

## KAFKA'S STUDENTS AND THE INOPERATION OF KNOWLEDGE: AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE POWER OF STUPIDITY

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### Abstract

*This article will explore how configurations of the student in Kafka's literature represent a specific relation to knowledge. The central argument will be that their attitude represents a form of rendering knowledge inoperative, therefore representing a disruption of power structures. The emblematic figure of this posture will be the worst student in Kafka's Abraham. This disruptive posture will be denoted as a form of stupidity.*

*The interest in stupidity comes from its abundant presence as a motif in contemporary social and political issues. Stupidity is a form of otherness and belongs always to the other: the accusation of stupidity is always directed at the alternative position. The text will use the student in Abraham to challenge the common-sense framing of stupidity as constituting an unwarranted invasion, deemed inconsistent with the age of enlightenment and political progress, and that must therefore be eradicated.*

**Keywords:** Franz Kafka; Abraham; Stupidity; Intelligence; Knowledge; Power

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### Introduction

The first step of this paper is to set the stage for a detailed examination of stupidity as an ontological and political concept. By engaging with a diverse philosophical tradition and adopting a methodological approach that mirrors its conceptual framework, this work aims to offer a new perspective on stupidity. It invites readers to reconsider the value of not-knowing, confusion, and anarchy in the pursuit of deeper philosophical and political understanding. This work will therefore question intelligence fundamentally, in fact, it understands itself as a systematic defense of stupidity.

In *Abraham*, the worst student mishears their name when an award is being announced for the best student, and stands up to receive it. The argument implied by the story is that the student represents the dismantling of subjectification since their condition is always already unsettled in his act: the contingency of a meritocratic social hierarchy and the disciplinary subjectification of abiding to it crumble when the student gets up to take the award. The Kafkian student is central

because rather than avoid or escape authority, they confront the mode under which they are being made a subject. The character demonstrates a total lack of self-awareness, a form of non-conscience of oneself, that will be constructed as a mode of stupidity. The article will demonstrate how this act of interrupting power is an interesting model of social-political resistance. This figure will then be placed in parallel to other literary and philosophical figures, among them two other Kafkian students, demonstrating how stupidity can serve as a counter-hegemonic project.

My overall conclusion will be that this stupidity amounts to a form of being that is ungovernable. The conceptualization of stupidity aims to defy the double meaning of subjectification: stupidity will be a form of being that is not subject (submissive, receptive, dominated...) to anything by not being a subject (agent, individual...). In this way, by presenting stupidity as a form of ungovernability, the investigation will show that it is a mode of desubjectification. Briefly, the project here is an attempt to delineate a possibility of an anarchic political subject, one that does not work or could work towards anything. That comes from nowhere and goes nowhere.

Throughout the text, the methodology will remain deliberately unconventional, reflecting the chaotic and often paradoxical nature of the subject matter. The goal is not to provide definitive answers but to provoke thought and encourage readers to reconsider their assumptions about stupidity and its place in intellectual and political life.

### **Why is stupidity so important?**

Stupidity seems to be the word of the day. With the rise of so-called populist political leaders, conspiracy theorists, misinformation, and anti-scientific postures, it appears that stupidity is overwhelming, omnipresent and omnipotent. It affects not only politics, it seems to also pervade our social interactions. (See Spring 2020 and Warzel 2020). It emerges from nowhere, inexplicably, and it corrodes the fabric of the world in which we live in ways that seem stronger than all checks and balances put in place to avoid it (See Coppins 2024a and Coppins 2024b). The common-sense perspective seemingly posits that this presence or return to stupidity constitutes an unwarranted invasion that is inconsistent with the age of technological advancement, enlightenment and political progress, and it must therefore be eradicated (See The Guardian 2023 and Karlson 2024).

Interestingly, it seems the notion of stupidity is so ubiquitous because the accusation of stupidity is always directed at the alternative position one finds oneself. Stupidity is always a form of otherness and belongs always to the other. If everyone believes that anyone who does not hold the same beliefs as them is stupid, then everyone falls into the category in the eyes of someone else. The accusation of stupidity is used to discredit opponents and dismiss dissenting views, but nobody really believes themselves to be stupid. Without descending into relativism, since we take it for granted that the Earth is not flat or that lizard people do not exist, it is fundamental to notice that those who are called stupid do not endorse a posture that adopts irrationality or that asserts that knowledge should not be built on facts. In fact, they usually believe that they are the ones holding the facts, while the alternative posture is held by one who is stupid. To put it concretely: Flat Earthers consider people who believe that the earth is round stupid and deceived, while they have knowledge and a scientific mindset. Flat Earthers demonstrate a fixity considering that their world view has the desire to claim 'Truth' — a desire that reconstructs reality through reason.

But what really is 'stupidity'? The motivation for inquiring about stupidity emerges from an overarching discomfort with this framing. It is a suspicion towards how this conversation is being developed since there seems to be an axiomatic presupposition that the authority of knowledge is lost (See Naim 2022 and The Wall Street Journal 2023). This frame becomes particularly problematic when it appears within spheres that strive to challenge authority (See Robin 2017, Foster 2018, and Marcetic 2022). It is often surprising how fast the authority of knowledge is called back into the scene to establish order. And to be clear this does not need to be a call for coercion, but it also functions as such. Concretely, this attitude is found both in those who 'feel sorry' for the stupid person's lack of education and in those who celebrate when apparatuses of control are directed at their opposition (See Wolf 2024). To state that narrow views are the outcome of misinformation is to assume that everyone would agree with you given the right opportunities to access information. It assumes the same corrective role of authority embodied in the enforcement of law or other forms of coercion such as for example when racist, xenophobic or other dissimilatory attitudes are punished. The attitudes converge as if one thinks that the other is too stupid to understand that they need to understand, the only instrument is left force.

This attitude is particularly problematic when one considers that this appeal to force or authority is often present in what is supposed to represent a critical discourse. The posture of seeing others as inferiors, savages and irrational beings that marks oppressive attitudes has been widely documented and treated as problematic in philosophy and more broadly. Critical scholarship has highlighted how categories of stupidity, barbarism, savagery and irrationality are employed in projects of domination and oppression. This discriminatory posture is taken to be a mark of sub-development or irrationality, for example, even though it still occurs, being openly racist, sexist and directly endorsing other forms of discrimination is not widely accepted.<sup>1</sup>

The common sense holds that if those postures still exist, this is taken to be in contradiction with or despite the developed ways in which we live today, and is therefore considered reminiscent of dark times and an obstacle to be surpassed as we move into the future. Most of the literature on stupidity—for example Sacha Golob (2019), Roland Breeur (2015 and 2019), Zoran Terzić (2022), Alain Roger (2008) and Michel Adam (1975)—portray it as a superficial issue. Despite its overwhelming presence, in their accounts it does not challenge our conception of intelligence. Most of the investigations into stupidity are thus occupied with modes of avoiding or restricting it.

Still, a common response to so-called populist phenomena is to refer to their supporters as uncivilized or uninformed. The thesis here aims to highlight how the paternalistic attitude that sees others not just as stupid, but as too stupid to even realize that they are stupid remains a valid posture. I will then argue that the framing that stupidity receives today is reminiscent of ideas of inferiority, irrationality and savagery that engendered oppressive postures in the past. In that way, despite the developments in this sphere, I will argue that oppressive logics of the past are neither surpassed nor inconsistent with the contemporary worldviews. The realization that this technocratic appeal to the authority of truth is consistent with the problem rather than a response to it, leads the investigation here to propose an alternative response.

Moreover, the perception that responses to phenomena like Brexit or the elections of Bolsonaro, Trump, Wilders and Orbán typically resort to notions of

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<sup>1</sup> See for the example the reflection UN did on its 1965 convention on the elimination of racial discrimination (UN 2018)

misinformation, stupidity and irrationality, invites us to reflect into how the category of stupidity is employed not just in the continuum of marginalizing and discriminatory postures, but also in positions that strive to oppose them. This investigation into stupidity is motivated by the perception that, more often than not, phenomena that are commonly associated with stupidity actually speak to or are advanced on behalf of intelligence and not stupidity (See Britzky 2019 and Crilly 2024). Those figures have their own pantheon of established intellectuals who also refer to 'snowflakes' and 'progressives' as a stupid mass (See Aguayo 2022, Carpanez 2018, and Dos Santos Filho 2022).

The realization that emerges from this supposed dispute is that despite diverging in content, the common presupposition across the board is that knowledge grants the authority to govern stupidity. Hence the perception that motivates my inquiry into stupidity is the fact that, despite the purported abundance of stupidity, every government is a government that speaks on behalf of intelligence. Furthermore, it is central to this reflection that under the logic constructed above this is not only a legitimate authority but also a necessary one, since those who do not know and cannot know can only be governed by force.

Therefore, one of the central articulations in the investigation into the political role of stupidity will be how this figure demonstrates something about the relationship between reason and force. The main issue here is the trivial perception that reason always depends on some degree of force to be implemented. Think for example of the fact that we talk about the strongest reason to act in a certain way rather than another. The investigation will show that this appeal to strength is consistent with the conceptualizations of intelligence and in that sense every reason is to some degree the reason of the strongest. In other words, it is only by force that the reasonable or intelligent establishes itself.

The dynamic between the two—reason and force—becomes even reinforced when we consider that violence is always imposed toward those who do not recognize the reason that is being put forward. Think, for example, that if a posture is validated by the strength of its rationality, then those who understand those reasons are never the object of its force because they already accept its prescriptive strength. It is only those who do not see it as valid, either because they disagree with it or because they do not understand it, that encounter this force in its most violent form. In other words, whoever speaks on behalf of rationality need only flex its strength against those who do not *automatically* recognize it,

and therefore *automatically* comply to its reasons. I say automatically because even the humanist act of educating someone is a form of showing strength—that is, demonstrating that there is a strong reason for something to be the case.

Understanding cuts deeper than merely recognizing the rationale of something. One can recognize the force a prescription has and not accept it: for instance, when one disagrees with a prohibition but recognizes that this law exists and recognizes what a law is. One understands that laws demand obedience, even if one does not obey it. In this context, one is aware of the validity of its force. The investigation into stupidity is then concerned with the situation where one does understand this prescriptive force of reason. Returning to the previous example of a law, if one does not understand a law, one cannot recognize it, but its force is extended regardless. In this last context, we could say, this occurs with even more legitimacy because it becomes even more necessary to maintain order. As in the previous example of education, one might disagree with the law but still recognize its validity after being shown its rationale. In this circumstance, one would merely not *automatically* understand the law but would be *made* to understand it. But if one does not understand it, law is just force

The argument for stupidity will therefore offer a radical rejection of authority since it sees this as the only appropriate response to the issues facing us today. The text will frame this by deconstructing what it identifies as a transparent, self-evident political logic of governance by intelligence, reason, and optimality. In the past stupidity was the unreason of the savages or barbarians, and in the neoliberal age of inclusion and tolerance, stupidity serves as a legitimate mechanism of exclusion under a meritocratic discourse. My argument is that there is a common logic between these two iterations and therefore it is not enough to challenge definitions of stupidity without challenging the political structure that relies on its marginalization.

I argue then that stupidity serves as a locus for the obstruction of contemporary political logic. To this extent the investigation offers an inversion to the traditional denunciation of stupidity. Rather than denounce the fear of this obstruction as incorrect, discriminatory, or deviant—as something inconsistent with contemporary worldviews—the thesis offered here will both reinforce the danger stupidity offers and present it as the reason for its adoption. In essence, rather than correct or remediate the discriminatory attitudes that develop from the categorization of stupidity, the argument here will state that dominant order is correct in

its 'fear' of stupidity since stupidity offers a real threat to the logic of domination. Therefore, if one desires to confront domination, one should be stupid. This will be performed in a twofold manner: (1) using the notion of stupidity to demonstrate the consistency between logics of oppression in the past and in the present; (2) showing that stupidity offers an alternative to this model since it challenges something fundamental in it.

### **Methodology: How does one talk about stupidity?**

Traditional scholarly discourse tends to focus on intelligence, rationality, and the pursuit of knowledge. Hence, the study of stupidity presents a unique challenge, both methodologically and conceptually. Stupidity is an unconventional topic and a defense of it even more so. Musil's short lecture on stupidity is helpful as an initial engagement with the question stupidity:

[...] 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! (Musil 1995, 270)

Musil's statement illuminates a central tension in the investigation: how is it possible to approach stupidity in a serious way? That is, how does one talk about stupidity without diminishing or undermining its significance by turning it into a mere object of reason? What Musil is insinuating is that stupidity is something that cannot be approached both in the sense that it is ungraspable but also in that it is a dangerous object since it subverts those who engage with it. In this manner, any direct investigation into stupidity undermines itself and therefore one must resort to indirect encounters with it. In the investigation into stupidity here, this will be done by drawing parallels between theoretical philosophical engagements with stupidity and literary figures. From this encounter, the investigation will extrapolate possible defying elements of stupidity. It is also important to point out that this subversive power of stupidity highlighted by Musil is the central element this investigation aims to pinpoint. To this extent, this methodological difficulty where the authority of the argument is undermined by its affirmation is an element to be welcomed.

The method by which I write is directly connected to the arguments I am trying to make. It emerges from the presupposition that its arguments do not need

to be definitive. Instead, they strive to initiate a reflection. It does not hold to the authoritative presupposition that if its points are presented in a clear and convincing manner—that given a reasonable exposition of the thesis—its readers should agree with its arguments. It takes a step back to question the axiomatic expectation that achieving the agreement of its reader is the goal of philosophical endeavors. The stupid suggestion being that philosophical texts are supposed to instigate thinking and not produce verdicts on a subject.<sup>2</sup> To this extent the text is to be taken as a sketch. The sketch is a non-definitive statement, it is tentative, hence offering no ultimate resolution. Werner Hamacher describes it as:

It is a preliminary work, a project, a first test of the possibilities of composition, of accentuation, and of the arrangements of lines of force, of surfaces, and of colors, often with one or more details treated more precisely—probing and soundings. But the sketch has its own structure that makes it independent of its function. It is not only preliminary work on, and the projection of, a fully elaborated work. It is not only a first "step," as art and text historians say, always fantasizing steps leading up and down. The art of the sketch is the art of *détachement*—of redemption (also from its function for a coming work); of the parting of water, of surfaces, of space; of the relinquishing of the self to a phenomenon; of probing into dangerous zones; the art of animated attention and so also of restraint. It allows double perspectives, double and triple accents, blurs, deletions, and the omission of parts that in other contexts would be indispensable. As such, the sketch is precisely what the "elaborated work" is not: it is a first attack with open fields of retreat. A mobile outline. Every stroke in the sketched field suggests that it could be otherwise. The art of contingency and the art of contact with otherness.

The sketch is the form of the opening of a form—hardly a form, merely disclosure of form. It is the beginning of a form, ad-formative, affirmative, where it touches upon mere possibilities of form, not fixed, not stabilized, hurriedly touched upon as when someone glances at another, accidentally or deliberately brushes against a dress or mentions a theme. (Hamacher 2020, 206)

The importance of referring to literary figures throughout the argument is first for its indirect engagement with stupidity. This is an attempt to navigate the aporia emerging from Musil's statement. This does not entail that literature provides a privileged engagement with reality, but it serves a specific purpose.

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<sup>2</sup> The term verdict is purposeful here: the goal is to not produce a judgement or definitive knowledge that can then engender a form of prescription. In what is perhaps a forced word-play I would say that that the aim in my project is 'not to dominate the subject' of stupidity.



Briefly, the appeal to literature emerges from the interest in constructing the possible via the fictional. Literature as a form of thinking has the power to transform that which is not the case into a possibility. This is particularly relevant to the project of stupidity given that one of the challenges presented by it, is the fact that there are no concrete examples of stupidity as it is framed here. There are no successful examples of stupidity because stupidity has not succeeded yet. Stupidity is constructed as the gesture that dismantles the government of reason. The argumentation will demonstrate that we live in a world governed by reason. Therefore, the implicit thesis that is being put forward with this argument is that stupidity has not yet been enacted but it could be. To this extent the use of literary figures comes to replace the absence of a radically different reality.

The particularities of literature as an object and its connections to politics cannot fully be developed in my upcoming investigation. There is no doubt that literature is an important channel to comment to access politics:

Every discussion on the subject of speech acts (relations between acts of language and truth, acts of language and intention, 'serious' and 'non-serious,' 'fictive' and 'non-fictive,' 'normal' and 'parasitic' language, philosophy and literature, linguistics and psychoanalysis, etc.) has politico-institutional stakes that we should no longer hide from ourselves. These concern the power or non-power of academic discourse, or of research discourse in general. (Derrida 1992, 15)

Even though there is something to be said about the politics of aesthetics, the aesthetics of politics and their relevance for an aesthetic approach to stupidity, the focus here is strictly on the political function of stupidity. I make this analytical decision while being aware that the political and the aesthetic are not distinguished spheres.<sup>3</sup>

The combination of both philosophical and literary engagements with stupidity allows for an argumentation that does not strive to justify itself. In direct terms, the position that is being put forward here is not one that strives to legitimize itself via an exposition of the reason stupidity is politically valid. Or only to the limited extent that it strives to show that stupidity is valid exclusively because it is unable to receive any validation and in that sense this gesture cannot be but a form of accidental or tentative justification. To this extent the argumentation here

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<sup>3</sup> See for example Gisèle Berkman's *L'effet Bartleby* (2011) for an extensive engagement with the way philosophers engaged with literary figure.

will not provide evidence for stupidity as it stands on trial at the court of reason. Stupidity is interesting as political posture because it is indefensible.

### **The obligation to be intelligent**

To illustrate what I refer to by intelligence, I will use Halpern and Mitchell's (2023) concept of smartness mandate. According to them, this is a new development owing to neoliberal and technological developments. In my engagement with intelligence, I will argue that despite the undeniable developments to forms of capitalism or colonialism, there is a persistent logic in the political imperatives of governing via rationality. This is the self-evident connection between the right or the best or the good options, and the imperative that it be implemented. My argument is that the assumption—that if the optimal is possible it must be desirable, which constitutes the smartness mandate—is not restricted to the context to which Halpern and Mitchell associate it. Instead, it has a wider applicability.

Halpern, Mitchell and Geoghen (Halpern, Geoghegan and Mitchell 2017, 107-109) state in their article that the smartness mandate is the belief that democracy and prosperity can be achieved via automated apolitical decision making. The imperative power of smartness emerges from the assumption that decision making can be 'infused with intelligence', to paraphrase the IBM executive's quote used in their argument (Halpern, Geoghegan and Mitchell 2017, 108). The central idea here is that the mandate's technocratic power, its transformation into a governing principle, emerges from the presupposition that the availability of the best option automatically entails the legitimacy of its implementation (Halpern, Geoghegan and Mitchell 2017, 109): "The smartness mandate is the demand, cast by its advocates as having the force and irresistibility of a law of nature..." (Halpern and Mitchell 2023, 251)

More importantly this is framed as mechanism of democratization rather than one of control. The option for smartness opposes the logic that prosperity is achieved exclusively via centralization and control. Instead, it states that decentralization, and the possible accidents or friction that might emerge from it, are the path to prosperity. There is a premise that the individual is 'dumb' but the collective cancels this 'dumbness', or in other words, the singular application of reason can be mistaken but the multiplicity of the repeated applications bends towards intelligence (Halpern, Geoghegan and Mitchell 2017, 117) (Halpern and

Mitchell 2023, 32). To this extent, crisis is not only normal but fundamental to the development of intelligence. Intelligence is flexible and adaptable; breaks are not only part of its mechanism, they are also inherent to the mandate's power via the promise that the next iteration will solve the issues of the previous. Control is replaced with management and reason is no longer associated to the ability to plan but is replaced by resilience (Halpern, Geoghegan and Mitchell 2017, 111). Smartness is not interested in the correct or the right, only in the best.

The mandate's mode of government entails that administration is not *essentially* needed, so it becomes even more fundamental because it is now the best form of government. It is not the outcome of some axiomatic posture but the result of pure rationality. The neoliberal government establish itself as the umpire who governs purely and exclusively out of necessity—it governs both necessarily in the sense that it is required and exclusively to the extent that it is necessary. Under this logic, government is not only a legitimate authority but a necessary one against anything that is not smart.

To this extent it becomes clear that the mandate does not represent an absence of mechanisms of control but instead an alternative mode of exerting dominance: rather than government being a form of heteronomous force, government becomes a mechanism of turning self-determination into obedience. It merely replaces the explicit external imposition 'what must happen' with a supposedly democratic 'what could be done' that amount fundamentally to the imposition of an equally powerful 'what should be done'. In the end, the mandate entails an equally normative prescription that one 'must be intelligent' while devolving the responsibility to the individual and to this extent this becomes an even more dangerous mechanism of domination.

As Deleuze states in *Thousand Plateaus*, this form of control is no longer connected to an external force but to the internal obligation. This internal obligation is what is being referred here as the obligation to be intelligent, which characterized the smartness mandate. According to Deleuze then the imperative to be rational and aware becomes a new form of control:

This is the paradox of the legislator-subject replacing the signifying despot: the more you obey the statements of the dominant reality, the more in command you are as subject of enunciation in mental reality, for in the end you are only obeying yourself! You are the one in command, in your capacity as a rational being. A new form of slavery is invented, namely, being slave to oneself, or to pure "reason," the Cogito. Is there anything more passional

than pure reason? Is there a colder, more extreme, more self-interested passion than the Cogito? (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, 130)

In so-called modern philosophy, and in the so-called modern or rational State, everything revolves around the legislator and the subject. The State must realize the distinction between the legislator and the subject under formal conditions permitting thought, for its part, to conceptualize their identity. Always obey. The more you obey, the more you will be master, for you will only be obeying pure reason, in other words yourself...Ever since philosophy assigned itself the role of ground it has been giving the established powers its blessing, and tracing its doctrine of faculties onto the organs of State power. Common sense, the unity of all the faculties at the center constituted by the Cogito, is the State consensus raised to the absolute. (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, 376)

My expansion of their configuration constructed so far is to link this analysis of neoliberalism to Federici's reading of the transition into capitalism. Federici's argument demonstrates that the notion of rationality and agency are not in any way objective and emerge exclusively within a disciplinary impetus. She argues that the opposition to magic is not located in feudalism but in the necessity of capitalism to root production in work disciplinary and obedience. To achieve that goal capitalism had to eradicate the possibility of magic and inoperative production on behalf of an account of agency that allowed for its mode of production: "Eradicating these practices was a necessary condition for the capitalist rationalization of work, since magic appeared as an illicit form of power and an instrument *to obtain what one wanted without work*, that is, a refusal of work in action." (Federici 2004, 142 [my emphasis]) which she then develops to state that "magic seemed a form of refusal of work, of insubordination, and an instrument of grass-roots resistance to power. The world had to be 'disenchanted' in order to be dominated" (Federici 2004, 145).

In Federici's understanding this is the logic behind the cartesian rationalism and its division of body and soul. The parallel here being that in the same manner that spirit governs the mechanic body, the invisible hand governs—via the dominant class—the mechanic masses in the factories. It is a mechanism of administration via and towards optimization.

Yet, we cannot fail to see the important contribution which their [Hobbes and Descartes] speculations on human nature gave to the emerging capitalist science of work. To pose the body as mechanical matter, void of any intrinsic teleology—the "occult virtues" attributed to it by both Natural Magic and the popular superstitions of the time — was to make intelligible

the possibility of subordinating it to a work process that increasingly relied on uniform and predictable forms of behaviour. (Federici 2004, 139)

As Federici points out, the cartesian *cogito* is not contingently connected to the witch hunt. This is not a just a new form of external imposition but more importantly it is the creation of a new mode of individuality (Federici 2004, 132). Federici, for example, highlights the way a new science of anatomy, and therefore of the individual body, saw the body as a machine in the same way that Descartes presents it as *res extensa*. The body or the mass operates as mechanism for the spirit or the productive energy. This framework opened the possibility that in the same way that the mind should control the body, reason should control the workers as they were mechanical part of the physical factory. As the body does not think, it requires bourgeois intelligence and calculability. It is not the renouncing of the irrational part, but its control aligned with the discourse that enables the control as a logic that acts on the bodies' behalf rather than against it: "Like the land, the body had to be cultivated and first of all broken up [...] It was not sufficient, then, to decide that in itself the body had no value. The body had to die so that labor-power could live" (Federici 2004, 118).

Halpern, Mitchell and Geoghen (2017) conclude their article by stating that the critique of smartness requires a different form of thinking since changing what intelligence entails and the way to implement is it way to preserving its dominance. To this challenge, the article here offers the idea of stupidity.

### **Figures of Stupidity**

The argument will return to several central figures to make its case. It will draw parallels between its main figure, the worst student in *Abraham*, and other literary figures to delineate what it means with the notion of stupidity. The central claim is that stupidity is a form of desubjectification: an act that dismantles the government of one's existence.

The child from Anderson's 1837 story "The Emperor's New Clothes" serves as an initial station to navigate the meaning of stupidity. In the tale, the emperor orders new clothes from a group of scammers. Instead of sewing the ruler new clothes, they claim to have used a magic fabric that is only perceivable by the intelligent. Out of fear of being perceived as stupid, the emperor and all their court behave as if they were able to see the fabric. This is the same reaction of the general

population when the emperor parades his 'new robe'. This consensus is broken only by a child who, shocked to see the ruler naked, shouts: "But he has nothing at all on!" (Andersen 1913, 236)

The element of stupidity that will be relevant in this case is the perception that the interruption of the child is not a sudden revelation that challenges the already established knowledge. Everybody knew the emperor was naked including the emperor himself. It is not the introduction of a new element but merely the affirmation of reality regardless of its consequences. In this case, one finds our reality being supported by a trivial pretense that everything is working or could work even when the blatant and evident truth, or to use a pun that I will return to, the naked truth is that something central is problematic. Still, intelligence demands that we be realistic and work through rather than abandon the stability purchased by this pretense since there is no actual gain in realizing the emperor is naked. In fact, everybody already knew it. Only an idiot would state the truth rather than hold to such a silly lie—only an idiot would jeopardize stability in exchange for nothing. Stupidity will be constructed as this fundamentally powerless gesture and its ability to enact change. Stupidity will then be an act that accomplish nothing even though it accomplishes its maximal outcome.

The investigation into stupidity will highlight how this tale demonstrates the counter-intuitive conclusion that the knowledge, awareness, or the accurate delineation of reality are not sufficient to impact our condition. Contrarily to what can be commonly believed, the affirmation of truth appears to have no consequences. To this extent, the tale helps demonstrate that truth, as appropriate knowledge, is not sufficient to impact reality. This is particularly relevant in a context of hyperbolic transparency of information or one that supposedly strives for it. As Deleuze (1992, 7) explores in his *Postscript on the Societies of Control*, the new politics of control does not respond to frontal confrontation. The disruption of it therefore cannot rely on direct violence like terrorism or the exposing some 'hidden' truth of reality, i.e., informing. As in the tale, stupidity aims to demonstrate that the denunciatory power of affirming truths has no consequences regardless of its correctness. As it was developed, it can even be counter-productive in cases where a supposedly critical posture adopts the authoritative posture of having to impose (either violently or via education) its truth based on the affirmation that others are too stupid to accept it.

This conclusion can be further sharpened in parallel to a second tale where Lie deceives Truth into entering a well only to run away with its clothes. Lie leaves

Truth horrifically naked and unable to show itself due to it being fully exposed. This tale seems to be based on aphorisms by Democritus, but it does not have an official source. It is part of folklore and was most famously the object of a painting by Jean-Léon Gérôme. The painting is interesting because it portrays a revengeful and weaponized truth coming out of the well. In the image, truth is wielding a whip which suggests the constellation between punishment, control, and education that is central to the deconstruction of the link between reason and force. Additionally, the painting is associated with the Dreyfus affair, whereby a French Jewish officer was wrongly accused of treason due to antisemitic motives. In this circumstance, similarly to what is denoted as a current democratic backslide, progressive and tolerant discourses were confronted with underlying oppressive and discriminatory structures. Gérôme's painting refers to an authority of truth and its possible weaponization as a response to the discriminatory outcomes of Lie's deceitfulness.

The invitation proposed here offers a different employment of the tale. It is to think of stupidity as a possible form of presenting this unbearably naked truth we live in without weaponizing it. Rather than perceiving truth as a denunciation or an informative presentation, stupidity is a form of enacting this truth. Rather than opt for new clothing, i.e., an indirect method of exposing truth or making it more palatable (as if it was too brutish for our feeble minds), stupidity would be the option of gazing directly into truth. The first option presupposes that only the few can see the naked truth, but it needs to be clothed to be exposed. Or alternatively, that the naked truth hides from us, so we need mediation or patience for it to approach us. The second option, the stupid one, makes truth vulgar and inconvenient. It unashamedly exposed itself to us and it is our politeness and manners that stops us from gazing straight at it. In this account, truth is indecent, but we cannot help but be civilized. We all see that the emperor is naked, but we also know that if we behave as such, order will not be upheld.

This encounter with truth as an enactment, and not just as a statement, will be associated with the stupid act of the student in Kafka's short story *Abraham*. It was published posthumously in 1961 by Nahum Glazer in a collection entitled *Parables and Paradoxes*. In the story, the worst student mishears their name when an award was being delivered to the best student:

It is as if, at the end of the year, when the best student was solemnly about to receive a prize, the worst student rose in the expectant stillness and came forward from his dirty desk in the last row because he had made a mistake of hearing, and the whole class burst out laughing. And perhaps he had

made no mistake at all, his name really was called, it having been the teacher's intention to make the rewarding of the best student at the same time a punishment for the worst one. (Kafka 1961, 41)

In the argumentation that will be developed, the student's gesture will represent the dismantling of their subjectification. The condition of their existence is unsettled in their act: the contingency of a meritocratic social hierarchy and the disciplinary subjectification of abiding to it crumble when the student gets up to take the award. In this way, the character demonstrates the total lack of self-awareness, a form of non-conscience of oneself, that will be constructed as stupidity.<sup>4</sup>

A central point of interest for the construction of the notion of stupidity is the fact the Kafkian student does not wish to avoid or escape authority. It does not offer a tangential or marginal order to the one being imposed on them. In their act of receiving the award, the act of not understanding the conditions and requirements for participation, the student walks through the harmonious administration of their life and dismantles its logic. Interestingly for the conceptualization of stupidity: not by correcting it via a demonstration of their worthiness according to those standards or the injustice of upholding unfair and arbitrary conditions, but by failing to uphold it to such a deeper extent that it crumbles. It also reproduces the same lack of motivation or end goal that characterized the child's intervention that the emperor was naked. The student's gesture simply defies order without establishing or offering an alternative. The student will serve as an emblematic figure of stupidity because it enacts what the reflection on stupidity that is being proposed here aims to achieve: their act does not dispute or challenge the norm; it turns the norm inconsequential.

This is consistent with Musil definition of stupidity as a form of power of the impotent. He claims that:

[...] 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. If one were therefore looking for the most general notion of wisdom<sup>5</sup>, 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;" (Musil 1995, 276)

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<sup>4</sup> For an alternative account of the figure, see Roland Breeur (2015 and 2019) or Avital Ronell (2002). They make a stronger link between the student and Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot* than the one in the construction here.

<sup>5</sup> The English text has 'stupidity' rather than wisdom. I changed it to 'intelligent', which is the appropriate translation of the original 'Klugheit'.



Elaborating on his previous statement that "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." (Musil 1995, 273). In Musil's account, stupidity is unshakably triumphant in its failing potential: it may not amount to anything as it is defined as the 'diminution of achievement, 'but it disassembles intelligence since, as it was analyzed previously, one cannot grasp it without falling prey to it.

This disruptive power of stupidity can be linked to Federici's account of how the repression of magic was necessary for the development of capitalism. In this case one can see how despite being conceived as an irrational and inferior worldview, the violent repression and fear of the 'diminution of achievements ' represented by magic was necessary for modern development.

The character from *Abraham* can then be placed in parallel to two other Kafkian students, who help sharpen the aim of the stupid student figure. In *The New Attorney* (1961) and in *Amerika* (1996), Kafka describes students who study infinitely and aimlessly. Bucephalus in *The New Attorney* studies law but does not practice it and the student in *Amerika* postpones the completion of his studies indefinitely. The first story concerns Alexander of Macedonia's horse, which in the absence of his master or a function takes to 'aimlessly turning the pages of our old books'. In the second, the student postpones sleeping and drinks coffee endlessly to dedicate themselves to the studying. Despite stating that his studies would finish, the character engages in perpetual study.

Those attitudes are ones that, similarly to the student in *Abraham*, challenge the meritocratic approach to knowledge since in studying for no direct purpose, knowledge becomes inherently unproductive and therefore invalid as a mechanism of hierarchization. Their act turns studying into an empty gesture rather than one that is directed at something. This self-defeating or pointless element will be a central factor in the future definition of stupidity. To this extent, both Bucephalus and the student in *Amerika* are like the worst student in *Abraham* since the worst student also goes to school for nothing. More importantly, their stupidity is not a refusal of knowledge, studying, or thinking, it is rendering those things unproductive.

One could think of those characters in parallel to the figure of Socrates who, despite learning and becoming more knowledgeable, remains as wise as he

originally was. Socrates is famously unable to become wiser despite constantly learning. One might simplistically understand the dialogues as Socrates' refusal or dismissal of the knowledge transmitted to him. What is described is much richer in the sense that Socrates does not refuse the knowledge that is given to him, but still, he never becomes any wiser than he was at the beginning of the conversation. He can grasp the reasons that are being offered to him, but no reason proves to be a satisfying reason or engender any wisdom in him. Despite learning, i.e., acquiring knowledge, one could say he remains unshakably stupid. More interestingly, it is precisely his stupidity that allows him to think.

Still, unlike the student from Abraham, the two other students are not challenging the domination, they are merely avoiding it or postponing it indefinitely. Whereas the stupid student does not escape authority, in fact they do the very stupid act of confronting it, the two other students are merely suspending its authority.

In this manner it is important for the development of the notion of stupidity that one distinguishes it from accounts of stupidity that are not confrontational. For example, associating stupidity to a form of innocence or naivete. Here one can take Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot* published in 1868-1869 and Hašek's *The Good Soldier Schweik* published between 1921 and 1923 as paradigmatic examples. The main character of the first story is prince Myshkin. Under the auspice of his title, the prince is welcomed in aristocracy and navigates their social milieu. These interactions are often charged with tension due to the prince's faux pas. Despite an initial tolerance and accommodations by those who interact with him, the prince constantly pushes the boundaries of what is acceptable so that what is initially perceived as innocence becomes tenser as the story develops. The second story concerns a soldier who insists on being sent to war despite all barriers put in his way. For example, he is arrested, judged unfit to serve, gets in trouble with his superior, etc. The character is described as childlike, obedient and having a blissful smile. He constantly returns to the formula "Beg to report, sir,..." (Hašek 1930, *passim*) in order to state that he performed the task that was assigned to him with precision—which sometimes produces a counterproductive outcome.

Despite presenting an inconvenience to hegemonic order, this form of stupidity is not the one that will be developed here since it represents a Candide-like optimism that constantly reiterates its trust in what is presented and therefore does not exemplify the same degree of resistance as the figures mentioned before. Both

Schweik and Myshkin are unhappy figures of misfortune who provoke pity but also doubt, suspicion, irritation and, should the occasion arise, punishment. They embody the political-ontological role stupidity takes here. Still, the outcome of their intervention is at best a sarcastic denunciation of certain norms and at worst the transformation of those figures into saint-like beacons of purity and the treatment they receive as a moralistic denunciation of worldly corruption. Despite serving as a figure of otherness that creates disturbance and often become the receptacle of guilt or blame, those are not figures that fight back and offer an alternative. Their attitude does not represent a response to the order of intelligence that surrounds them and in their non-response, they reinforce a certain moralism that makes their stupidity acceptable as saint-like figures rather than abject figures.

In direct opposition to the Kafkian student, both Schweik and Myshkin follow orders and social norms in their most literal sense. They fail to detect the nuance and unwritten norms regulating the interactions they find themselves in. The disruption they create does not emerge from a misunderstanding of the norms but rather from its hyperbolic application. They demonstrate a blind and uncritical belief in what is presented to them or demanded of them. To this extent, they also serve as the negative or opposite figure of the child who shouts that the emperor is naked. The attitude put forward by those characters is a conservative one, where they insist on seeing the emperor's clothes even when the emperor has admitted to being naked.

In a similar manner Bartleby's response from Hermann Melville's short story from 1853 *Bartleby, the scrivener* that he "would prefer not to" (Melville 2002, *passim*) can also be seen as a stupid attitude, but the construction here will argue that it remains an insufficiently stupid attitude for the framing proposed by my investigation. This is the story of a scrivener who despite having the skill and the capacity to perform his duties, responds with the dubious formulation—to the surprise of his superior—when asked to fulfil a task. The story then develops to the point where Bartleby ceases to perform all activities and ends up in prison. In giving this response, the character neutralizes the governability that is being operated towards him, but it does nothing beyond that. In this manner, this response resembles the previous two, Schweik and Myshkin, in the way it absorbs what is being imposed on him. Bartleby's 'I would prefer not to' does not generate the same martyrdom that turns him into a saint-like figure since he demonstrates some understanding and agency in his response, instead of the innocence of the other

two. Still, even if Bartleby is not innocent, he is also not guilty since he has not done anything. To same extent, his demise is one of passivity and acceptance rather than one of resistance. Unlike the student in *Abraham* and the child that shouts, Bartleby does not do anything.

While Bartleby can be compared to a black hole that fully absorbs the norms that are directed at him, the student in *Abraham* does not allow for its existence and therefore it is a better example for the ungovernability that will characterize stupidity. In the first scenario, force that is directed at Bartleby is neutralized but does not cease to exist. Each specific iteration of an order is neutralized by his response, but his response does not render the possibility of an order taking place inexistent. Kafka's student makes the whole situation under which they were supposedly subjected inexistent. When they stand to get the award, the ceremony turns pointless. There is no longer any awards or merits to be distributed. The order that those things would establish can no longer be upheld since the student's response enacts a form of radical equality: the fact that any student could have gotten up. What was already evident, becomes enacted.

For my case these figures will serve as concrete examples of what *could be* a form of political action. In an act of defiance against the obvious separation between fictional entities and real ones, the argument here stupidly takes the fictional to be real or at the very least possibly real. If one were to state against my position, that in real life a person who like the student in Kafka's *Abraham* just walks into a room and takes something will not dismantle the regime of power because they will be reprehended, this would to some extent reinforce the motivation for my investigation since it would evidence the fragility of power constructed previously, where force is constantly required to (re)establish its dominance.

Concretely, the perception that order can be re-established by force—if we were to try to mimic the student and we are consequently put back in our place—is what motivates the reflection into stupidity. The important element that stupidity allows us to see is that this re-engendering requires the permanent intervention of power and therefore it allows us to question why we constantly accept its legitimacy. This is not trivial since it shows that order is always fragile and contingent: we know we could do it, so the question is: what stops us every time? Or how and why is this force of reason so dominant, given that we are aware of its fragility? Stupidity is therefore an invitation to construct a posture where the justifications for reason's dominance are always rejected.

### The philosophy of stupidity

This problematic entanglement between reason and force can be fruitfully connected to Rancière's (Rancière 1999, 44-46) account of the 'do you understand?' interpellation. According to him, this is not a legitimate question but a rhetorical device of submission where the enunciator assumes the receiver's capacity to understand, or else they would not be explaining anything. So, what is made to be understood is the submissive position of the receiver. The presupposition of equality underlies the imposition of inequality: the factual equality that both enunciator and listener share the capacity to understand is undermined by the imposition of a common sense of inequality—the common understanding that one is superior to the other.

Hence the underlying logic sustaining the interpellation's imperative role in politics is not whether the content of the order was comprehended since that is always already given within the question. The sole purpose of the questioning is to demonstrate the sovereign power by 'checking 'whether the sovereignty of the enunciator was made known. Or as Derrida puts it: "knowing how to cause fear, knowing how to terrorize by making known." (Derrida 2011, 39). The interpellation 'do you want understand?' would be better formulated as 'Do you understand that you *must* understand since it is me who determines what makes sense?'.

The student in *Abraham* does not understand in a profound manner. The 'misunderstanding 'of stupidity relevant is not one of not understanding the content of the order but rather one of not understanding the smartness mandate as a mandate. It might perfectly comprehend the explanations for socio-economic policies or policies of an institution or labor agreements. One might even understand the impeccable internal logic under which they operate, and still, nevertheless not understand them as reason for acting a certain way—i.e., not accept its imposition as a governing order. As Derrida puts it: "Bêtise [stupidity] is always a way of not comprehending, not of not explaining to others or oneself, but of not comprehending" (Derrida 2011, 149)

Here it is interesting to turn to Deleuze's definition of information:

And what is information? It is not very complicated; everyone knows what it is. Information is a set of imperatives, order-words. When you are informed, you are told what you are supposed to believe. In other words, informing means causing an order-word to circulate. Police declarations are appropriately called communiqués. Information is communicated to us,

that is, they tell us what we are supposed to be ready to believe, or be required to, or be held to believe. And not even believe, but pretend like we believe since we are not asked to believe but to behave as if we did. That's what information is, communication, and outside these order-words and their transmission, there is no communication, no information. This is the same thing as saying that information is exactly the system of control. (Deleuze 1987)

To this extent, one could argue that the student's gesture challenges the obligation to be informed implicit in the announcement of the award. The student hears it and understands it in terms of content, but they are not informed by it in the sense that Deleuze is delineating. Moreover, Deleuze concludes his reflection on information by stating that "And it's true, I'm stating platitudes, this is obvious. It's obvious, except that it particularly concerns us all today." (Deleuze 1987) therefore, highlighting the same limitation exposed via the reflection on the denunciatory power of truth. As it was explored, the stupid student is not a form of denunciation. Therefore, it responds to what 'concerns us all today' by not appealing to information against a regime of information.

To sharpen this conceptualization, this stupid act can be understood as an affirmative act as it was constructed by Werner Hamacher's text on Walter Benjamin. According to Hamacher (1993), if one understands violence that preserves or imposes a law as a performative act that relies on the continuation of a specific model, then a disruptive act of the sort that Benjamin (2021) is attempting to articulate should be denoted as "an absolute *imperformative*"<sup>6</sup> or an "*affirmative* political event, as *depositive*, as a political *a-thesis*" (Hamacher 1993, 115). It is a non-positional, one that destitute or deposes rather than institute or impose (Hamacher 1993, 125): "afformance 'is' the event of forming, itself formless, to which all forms and all performative acts remain exposed." (Hamacher 1993, 128)

There is a dynamic that is unexplored by Hamacher but emerges from his points considering the previous arguments elaborated in this thesis: only the performative can fail whereas the affirmative cannot since it does not fit into a logic of means to an end. While hegemonic violence and order is grounded on a measurement, on its ability to successfully perform, destitutive violence is always already a 'failure' since there is no absolute new formation it strives to accomplish. The act of destitution performed by the student establishes only the constant lack

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<sup>6</sup> Inoperative to use to the previous conceptual framework

of any foundation for the order that is trying to be established. The award ceremony aims to engender an order and by disrupting its performance, the student stops it from taking place smoothly. The stupidity of the student shows the dynamic where hegemonic violence never succeeds because it needs to constantly perform itself. Whereas the affirmative act, on the other hand, never fails because it never aimed to fulfil anything.

Hamacher's reading of Benjamin's example of the proletarian general strike illustrates that. According to him the strike does so by articulating nothing—the (stupid or trivial) possibility that "nothing happens, no work is done, nothing is produced, and nothing is planned or projected" (Hamacher 1993, 120). Hamacher highlights that this entails a subversion of the meaning of politics: the replacement of the idea that politics concerns the organization or systematization of life for the idea of politics as an intervention—we do politics, but we cannot have politics:

Benjamin's sketch of a politics of pure means is a theory not of positing, producing and presenting, not of forming and transforming action, but a theory of the *abstention* from action; it is, if you will, a theory of the transcendental strike which exposes the conditions of historical action, suspends its previous forms, and inaugurates another history no longer dominated by forms of positing and work, by forms of presentation and production, and no longer by forms. A strike, then, that even disrupts the form of the transcendental, the form of pure paradigmatic forms themselves, and thus the possibility of its cognition. The decision reached by pure, critical violence cannot be made by cognitive means. The decision eludes judgement. Critique, as the advocate of historical justice, must present the possibility as well as the structural unavoidability of the strike and must take part in the strike in such a way that critique is itself 'striking' (*schlagend*). [...] Affirmatives can have unforeseen effects, precisely in so far as they 'strike' the cognition directed toward them with powerlessness. [...] The strike is not a matter of theory; it can be the object neither of prognoses nor of programmes; it belongs to the order of events that break through the continuum of history, as they do the commensurability of its cognition. (Hamacher 1993, 125 [italics in the original])

He elaborates on the importance of the counter-cognitive element of defiance by stating that: "The restriction of cognition to mythical or thetic violence is not a limitation which applies merely to a particular realm of cognitive objects, but a structural limitation on cognition itself: cognition is itself essentially thetic"

(Hamacher 1993, 136n46). Like in Musil's definition of stupidity, Hamacher argues that: "Whoever speaks of the strike cannot be sure that he is not already affected by it, that he is not already participating in it." (Hamacher 1993, 125)

Linking back to Kafka's *Abraham*, one can connect his taking of that which 'does not belong to him' with Hamacher's definition of the affirmative act as:

*Affirmation* thus no longer means only dethronement, or deposition of what has been posited. Such deposition is possible only if there 'is' an area of the unposited. Accordingly, *affirmation* means also *exposing* to the unposited, giving what cannot become a gift, an event of formation which is not exhaustible by any form." (Hamacher 1993, 131)

The student receives that which that which cannot be given to them in an act that evades cognition in a twofold manner: it is both an unthinkable act and an act that challenges the cognitive order of merit. In this manner, the meaning of student's act can be further elucidated via Agamben's concept of profanation:

It [profanation] is not disbelief and indifference toward the divine, therefore, that stand in opposition to religion, but "negligence," that is, a behavior that is free and "distracted" (that is to say, released from the *religio* of norms) before things and their use, before forms of separation and their meaning. To profane means to open the possibility of a special form of negligence, which ignores separation or, rather, puts it to a particular use. (Agamben 2007, 75)

It is important to emphasize that previously on that same page Agamben highlights that the term *religio* (and therefore religion) etymologically is not a bond that connects people but rather a norm or discipline that separates them. Those two options are not self-cancelling: the bond that establishes the common also regulates how it is to be shared among the particulars. Unless one is interested in the 'true' etymological source, one could say that in disrupting *religio* the profanation enacted by the student disrupts both.

## Conclusion

The student does not burn the school and negate it absolutely, they disrupt it. The education system does not meltdown as if being exposed to acid at the second the student touches the award neither is their walk to the podium dramatic. In fact, that is precisely the point raised, we can all live under this equality of intelligence, this unconditional anarchy where merit plays no role. The argument here is that largely the catastrophic effect—in the sense of the original etymological root, i.e.,



a life changing turn of events—of abolishing capitalism is much milder than the catastrophic consequence, in the sense of a cataclysmic life destroying chaos, of upholding it.

Even if we can imagine another ending to the story where the student is put back in their place, the lesson is that they can only be returned there but, in their act, they are no longer the subject they were supposed to be. Their action has established the obvious fact that anyone could have taken the prize. To this extent, unlike the powerless condition of being under control, stupidity is the powerlessness condition of the moment after the king's head has been guillotined or the czar is hanging and there is nothing else one can do.

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