient Greece or even to Ancient Mesopotamia.

But there are other ways. Let us see on what the Hindu have founded their logic. The Orientalist and mathematician Henry Thomas Colebrooke first introduced Indian logic to Europeans in 1824. Departing from the teachings of the Nyaya school, he presented the scheme known today as the Indian (Hindu) syllogism (Ganeri, 2001: 7-8).

- 1 This hill is fiery:
2. For it smokes.
3. What smokes is fiery: as a culinary hearth.
4. Accordingly, the hill is smoking:
5. Therefore it is fiery.

At first sight, it seems that it can be considered a conditional-categorical syllogism:

Modus ponens:

The general presumption: If there is smoke, there will be fire.

The particular presumption: There is smoke.

Conclusion (often left unsaid): There also is fire.

Discussions of this kind seem to be almost identical to those based on the Greek logic. But the worldview grounding these propositions is fundamentally different, so the analogy may be quite ostensible. In India, it is customary to add to these propositions a concrete condition (see proposition 3 in the Hindu syllogism). If smoke and fire are discussed, then it is said that it is like the case of a bonfire or an oven. In other

words: in Indian logic, the general proposition gains weight from particular propositions known from reality and this in turn gives the proposer some kind of certainty. But it fails to give us the kind of universal certainty or the absolute wisdom to claim that in all possible Universes where we find smoke, there is also fire. Similarly, it is not known for absolute certainty that in all over the Universe sheep have four legs. This kind of approach is fundamentally different from that of the Greeks' logic. In the Greek way of thinking, the credibility of the particular proposition derives from the inevitable general proposition, whereas in Indian logic, the credibility of the general proposition derives from the credibility of particular cases. The general is reduced to the particular.

Modern science has grown out the Greek way of thinking. Does science contradict the Christian religion, as is often claimed? Hardly, for the Greek thinking has come to us in certain aspects through Christian philosophy. Half jokingly, we might say that even scientists pray to their own version of the Holy Cross, called the co-ordinated axes by their sect. Only their rituals and customs are a little different. The opposition between religion and science was a typical fight between two sects which has started dying down as the dialogue between science and religion advances. As considered by several philosophers, e.g. Paul Feyerabend (see 1975: 275-276), there is no great difference between the two in the ideological sense. Both science and religion have been founded first and foremost on believing. First I believe and then understand – *credo ut intellegam* –, thought Anselm of Canterbury. I believe in order to understand, not the other way around, although some thinkers – such as the good old Abelard – have thought.

Let us turn back to true wisdom. Obtaining such true wisdom would mean knowing the truly important matters. Then one would be almost be in the pantry of God. One would not comprehend the content of all the shelves or all the spices in that pantry but still understand that this here is salt and that there is sugar. One would know that one could talk about these and be certain that in these matters, one would not be wrong any more. This is the rough idea of the naïve, but at the same time classic and very widespread approach to science

characteristic of the beginning of the 20th century and influencing us to this day. According to the classic view, science is something that presents us with inevitable and final truths.

As an overture confirming the influence of the described mentality, I would like to refer to the quite often-met conceptions expressed by propositions such as 'there are philosophers who doubt the existence of truth' as well as in negative assessments of such philosophers. But why should truth exist? Whence the widespread notion that the existence of truth is self-evident? I think that the belief has come unto us as the somewhat altered notion of Absolute as the possessor of all truth. How could Newton claim that absolute space is infinite and eternal? How much of that infinite Universe did he traverse and for how long of that eternity did he live? Newton's claim is not scientific, it is the claim of a deeply religious man who believes firmly in the existence of absolute truth and the possibility of perceiving it. Although I sometimes do not understand my cat, I can understand the Universe for I was created after the face of the person who created the Universe.

In 20th-century physics, it came to pass that many inevitable, universal and final truths were undone one by one. Their demise was often brought about by experiment, that final court of science that leaves no further right of appeal. When it seemed that there remains at least a one-valued way of analysing truths logically, these possibilities were narrowed down by Gödel's theorem. How could then happen that the traditional notion of science is still so influential? Probably one of the reasons is that most school textbooks begin with lies. In the first lessons, the teacher of physics tries to leave the impression that he understands what space actually is, what time is and what mass is. The teacher of biology lies in trying to leave the impression that he knows what life is. The teacher of psychology lies as if he knows something about the connections between neural processes and thinking, although scientific knowledge about these connections is still lacking in actuality (yet scientists believe that such knowledge will soon come about). If a pupil starts asking uncomfortable questions, precise answers are promised at the end of the course. Given

that someone still bothers using one's own head for thinking at the end of the course, they will have understood that presenting these uncomfortable questions is simply out of place. Many teachers believe those lies themselves and quite possibly lying in such a manner is useful for the sake of teaching. Unfortunately, it makes the pupils believe the illusion that we have knowledge about things we are in fact oblivious of. We have heard an unbelievable quantity of stupid things, we have said an unbelievable quantity of stupid things and probably it is inevitable for unfortunately we seem to be stupid.

Scientific foolishness becomes evident as we leave the context of the era. Discussing the themes of hell and heaven, issues of soul vehicles and other such matters in a way they were studied by 18th-century English thinkers with Roomet Jakapi (Jakapi & Kasak, 2004-2005), I noticed that people feel funny listening to it. In turn, we emphasized that it was science in the sense of the 18th century. Today it is funny to read a scientific treatment of the location of hell simply because the context has changed. Probably the treatments of the Big Bang will be equally funny if read after a few hundred years. Some scientific stupidities may stay influential for millennia, such as the epicycles theory, supposedly authored by Apollonius (Pannekoek, 1961: 133-144). According to Plato and Aristotle, planets may move only along a circumference. However, the theoretic movement of planets was not in accordance with what was seen in the sky, so astrologers were in distress. Philosophers in those days were interested rather in universal truths than in concrete observation data, but astrologers with rich sponsors could not afford errors in predicting what was to be truly seen in the sky. A more complex theory was therefore needed. In the 3rd century BCE, Apollonius made planets move round an empty point along a small circumference called an epicycle. The centre of the circumference in turn moves along another circumference centred on the Earth and called a deferent. But why should a planet move round an empty point in space? Now we know that it is not true and can only wonder why such a stupidity was believed for two millennia, as it was scientific knowledge. What belongs next to knowledge? Of

course, I believe what I know, my belief has certain basis and while I think I know something, I believe it to be the truth.

Next, the meaning of the situation when someone knows should be explained. But again, explaining that makes us face difficulty, for it is possible to do in many various ways. Using an example on the model of Roger Scruton (1998: 61), let us assume that you stand in the middle of the street and see your friend waving her hand very vigorously. A biologist could explain this in a very scientific manner: your friend is waving her hand because neural signals go from her brain into her muscle, the muscle in turn deflates and because it is attached to bones, the hand starts moving and the waving movement results. However, we have another way of seeking explanation and in order to pursue it we should listen to what she is shouting. She appears to be asking you to step aside from the way of a streetcar.

Thus we have two explanations, both correct. It remains for us to ask if both are sensible. It seems that the task is not a simple one. The first explanation corresponds to the situation in which wisdom is an extreme form of stupidity. Stupidity has different degrees and in its most brutal form, it can take the shape of wisdom. Such wisdom may sometimes be terrifying. Imagine that you are attacked by a criminal in the street, you attempt to defend yourself and then someone in a window says: "Why are you people fighting? Can't you just be friendly?" Of course, this is wisdom but in this case – while lacking an understanding of the "social context" – it is a brutal form of stupidity.

The former examples have been given for the reason that they are easily comprehensible in the context of everyday life. I argue that scientific wisdom is often a brutal form of stupidity. Certainly, we have to distinguish between scientific wisdom as stupidity and random other stupidity. If one regards a step of a staircase by itself in midair, then it will doubtless seem absurd. A step within a staircase in turn is completely sensible and allows us to go to an upper floor. Having reached the upper floor, I will not need the staircase anymore.

Furthermore, scientific wisdom is distinct from any wisdom, or rather: scientific stupidity is distinct from any wisdom in that, in the social and temporal context, it forms a

staircase that leads us somewhere which need not have such great value as we are accustomed to imagine. To use another example: imagine a bodybuilder training his muscle by lifting a weight. Such a weight in itself is completely useless, it is not good for almost anything. The weight gains value as it allows the bodybuilder to train his muscle to a certain level and then can discard the weight. The case of a scientist appears to be similar: by doing science, she refines her muscle of thinking but that knowledge in itself may not have the value it can seem to have at first glance.

Can knowledge be worthless or outright harmful? Buddha is said to have brought a nice example of this already 2500 years ago (see Nagarjuna: 20-21). When asked for certain important wisdom about the world, he replied that such questions remind him of a person hit by a poisoned arrow who should see a doctor. Yet instead of removing the arrow, the person first asks for the first and last name of the doctor, his home village and the names of his parents. Next, the patient inquires from which hill the arrow was shot and which kind of wood the arrow was made of, etc. Unfortunately, it cannot be helped that when the wounded person has gained some information he asked for, he dies because the deadly effect of the poison is gradually inflicted. Thus, some knowledge is not only useless but also harmful. In what sense might scientific knowledge be harmful? The presence of some knowledge spawns the illusion that we already know the answers to the important questions and cease inquiring further – we already know the self-evident answer. Knowledge of this kind might prevent us from seeking answers to the most important questions. Therefore, it is not safe to know some things. One of the worst side effects of education is the set of ready-made wrong answers that the child has acquired. Should she have need for an answer in life, she often already has a readily available wrong answer and no time or opportunity to doubt it.

Much evil is done out of simple stupidity. This has been taught by many religions and schools of philosophy. An evil person is unable to do as much evil as good people to those close to them. Let us observe all the soap operas in life around us: the fathers-in-law, the mothers-in-law, the children – how

much good everyone aspires to do and how much evil gets done this way out of sheer stupidity. Let us observe our neighbours as well as neighbouring peoples and countries. Stupidity spawns evil and it is seldom possible to be as evil intentionally as out of the stupid desire to do good.

Yet evil is not done solely out of everyday stupidity, Stupidity that is generally considered wisdom is equally influential, such as wisdom that advances success in everyday life. Such wisdom works very well in the daily context but may be utterly misleading when applied on important matters, such as solving the fundamental questions of life. Let us assume that I am building a house. Let us assume that someone comes running to me and says: "Hey, the blueprints of your house are wrong. If you build it this way, the foundations will crack up in ten years". In such situations, I have often replied that I am in a terrible hurry and should not be disturbed. For example, I have to agree on buying the materials with the builder, a truckful of blocks is already coming and if I do not receive them on time, I will have to spend more money on these same materials afterwards, I have agreements with the workmen and I cannot right now deal with such general problems. This is doubtless wisdom, for the house would remain unbuilt if all the time were spent on discussing general issues. And so we keep building our houses and afterwards curse the failing foundations. Thus, we are inclined to deal with details as life goes by. Finally, we have to repeat Shantideva's words (VII 36): „I have never trained in even a small fraction of good qualities. It is astonishing that this life, which I have somehow obtained, has been spent in vain”.

Considering what should be truly important to us, it may occur that wisdom of a certain kind is not only useless but may even turn out to be harmful. In order to understand important matters, we should purify ourselves from some wisdom. Certainly, it is important to stress that one can only give up what one has. I cannot say that I will give up the riches I do not have. A person may declare something but it is not evident whether it is an empty promise. Life has shown that very few of those who have declared surrendering their riches have actually done so.

Knowledge poses a similar problem. It is impossible to give up knowledge prior to acquiring it. It is funny to listen to a school dropout assuring us he gave up education because knowledge is unimportant. In order to give up some kind of knowledge, I need to have it in the first place. Returning to the banal example of the bodybuilder and the weight, it is obvious that the weight can be discarded only after it has been used and the muscle has grown. The weight cannot be discarded in the beginning for that way, the muscle remains untrained.

It might be discussed whether it is sensible first to acquire knowledge to give it up later. Where can it lead and could it give us something? I would not mention this unless I had often in life had the idea that I was wise. This is a feeling very difficult to cast aside. Yet, every time I feel I have understood something, it seems to me that I am in a way in severe error for it is difficult to cast that wisdom aside at the right moment. In that case, I am like a bodybuilder so in love with a weight that he even takes it along to the theatre for he cannot give it up. He cannot think of the possibility that he could part with the weight. In my opinion, such a person makes a dangerous error while considering himself wise and deeming that his wisdom has great value. Understanding one's stupidity does not mean telling others that one is stupid while still believing the opposite. It is not a matter of posing with stupidity and at the same time demonstrating one's erudition, it is a matter of truly recognizing stupidity, which is not easy. Matthijs van Boxsel, author of *The Encyclopedia of Stupidity*, coined the term *morosophy* (Greek *moros* – foolishness; *sophia* – wisdom) or 'wisdom of foolishness' in order to study foolishness. He was not content with the term *philomory* (Greek *filo* – striving for something, love) as he is a sage studying foolishness. This discussion here definitely is not morosophy but rather philomory, respect for expert stupidity or even love of stupidity.

Perhaps a passage of *Bodhicaryavatara* by (VIII 79) might assist us here: "Consider wealth as an unending misfortune because of the troubles of acquiring, protecting, and losing it. Those who are distracted by attachment to wealth have no opportunity for liberation from the suffering of mundane existence". This passage best

concerns those desiring wealth and many of those who love wisdom and do not care for wealth may think that there is nothing noteworthy in this text. I would dare to paraphrase Shantideva: "Consider scientific knowledge as an unending misfortune because of the troubles of acquiring, protecting, and losing it. Those who are distracted by attachment to scientific knowledge have no opportunity for liberation from the suffering of mundane existence".

Just as it is very difficult for a rich man to give up his wealth, it is difficult for a scientist to give up his knowledge. Nevertheless, both have to give it up if they want to comprehend matters truly important. Training one's mind with scientific wisdom, an insight for understanding much more important matters is gained. Yet before moving along, it is necessary to throw away one's knowledge the way a bodybuilder needs to throw away the weight in order to lift something else. This reminds one of Wittgenstein's recommendations to discard words once their meaning has reached us like a ladder that becomes unnecessary once we are on the higher level already (*Tractatus*, passage 6.54).

Speaking about the uselessness of scientific knowledge is unlikely to be praiseworthy although several philosophers have undertaken it many times. An important scientific problem is whether the Universe is finite or infinite. Certainly, the reader is familiar with Immanuel Kant's approach to the problem by compiling four antinomies on questions that are senseless, absurd and insoluble. Here, only the first the first antinomy will be considered (Kant, 1783, Sect. 51).

Thesis: The World has, as to, Time and Space, a Beginning (limit).

Antithesis: The World is, as to Time and Space, infinite.

An infinite amount of arguments can be brought in favour of both the wisdoms above and the controversy has been going on for millennia. This is truly a distinct form of mind-sports that can be developed in a very nice manner, as I myself have done. Yet Kant declares these questions senseless. He argues that it is stupid to consider them because they concern things that cannot be objects of perception and that we have no sensible way of perceiving such things. Therefore, there is no sense in asking this, this is a *category mistake*. A nice example of a mistake in category has been brought by G. Ryle (1966:

17-20): someone asks to be shown the University of Oxford and gets shown about forty buildings. Now the guest could ask: but which of these buildings is the university? In a similarly silly manner, we ask if the world is infinite. Whatever is the answer, it can only be stupid.

Even this question was dealt with in India 2500 years ago. How did Bhagavat or Buddha (in the Pali canon, *Aggivačchagottasutta*) answer the question whether the world exists. He was silent when asked in order to show that the question cannot be answered in this way. Then Buddha was asked if it is the case that the world does not exist. Buddha was silent in reply, indicating that the question cannot be answered. The smart inquirer then asked: maybe the world both exists and does not exist at the same time? Buddha remained silent because the question is absurd and has no answer. The inquirer then asked a fourth question: but maybe it is not true that the world both exists and does not exist at the same time? Buddha still remained silent. In such a tetralemma, all four possibilities are negated according to a very strict rule in the hope of thus expressing the inexpressible. This teaching was further developed in the *Mādhyaṃika* (middle) or *sūnyavāda* (emptiness of emptiness) school, the central term of which is *sūnyatā*, or emptiness (Narain 1997: 93). The foundation of the school is associated with the name of Nagarjuna (1st—2nd century). Shantideva (7th century) who was quoted above and belonged to the same school. The way practiced there is fit for intellectuals. The goal is to reach the third level of understanding, the *transcending awareness*. Linnart Mäll (2003: 15-24) has presented sensible activity according to this school as having three levels (using Sanskrit terms):

1. *avidyā*: ignorance or conventional mind; and perhaps everyday intelligence;
2. *vijñāna*: discriminative knowledge; the ability to create new signs, and perhaps logical and scientific knowledge;
3. *prajñā*: awareness, wisdom; wisdom synonymous with omniscience; wisdom is reached by way of distinguishing knowledge and the level of wisdom transcending the others.

I have no intention of preaching Buddhism as I have not reached either enlightenment or surpassing comprehension. It pleases me, however, that such a problem has been dealt with in such depth already such a long time ago, and not without suggesting a solution. They have attempted to express the inexpressible. I do not know if they were wrong or not but I hold the attempt in high esteem, it gives me hope that a solution I could comprehend is possible. It may occur that the way of comprehending one's own stupidity need not be totally destructive.

This is a suitable place to say a few words in favour of stupidity. In mediaeval philosophy, the attributes of the Absolute received much discussion, one of the attributes being omniscience. Relating to that, a problem arose: does an omniscient being remain omniscient if there are things that I know and that being does not? Apparently, I could not consider the being omniscient. What would be the thing known to me but forever unknown to an omniscient being? Hence, I would present a question: *how can an omniscient being know what it feels like to be stupid? How can an omniscient know what ignorance means, for he knows everything and always?* One possible answer is that it is the reason why God has created man: our task is to be stupid in this world and God knows of our stupidity as a phenomenon in the world and his omniscience is fulfilled by means of our stupidity. It may occur that our stupidity is our inevitable essential quality. So we may find the answer to the question about the *raison d'être* of man: the *raison d'être* of man could be being stupid. On the one hand, we fulfill thus the Absolute's omniscience, and on the other, we approach perfection. Evidently, man is not best at anything anymore. Something runs faster than us, something calculates faster than us, something is more powerful than us. Maybe stupidity is the only event in which we cannot be surpassed, in stupidity we may reach divine quality and nothing can beat us. In this sense, one may understand Buddha's notion that man is in a special position with regard to salvation, only man can be salvaged. Gods are too wise to be stupid and animals are too stupid, which prevents them from being wise enough to be sufficiently stupid. It seems that man is the only truly stupid species. This

claim is – naturally – a controversial one but I am comforted by the fact that van Boxsel agrees (2005).

However, it is not easy being in such a special position, to comprehend that there is something truly important and at the same time understand that it is inexpressible. Perhaps the struggle to comprehend the inexpressible is man's way towards wisdom which is not stupidity. Expressing the inexpressible has been attempted by artists, writers, many philosophers and very few scientists. In most cases, scientists deal with small truths, the opposites of which are false and which can be analysed logically. Great truths, however, have been left for other people to seek, for the opposite of a great truth may be another great truth. It may even be that each discussion is sensible as much as it leads us to comprehending the inexpressible. This resembles the situation in which we look at a picture logically absurd but comprehensible as the author's message.

In the exact same way, a text in itself is the important thing but rather it acquires meaning in a context. When the content of the argument has reached us, the text need not be important to us anymore. Sometimes it may occur that conveying the same message requires a text of another kind and the text presented previously has to be declared totally erroneous because the context demands it. Why are myths so important? It is not the text of the myth that speaks to us, as many researchers have proposed. Of course, researchers like investigating the text because the text allows investigation and the application of different scholarly research methods on it. Inventing such methods has been a major concern of scholars. For example, many psychologists have been in favor of the behaviorist school. It is very difficult to explain what someone feels, it is damn difficult to measure it. But if I stick a needle in the subject of the experiment, it can be established that he jumped 20 centimeters out of pain; I slash him with a big poker and he jumps half a meter and screams 30 dB louder than the previous time. As it is possible to measure things this way and calculate such differences, it is possible to do research this way. Researchers into myths are excited by texts, they may get the feeling that myth is text. Fortunately, it has been

noticed that a myth is a whole that is not worth much without its context, without the speaker. So it is also with other narratives of import.

Consider the first sermon by Buddha, the title of which is often translated as “Setting in Motion of the Wheel of Dharma”. The scholar Linnart Mäll has deemed that “Starting up the mechanism of dharma” or “Starting up the text generator” is more appropriate (2003: 9). In his opinion, it puts in motion the generator of all texts we may need in order to express the inexpressible. The texts may also be discarded later for the text itself has no importance once it has done its job.

With no intention to disparage science, one should not expect too much of science. Science is a very important and useful phenomenon, on the one hand, because it gives us results, and on the other hand, for being a sermon and a text of its kind. It may have to be cast aside in the end, but it should be undertaken in order to comprehend what cannot be expressed. However, scientists as humans need the truth even when science cannot provide it. For example, many people are interested in death is in fact the end of all. In this case, it should be mentioned that this is not certain, no matter what materialists claim. The materialist way of thinking – according to which a group of atoms gather to form dirty socks and stink while another group gathers to become a brain and think – has a certain advantage while observing something from the outside. But each of us may use one’s perception of the inside: a thousand scientists will not convince me in the nonexistence of pain if I really am in pain. It may well be that the materialist outlook built on the wisdom of the external observer leads us to severe error in what concerns the most important matters. It may well be that pursuing greater pleasure in this life (as it is called) is the greatest mistake we may make on this Earth. Science does not provide answers to questions such as this one but we must nonetheless make decisions on our lives. Even indecision is some poor sort of decision.

To summarize the above, the following proposition could be formulated: “As soon as I feel myself to be wise, I am in fact truly stupid”. Of course, it is stupid to present such a claim, for it says nothing Socrates did not say about 2400 years ago. Finally, the

initial question should be answered. The answer could be something like this: If I know what it feels like to be wise, then I know what it feels like to be stupid.

Once it is known what it feels like to be stupid, it is possible to look in the opposite direction and give counsel to the stupid creature. Perhaps there is hope to escape from stupidity for those who honestly recognize and repent their stupidity every time the feeling of wisdom strikes them. It cannot be ruled out that new knowledge may in this case appear in a completely different way. It might be something as surprising as the way of transcending wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*), favoured by the Mahayāna Buddhist school of Mādhyamika (Narain, 1997: 95–96; Mäll 1998: 231).

Perhaps it is too much to hope that my point of view of a stupid creature will transform into a point of view of a wise creature. But perhaps I will then be able to see further than now.

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