

Maxime Rovere

Translated by David Bellos

How to
Deal
With

IDIOTS

(AND STOP BEING
ONE YOURSELF)

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Translator's Note

Maxime Rovere's profound and entertaining essay tackles a broad problem for which the French language possesses a single term. It's a word often said aloud in anger, disgust or amusement, and you can write and print it in many contexts – but you'll not hear it uttered in news broadcasts, or see it printed in the regular press. Using this vigorous and still not quite proper word as the title and topic of a philosophical essay is almost scandalous, and also sets a problem for translation. To call someone *con* in French may indicate that their intellectual faculties fall short of the full hamper, or else that their behaviour fails to come up to the mark. Because the French word has both these meanings, it creates a deep connection between them – and that is what this book is really about. English, on the other hand, has a superabundance of terms for the uncountable manifestations of stupidity and boorishness in our fellow humans, without offering one overarching term for the fundamental problem that Maxime Rovere dissects in this book. My solution has been to multiply the object of discussion, usually by two, so as to speak not of *cons*, but of jerks *and* idiots, oafs *and* boneheads, louts *and* fuckwits,

and so forth. Nonetheless, the singular focus of this treatise is on how to face up to the always united front of stupidity and incivility in interpersonal relationships and social life.

David Bellos

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INTRODUCTION

Philosophers have never taken the issue I tackle in this book very seriously because they are mainly concerned, as they should be, with the positive powers of the mind. That said, philosophers' endeavours to understand and explore the different ways that 'understanding' can be understood have not left idiocy entirely out of the equation. This is for the good reason that even in the woolliest approach to the problem, understanding and stupidity are by definition in inverse proportion to one another: understanding increases in lockstep with a reduction in idiocy. However, that is also why philosophers have almost always given their adversary an entirely negative definition, one that presupposes that you share the philosopher's starting position: that of a person who is *theoretically* intelligent. Without giving an extended history of the philosophy of idiots, we can still say that philosophers have variously presented stupidity as an obstacle to knowledge, to moral progress, to healthy discussion and to life in society, identifying it by such terms as *public opinion, prejudice, pride, superstition, intolerance, the passions, dogmatism, pedantry, nihilism*, and so on. In doing so they have of course thrown light on many aspects of stupidity. But because they have always intellectualised

the issue (which is quite natural for masters of thought), they have not been able to see it in the light that reveals it to be a genuine problem.

To put it simply, the problem is not stupidity: the problem is stupid people. And this of course presents its own challenges. Because whatever definition of stupidity you start from, you end up with the same conclusion: stupidity must be battled and beaten down by every possible and imaginable means and by all the human and non-human powers that can be brought to bear on it. The Latin saying *stultitia delenda est* expresses a fierce and limitless hatred, telling us that *stupidity must be destroyed*. But what then about stupid people? Real living idiots – that’s to say, the ones we stumble over in daily life or encounter on trains and planes, the jerks who sit at other desks in our offices and the blockheads with whom we share our lives and who may be found, alas, in our own families and yes, even among those we choose as friends and lovers ... You see who I mean? Who would say they must be *annihilated*? Anyone who did so would be not only an unrivalled idiot but a criminal as well.

Idiots thus constitute a far more tricky and far more significant problem from a philosophical point of view than stupidity as such. Their existence as plain stupid and often aggressive individuals is an extremely complex theoretical problem because it is circular in shape. In fact, whenever you encounter a jerk or an idiot, a switch occurs that immediately undercuts your intelligence (I use the word in its widest sense, to mean *a disposition to understand*). Obviously, I do not wish to go so far as to insult you, dear

reader, but you have to admit that from the moment you identify another person as an idiot, you are no longer *engaged* with that person, but in a *situation* where your own attempt to understand is grievously impaired. This is because one of the main characteristics of boneheadedness – and it is important to use everyday language to name it – is that it sucks up your own analytic capabilities and, by some strange quirk, obliges you to talk in its own language, to play along with it. In a word, idiocy is a trap. Getting out of it is terribly difficult. I face the problem in my own home. I share a flat with a numbskull (not for much longer, thank goodness). And so I have decided to set aside my more abstruse scholarly activities in order to do you (and me) the favour of explaining why the problem is so hard – perhaps the hardest problem of all. I do so in the hope of finding a way out of it.

However, before getting down to the specific problems that jerks set us – and which I truly believe to be as serious as the weightiest topics that philosophers have ever tackled – I must first alert you to the fact that in this book I am dealing with stupidity in the real world, not in an ideal world. In other words, I am fully aware that insofar as it is a moral, political and social issue, stupidity must be thwarted. We must establish ways of organising life in society that discourage young people from becoming blockheads – especially since, irrespective of their social backgrounds, they may well be the offspring of assholes and fools themselves. I acknowledge that this is a pressing matter indeed. On the other hand, we must not allow the efforts to foster intelligence on a broad front to

obscure the limitations of this project. The implementation and effectiveness of anti-idiot measures are hostage to many factors: but there will never be a society in which one part of the population – even if it has only a single member – is not viewed by some other part of the population – again, even if it consists of just a single individual – as irremediably thick. In that sense, despite stupidity being theoretically solvable and despite the appropriateness and legitimacy of the efforts made to stamp it out by thoughtful and well-intentioned people, in the real world it will always be with us.

So we have to grant from the outset that even in the best of all possible worlds and with the best will that can be mustered, you will *always* and *necessarily* bump into nitwits. That is not just because progress never achieves total victory or because idiocy adapts easily to new circumstances. The distinctive feature of stupidity is a specific form of resistance, a blind opposition to anything being done to remedy a situation, including the situation of idiots themselves. So on all occasions, idiots will mount energetic opposition to your efforts, they will try to drown your arguments in endless and specious reasoning, they will try to stifle your benevolence with threats, your kindness with violence, and the common interest with blinkers that undermine the very basis of their own individual interests. In that respect, stupidity is not just a kind of incomprehensible leftover of human evolution; on the contrary, it is one of the main engines of History, a force which despite or rather because of its blindness has won many of the major battles of the past and will surely win many more in times to come. Allow me to sum up the

insurmountable permanence of that force by simply saying that *idiots always hunker down*.

Rather inconveniently, this particular feature of stupid people rules out the simpler solutions. Given the way idiots dig in their heels, there is no point pleading for tolerance among the intolerant, or proposing intellectual enlightenment among the superstitious, or preaching open-mindedness to the prejudiced, and so on. Uttering grand declarations or displaying fine feelings serves only to soothe the speaker, and the pleasure that such speechifying provides is just one more opportunity for stupidity to suck in its opponents, trap them in its web and obstruct yet again all attempts to arrive at understanding.

For all these reasons, reconciliation with jerks and idiots is structurally impossible. And as they themselves do not want reconciliation, we will just have to learn to cope with them. But how can we do that? Having made the dolorous admission that idiots exist as a matter of fact, indeed, that they exist necessarily, have always existed and always will, how can we then find the means (it is always already too late to adopt preventive measures) – how can we find the means to cope with fools, boors, blockheads and the like?

If I'd known the answer when I asked the question, I would be one of them. But I do have a few cards up my sleeve all the same: a sketch of a plan, some methods and tools, and familiarity with abstract thought. So let us work together for a while to see if philosophy can come up with clear solutions to this urgent problem.

THREE
CONCLUSIONS
BEFORE WE
EVEN START

'Oi, you, stop shoving!'

'Move down the carriage then!'

'Move? In that crush?'

'Well, *you* stop shoving then!'

'Then *you* move!'

'Then don't shove!'

'Gimme a break!'

'Can't you just move down a bit?'

'But I told you already ...'

Stupidity is in the eye of the beholder; stupidity can appear in an infinite number of guises; the biggest idiot of all is the one in the mirror. Now that's been said, we can start to think.

When you picked up this book, you had in mind your own experience of fools and boors. A face and a name may have come to mind ... Your painful experience, which may have involved matters as serious as injustice or suffering, makes you want to get your own back on idiots, which means learning more about them, having a bit of a laugh at their expense, and feeling more intelligent than they are. I share your hope. But before I begin, allow me to draw your attention to a problem inside our problem, namely, a question of definition.

Although it is possible to define stupidity in abstract terms, it is very difficult to say exactly what it is that makes an idiot an idiot. Two things are plain. First, it's obvious that the term 'idiot' is relative to such a degree that there is always someone out there for whom *you* are the idiot – and that is surely why there is no serious study of the topic so far. Secondly, and reciprocally, it's just as clear that we all have our own idiot – by which I mean that we all have a sense of a Being whose outlines may be as fuzzy as that of a ghost but whose existence is far more obvious to us than that of God. Like me, you too would like philosophy to provide a better grasp of a *thing* that appears in our lives in the shape

of specific idiots and jerks.

But here is something to puzzle over: from the perspective of a pure intelligence, idiots do not exist. The conceptual form of God sees no stupid people when he looks down upon the world. His infinite understanding instantly grasps the machinery of causes, the connections of factors and the dynamics of interactions that make humans act. With unending benevolence, He who is infinitely wise extends his loving acceptance to all rash inventions, rude gestures, silly remarks, low cunning, and so on. In his omnipotence, he knows that everything has its place in the world, and his confidence in the way the universe works allows him to remember this, even when contemplating ridiculous opinions and absurd human flaws. Idiots don't slip under the radar of the Absolute: they just evaporate under its Perfect Gaze.

But we are no God. It seems obvious that the problem we have with stupid people is that meeting them forces us to appreciate our own limitations. Idiots stand on that bourn beyond which we cannot extend our love or understanding. That leaves us with two alternatives. We could wallow in our own imperfection and be as pathetic as brainless twits who enjoy sniggering at the things they don't understand. Or we could acknowledge the specific force of stupidity, which is to be found in the effect that it has on us as individuals, and resort instead to the opposing force of ideas to trample over stupid people, which is to say, we could try to be not only better than they are but also better than we actually are ourselves.

The second path has a grave drawback: being better is not always entertaining, and on occasions it is frankly a bore. But fear not – I reckon it won't take more than a few relatively jargon-free pages for us to study the existence of idiots as a complex phenomenon.

Even before I begin, however, another problem looms. The sheer variety of forms that stupidity takes surely makes it impossible to study all idiots in one sweep. There are idiots who are so sure they are right that they will not countenance a moment's self-doubt; then there are those who are sure of nothing and query even the simplest truth; then there's a third lot who don't give a damn for the other two groups, or for anything else, even for perfectly avoidable disasters. How can I possibly put all idiots in one basket?

One imaginable solution would be to establish the types and species of stupid people and to group them into families, maybe even to draw a family tree. But in my view, such a typology would have the serious disadvantage of giving to fools and knaves the kind of consistency that they do not possess. If I were to list various different kinds of idiot along with a description of the distinguishing features of each, we would very probably agree about some of them, and jointly identify certain idiot-types or essences (as when sampling perfumes). Unfortunately, that would produce a result directly contrary to our aim: you would be inclined to over-project your own experience, that is to say, you would let yourself believe that you have had to cope with *entities*, not with situations. In other words, the more such a list allows you to recognise the jerks and twits in your own life, the

more likely you are to believe that idiots exist in the same way that ostriches and copper beeches exist (which is not the case, as I will show you very soon). Such a belief would result in your moving further away from the perspective of pure intelligence and benevolence, so that the ultimate effect of this book, as of so many others, would be to have you wallow ever deeper in your own prejudices, instead of leading you (and me) towards a little more wisdom.

So classifying idiots won't help us understand them any better, nor will it help us manage the ways in which they intervene in our lives. It's true that in many films, comedy acts and novels there is a typecast fool, a character whose total lack of imagination is designed to prompt others – as if by magic – to creative exploits. But that fact only supports my argument. Philosophy works with *concepts*, not with *characters*. So as to be fair to different cases, I'm planning brief interludes where I can make visible the kinds of experiences I have in mind while working with abstractions. But my aim is not to invent anything. My aim is to understand.

In other words, and despite this being rather unusual in philosophical discourse, I am asking you not to try to define idiots too precisely. Let's leave them to twinkle on in the night sky where each of us can pick out our own star idiots. Let me go even further. To be completely sincere, I don't really give a damn about what idiots are, where they come from, or what unpleasant methods they use to reproduce. All I want is for them to let me live in peace. And yet it is here, precisely, in a tender heart that yearns only to love, that

there is a snag, a problem as sharp and nasty as a rusty nail: idiots do not leave us in peace, and they afflict in particular those who would most like to live far away from them. And so, the second axiom of my book is: *idiots are all around and all over us.*

That is indeed a great mystery. How does stupidity make its way in the world, how does it slither and slide and insert its insidious self inside a *theoretically intelligent subject*? To answer this question, we have to start from the point where intelligence stops. And that, dear reader, is why I have already given you three observations that a smarter but less sincere author would have held back until the conclusion. Namely: every one of us is an idiot in someone else's eyes; stupidity has an infinite number of forms; and the main idiot is the one we harbour inside ourselves. These three points are all perfectly correct, but as far as I am concerned, they are of no use at all. What I want from philosophy are precise conceptual techniques that allow me to overcome the weakness in my understanding and the shortfall in benevolence that I experience every time I go past a particular door in my own home and find myself face to face with human idiocy.

HOW IDIOTS
TIE US
IN KNOTS

There are foolish men who don't want to get into trouble with their wives, and stupid women who try to avoid trouble with their mates; idiots who prefer not to get in a tangle with their kids, and thickos who feel the same about their parents – or their neighbours or their colleagues or their students or their teachers or their bosses or the media or their customers or the police ... and because of the desperate efforts they all make to avoid each other, as they retreat, so as to avoid getting into trouble, jerks and idiots bump blindly into each other all the time.

In which it is shown that stupidity is a device used by idiots in order to entrap you. And how to direct your mind so as to begin to find the way out.

Idiots crop up without warning, just when you were least expecting them. You weren't ready. You just wanted to get on with whatever you were doing, taking a trip, looking at the scenery, doing your work or enjoying your life – let's say, you just wanted to carry on in your own sweet way. But human idiocy reared its head. Now it doesn't matter whether you were in a good mood or not. Idiocy has riled you up and got you down. If I may be a little more dramatic and precise, it has offended you. Even if your pride makes you want to rise above it all, stupidity always offends you. And the very fact that you are offended by it upsets you; this only increases the offence and makes it worse.

Let's not be squeamish. Let's look at the wound close up. In thousands of instances that arise in the world – a driver cutting in on your lane, a walker giving his dog a kick, or a passer-by dropping litter on the pavement – jerks are people who lack respect for others, who disregard even a common-sense rule, who basically undermine the conditions of life in society. Of course, it has to be said that many of these behaviours are symptoms of deeper problems that don't just depend on the people concerned: difficult and unstable working conditions, leisure and consumption industries

unleashed to anxiety-inducing excess, the dismantling of frameworks that regulate person-to-person relations ... To grasp the situation in its entirety, we have to take into account a process whereby not only do idiots destroy the conditions of life in society, but also through which a sick society produces idiots. But the fact that human phenomena arise from specific conditions in no way precludes the real existence of idiots and jerks.

So we have an initial consideration of some importance. A behaviour that we judge to be insufficient marks jerks and idiots as individuals that we can identify, if only fleetingly, as occupying a lower rung on the scale of morality by which we aspire to become fully accomplished human beings (without presupposing that we are anywhere near the top of the scale ourselves).

Before we pursue this any further, we must first quickly answer an objection. Since each of us is always a jerk or an idiot in the eyes of someone (see above), do we really have the right to call anyone else an idiot? In all probability, that blockhead thinks *we* are the idiot. And anyway, who would dare to try to define a 'fully accomplished human being'? If we followed this line of argument to its end, stupidity would exist only in relative terms, and would be entirely dependent on any one person's point of view: it would be a reflection of personal preferences that are valid for a given individual but not for anybody else. But I can live with that! Relativism of this kind does not scare me. I willingly grant you that each of us is someone else's jerk; and yet that does not mean that all idiots are the same. Quite the opposite, in fact: if everybody