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TWO MODES OF NON-THINKING. ON THE DIALECTIC STUPIDITY-THINKING AND THE PUBLIC DUTY TO THINK

LAVINIA MARIN

Abstract. This article brings forth a new perspective concerning the relation between stupidity and thinking by proposing to conceptualise the state of non-thinking in two different ways, situated at the opposite ends of the spectrum of thinking. Two conceptualisations of stupidity are discussed, one critical which follows a French line of continental thinkers, and the other one which will be called educational or ascetic, following the work of Agamben. The critical approach is conceptualised in terms of seriality of thinking, or thinking captured by an apparatus, whereas the ascetic-educational approach is discussed by tracing the links between studying and stupidity. Both accounts assume that stupidity as non-thinking is a condition for thinking, either placed before thinking emerges or as an after-thought. However, the political implications concerning the role of philosophy in the public realm are divergent: for the critical approach, the task of the philosopher is to criticise the world, whereas for the ascetic approach, the task is to work on one's own self and hope that the world will be changed through thinking. The wider aim of this article is to contribute to the debate concerning the public role of the intellectual starting from the assumption that there is a duty to think publicly and then clarifying what this duty entails in relation to the self and the others.

Keywords: thinking, stupidity, apparatus, seriality, Deleuze, Agamben, criticality, impotentiality.

Motto: "Then alas, Alcibiades, what a misfortune you are suffering! I shrink from naming it, but nevertheless, since we are alone, let me speak. For you are living with stupidity, best one, to the extreme (...) and because of this you dart into politics before being educated."

(Plato, Alcibiades I, 118b)

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INTRODUCTION

Notwithstanding several famous exceptions such as Plato's *Alcibiades I*, or Erasmus's *In Praise of Folly (Stultitiae Laus)*, stupidity in philosophy has been a rather marginal concern for a very long time. This situation changed during the 19th century¹ when stupidity began to be problematized more thoroughly through the works of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, while in the 20th century the topic became even more developed. However, only in the last years stupidity became a more visible concern through the emergence of the public debates concerning the post-truth. If post-truth is about a partisan interpretation of facts, regardless of their nuances or complexities which turns facts into means for manipulation², then this description resembles strikingly the conceptualisation of stupidity as "an aptitude for wrong judgment, a defect in judgement, an inability to judge"³ which makes the distinction between error and truth irrelevant. The recent debates about the post-truth do not use the concept of stupidity, however, this article will argue that we need first to understand the particular mechanism of stupidity in order to understand the particular defeat of thinking in the age of post-truth.

In his book *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze remarked in a rather provocative manner that we need stupidity to begin thinking, because thinking is based on the faculty "of being able to see stupidity and no longer tolerate it"⁴. Deleuze had claimed that the exercise of philosophy is founded on a gesture of violence against stupidity, as „this most pitiful faculty also becomes the royal faculty when it animates philosophy"⁵. Deleuze's approach to stupidity was based on a negative assumption: stupidity is what makes us think, yet it cannot be described because stupidity is a "transcendent limit"⁶ of our own thinking; we cannot think our own stupidity while we are experiencing it. If stupidity is a limit for thinking, then what can stupidity show about what makes us think – philosophically or not? This article is concerned with clarifying the relation between stupidity and thinking in order to open a path for analysing the particular role that stupidity plays in the public life and, through this, to clarify the public role of the intellectual. If our age is an age of public stupidity as the age of post-truth, what is the role of the public intellectual or of the thinker? What can public thinking accomplish in this environment saturated with ideas which need no justification? The question of stupidity in a political or

¹ Isabelle Stengers, "Thinking with Deleuze and Whitehead: a Double Test," in *Deleuze, Whitehead, Bergson: Rhizomatic connections*, ed. Keith A. Robinson (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire [England], New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), p. 34.

² Maarten Simons, "Manipulation or study: some hesitations about post-truth politics," *IJHE Bildungsgeschichte* 7, no. 2 (2017): 240.

³ Jacques Derrida, *The beast and the sovereign: (Geoffrey Bennington, Transl.)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 204.

⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 152.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

public setting might give an indication on how to re-posit the problem of the philosopher's duty towards one's own city, the same problem which Socrates had debated with many of his interlocutors, including Alcibiades, the politician „wedded with stupidity”⁷.

Before describing the major philosophical approaches to stupidity, it must be clarified that this article is not concerned with stupidity as a psychological or a character trait. It is not assumed that some people are naturally stupid therefore unable to escape it. Instead, stupidity is approached as a mental state which, just like thinking, may occur to anyone. If anyone can think, then anyone can experience moments of stupidity. Stupidity is not taken here as the opposite of intelligence, but of thinking. If stupidity is fundamentally the un-thinking, or the refusal to think, as Deleuze⁸ had put it, it would seem that thinking needs stupidity to emerge against the background of stupidity. While in common language stupidity is an insult, this article will assume a theoretical approach which aims to bypass the common connotations of the word, while accepting that a certain negative connotation for stupidity remains ingrained no matter how much one tries to overcome the common usage of the word.

PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACHES TO STUPIDITY

Throughout the history of philosophy, there have been several attempts to conceptualise and describe stupidity. This article will be focused on the 20th and 21st century investigations concerning stupidity as a philosophical issue while bypassing the 19th century. In the previous century, a decidedly French line of thinkers such as Sartre, Deleuze, Derrida, Stengers took up this challenge; these thinkers do not form a line of thought, yet they share a common starting point in their analysis given by the etymology of the French word for stupidity, namely *bêtise*. A different approach has been proposed by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben who theorised the relation between thinking and studying also starting from etymological considerations, but this time from the Latin form of the word, *stupiditas*; this approach has been developed later by the American philosopher Tyson Lewis. These two approaches diverge on more than the etymological issue, but this will be used as a preliminary starting point to make the distinction visible. These two lines of thinking about stupidity will be used in this article in an attempt to articulate the relation between thinking and stupidity.

When trying to conceptualise stupidity, the major problem comes from the difficulty to describe it. This is because stupidity is not a mere absence of thinking, rather a thinking gone wrong in a particular way. A second difficulty comes from

⁷ Plato, *Alcibiades: Plato in Twelve Volumes*, 8 vols. (London: Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1955), translated by W.R.M. Lamb, p. 118b.

⁸ Deleuze, *Difference and repetition*, p. 155.

the temptation to assert that certain statements are stupid tout-court, which might lead the reader to the conclusion that stupidity lies in the content of the sentences, hence that stupidity might be a matter of epistemic error which could be solved through the distinction truth / falsehood. However, as shown by Deleuze, one can be stupid about true sentences just as well as about false sentences, which implies that logic cannot save us from our own stupidity.

Deleuze asserts that there is a fundamental distinction between stupidity, error, and malevolence or baseness. Stupidity is neither error nor evil doing, yet it works together with these two, forming three distinct ways of humiliating thought, three “misadventures” of thinking: “the terrible Trinity of madness, stupidity and malevolence can no more be reduced to error than they can be reduced to any form of the same”⁹. Errors are easy to detect and pose no real epistemic problem, hence, if stupidity could be reduced to merely error, we would only need to train people better in logics and we would be immune from stupidity. However, stupidity often consists of taking a simple truth and making it, through repetition, a stupidity: „In truth, as in error, stupid thought only discovers the most base – base errors and base truths that translate the triumph of the slave, the reign of petty values or the power of an established order”¹⁰. Thus, stupidity asserts itself by the serialisation of truth or error, a way of repeating the same with an almost mechanical insistence. Stupidity would then not be mere un-thinking but thinking in the same way all the time. In the next section, we will attempt frame stupidity by using two unrelated concepts: the animality of thinking and the seriality perpetrated by an apparatus.

DE LA BÊTISE OR THE ANIMALITY OF THINKING

French philosophers have approached stupidity starting from the roots of the word *bêtise*, which comes from the word *bête* meaning ‘foolish’ which, in its turn, comes from the Old French word *beste*, derived from the Latin word *bestia*¹¹ which means animal or beast. This etymological route points to a certain animal background of stupidity which has been conceptualised in different ways by several thinkers. One of the first to discuss the link between stupidity and animality was Deleuze. Stupidity appears as laziness, the natural tendency to preserve energy by doing the least effort possible. We do not think by nature, we need to be pushed into thinking. Deleuze brings forth the example of the school pupils whose homework are filled with little stupidities:

“Teachers already know that errors or falsehoods are rarely found in homework (except in those exercises where a fixed result must be produced, or

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and philosophy*, Athlone contemporary European thinkers (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 105.

¹¹ Source of etymology: <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/b%C3%AAt>

propositions must be translated one by one). Rather, what is more frequently found – and worse – are nonsensical sentences, remarks without interest or importance, banalities mistaken for profundities, ordinary 'points' confused with singular points, badly posed or distorted problems – all heavy with dangers, yet the fate of us all”¹².

Children are full of energy and restlessness, yet they do not apply this energy to thinking, rather they need to be made to think by their teachers. The impulse to think comes from the outside. Deleuze claims that there is a faculty of thinking, and then there is the event of thinking which happens when this faculty is forced to think at the power of n , exponentially. We need to be forced to think because we will not do it willingly, we are all like the school pupils, trying to pass a banality as some profound thought, making our lessons only because we have to. As adults, however, there is no teacher to make us think, stupidity itself gives us the impulse to think. Stupidity is one of “the forces capable of making thought something active”¹³ because thinking does not reach its true measure until it is stirred into thinking: “Thinking, like activity, is always a second power of thought, not the natural exercise of a faculty, but an extraordinary event in thought itself, for thought itself. Thinking is the n -th power of thought”¹⁴. Stupidity, in other words, is that essential impulse which provokes the faculty of thinking into thinking at its n -th power. There is a capacity to think, and this needs to be provoked. Stupidity would then be a way of reaching a full potential of thinking, by reacting to it. By reacting to stupidity, we react to our own laziness and animality, overcoming them. The relation thinking-stupidity in Deleuze needs to be understood as a dialectic of violence: stupidity hurts thinking which emerges empowered in an attempt to crush stupidity, while a circle of violence perpetuates itself.

However, stupidity is not merely a state of non-thinking characteristic of the animal. Rather, it is a particularly lazy way of thinking, a thinking which refuses to rise to the n -th power, and which remains in the realm of the obvious and the trivial. This is why a second key concept for understanding stupidity is that of seriality, a concept to which the philosophers of stupidity keep coming back again and again. The issue of the seriality of thinking was taken up also by Derrida and Stengers, both inspired by Deleuze.

One such instance of seriality is presented by Derrida who, in *The Beast and the Sovereign*, comments on Deleuze’s discussion of *la bêtise*, starting again from the distinction error – stupidity. Derrida agrees with Deleuze that “one can be in the truth and know everything and yet be *bête* with *bêtise*. At the limit there could be *bêtise* in absolute knowledge”¹⁵. Derrida goes on to conceptualise stupidity as a particular failing in the way of judgement, or “an aptitude for wrong judgement, a

¹² Deleuze, *Difference and repetition*, p. 153.

¹³ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and philosophy*, p. 108.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Derrida, *The beast and the sovereign*, p. 204.

defect in judgement, an inability to judge”¹⁶. The word Derrida uses to characterise this “defect” in judgement is “*hebetude*”, a word he coined from *habitude*, meaning dulled or unsensitised, also inhibited¹⁷. Stupidity would be then our own faculty of judgement which becomes dull or insensitive to a certain issue, which makes us see exactly the same way each time, refusing to re-think the issue at hand. One such example, to which we will come back later, is the refusal of the colonist to see and to understand the pain of the colonised. The colonist sees the manifestations of pain but refuses to judge these as pain or unhappiness, effectively dulling oneself to certain aspects of reality which demand to be thought, rendering oneself insensitive.

Isabelle Stengers is another philosopher who took further the Deleuzian intuition regarding stupidity. She also touches upon the issue of seriality, a thinking which always is the same, which uses the same path and always arrives at the same conclusions, no matter of the circumstances. For Stengers, stupidity is an active capacity to block other ways of thinking – in others – by using authority. Stupidity occurs when some people feel entitled to think in the place of others, to enlighten them to certain conclusions which cannot be questioned. Stupidity would then be a remainder of pastoral power: “Those who are responsible for us are not pastors because they are not guiding us towards anything at all; they are in the grip of stupidity because they judge the world in terms of dangerous temptations and seductions that it is a matter of protecting us from”¹⁸.

Stengers characterises stupidity as an active force which aims to shape the world on the same level by competing with thinking. Stupidity, however, aims to change the world by desensitising us to alternatives, by making us think the same way: “Stupidity is active, it feeds on its effects, on the manner in which it dismembers a concrete situation, in which it destroys the capacity for thinking and imagining of those who envisaged ways of doing things differently”¹⁹. In other words, stupidity is an active force which aims to keep things the same, a conservative force, whereas thinking aims to change, a revolutionary force. This does not mean, of course, that whoever is conservative is stupid, because this would bring us back to the fallacy of attributing stupidity to the content of sentences, and not to the form of the judgement. Rather, Stenger’s point is that stupidity can act politically and has been weaponised for political purposes which are, usually, to keep things the same. If thinking has political consequences, by making possible new configurations and new realities, then stupidity has also a political role. Let us see next, with Sartre, a way in which stupidity can be used for political reasons in the case of colonialism.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Isabelle Stengers, *In catastrophic times: Resisting the coming barbarism*, Critical climate change (Lüneburg: Open Humanities Press/Meson Press, 2015), (Andrew Goffey, Trans.), p. 118.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

STUPIDITY AS BEING CAPTURED BY AN APPARATUS

Sartre discussed stupidity briefly in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. The discussion was made as a comparison between stupidity and colonialism, while the issue at stake was seriality of thinking. Sartre wanted to explain how thinking can become serial, in other words, how is it that one thought becomes repeated by all members of a group, without any of them really thinking it? Sartre's example of the seriality of thinking emerges in the context of colonialism, through the shared belief that the colonised need their colonisers to organise themselves because the colonised are inferior and simply cannot do it by themselves. This would seem to be a racist statement, but its stupidity lies not in its being racists or wrong, but in the fact that it becomes an idea shared by all colonists and never doubted. The racists statements become a system of phrases which "were never the translation of a real, concrete thought; they were not even the object of thought. Furthermore, they have not by themselves any meaning, at least in so far as they claim to express knowledge about the colonised"²⁰.

The colonialist social system thus appears as a system of phrases which are trafficked around among the colonists, agreed by all, never challenged, in which every sentence is "an Idea of stone"²¹ meaning that these ideas have the concreteness of stone, are almost as real and indubitable as objects. Sartre argues that the colonists need these ideas-as-stones in order to be united as a community, otherwise their own actions would become meaningless. The colonialist system is then an apparatus which relies on the existence of such unquestionable ideas to bind together the colonists in a community based on lies and un-thought ideas. Sartre's claim can be taken as an interesting amendment to Carl Schmitt's thesis that communities need an external enemy in view of which they become united because the fear of extinction by the other would be the most strong social bond²². If we are to follow Sartre to a logical conclusion, there is no need for an enemy to threaten existentially a community, rather any idea turned into stone by its being unquestionable is enough to unite a group into a strong bond. Shared stupidities would make the community bonds, and then Schmitt's fear of the enemy would be only one particular case of a common stupidity.

According to Sartre, stupidity functions just like the racist ideas which founded the colonialist empires: as phrases which nobody wishes nor is able to justify, as ideas assumed by all to be true. These phrases "circulate, (...) people repeat them to one another in some form; the truth is that they cannot circulate

²⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of dialectical reason* (London: Verso, 2004-2006), (Sheridan, Alan, Transl.), p. 301.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 300.

²² Lavinia Marin, "Something to Die for. The Individual as Interruption of the Political in Carl Schmitt's The Concept of the Political," *Revue Roumaine de Philosophie* 60, no. 2 (2016).

because they cannot be objects of exchange. They have a priori the structure of a collective and when two colonialists, in conversation, appear to be exchanging these ideas, they actually merely reactualise them one after the other in so far as they represent a particular aspect of serial reason”²³. Stupidity would thus be characterised by the seriality of thinking and by „the secret hope that thought is a stone”²⁴, in other words, the secret hope that certain ideas, taboos, statements will never be challenged by anyone.

Both Sartre and Stengers had pointed to a certain political aspect of stupidity, namely that it gives force for those in power to remain there without ever feeling any bad conscience, and that stupidities are sometimes needed for consensus. Sartre and Stengers do not actually claim that one could not have political systems without stupidities, rather, our interpretation of their stance would be that it is only when politics becomes an apparatus that it needs stupidities to function. A political apparatus is a system that runs in a vacuum, without input or representation, merely reproducing itself. In order for such political apparatuses to exist, a certain insensitivity needs to be cultivated in all: the colonists should not see the unhappiness of the colonised, the “neo-liberal” economist must become blind to the destruction caused by the free market laws of competition²⁵.

Not all apparatuses are political, just as not all political systems become apparatuses. But there is a relation between how an apparatus functions and the effect of stupefaction on thinking. This relation has been described by Vilém Flusser as a way in which apparatuses make thinking automatic in order to imitate it. However, apparatuses cannot imitate complex thinking, this is why the “thinking” delivered by apparatuses is very simple, algorithmic, in fact, a caricature of thinking: “It is in this “stupid” and sub-human manner that the apparatus can “think”: by accidental combinations. And it is in this manner that apparatus are omniscient and omnipotent in their own universes”²⁶. Apparatuses try to imitate human thinking and thus simplify it, yet, when people let themselves be captured by apparatuses, for example by working inside an apparatus-like system such as the colonialist system, then they submit themselves to this way of thinking, they let their thinking be captured by apparatuses.

To conclude this section, stupidity appears not merely as a state of non-thinking which characterises animals, but as a compulsion to think in only one way, or a thinking captured by an apparatus which is desensitised to other ways of thinking and which also aims to propagate itself. This brings us back to the issue of the animality of *la bêtise*: there is an animal ground in the stupidity because it promotes a laziness to think, a compulsion to shortcuts and hasty judgements, yet

²³ Sartre, *Critique of dialectical reason*, p. 301.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 300.

²⁵ Stengers, “Thinking with Deleuze and Whitehead: a Double Test,” 34.

²⁶ Vilém Flusser, *Towards a philosophy of photography* (Göttingen: European Photography, 1984), p. 50.

this laziness is performed through an apparatus. In other words, stupidity as *bêtise* appears when we delegate our thinking to the apparatuses because we are too lazy to think.

STUPIDITAS AND STUDYING

So far, we have seen an account of stupidity understood as *bêtise*. However, there are other philosophers, such as Agamben and Lewis, which have tried to approach stupidity in a novel perspective, one that we will call educational in order to differentiate it from the previous perspective which will be called purely philosophical.

The educational stance begins by seeing something more in stupidity than the evil of un-thinking, thus going beyond the standard attitude of vilification of stupidity “by linking it with pathology or moral lassitude”²⁷. Lewis and Agamben do not aim to praise stupidity as such but to understand it as a state prior to thinking. Stupidity would be a state of impotentiality and desubjectification in which one allows oneself to be inspired and struck by thinking. Stupidity, in the Lewis-Agamben reading, appears as a state which makes possible thinking while studying, but this time thinking emerges not as violence or as a force against stupidity, but as being struck by inspiration, at the “point where the power of Genius takes hold as a creative potency”²⁸.

Agamben begins from the observation that studying (*studium*) and stupidity (*stupiditas*) have a common etymological stem. The common etymology “goes back to a st- or sp- root indicating a crash, the shock of impact. Studying and stupefying are in this sense akin: those who study are in the situation of people who have received a shock and are stupefied by what has struck them, unable to grasp it and at the same time powerless to leave hold. The scholar, that is, is always ‘stupid’”²⁹.

The link between stupidity and study is more than etymological: one needs to experience stupidity in order to experience thinking while studying because studying is an oscillation, a rhythm of going back and forth between moments of stupidity and moments of thinking. When we study, we want to think our way through something which resists us. The more we read and engage in study, the more we feel overwhelmed and stupid. We feel stupid confronted with the beauty and complexity of the thinking encapsulated in the texts of others, we feel stupid because every problem becomes more complex the more one studies it. To study is not about thinking all the time, like a computational machine delivering results

²⁷ Tyson E. Lewis, *On study: Giorgio Agamben and educational potentiality* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 131.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

²⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *Idea of prose*, SUNY series, Intersections: philosophy and critical theory (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 64.

without interruption. Studying is a state in which one hesitates, lets one be captured by others' thinking, overwhelmed: "This *festina lente*, this shuttling between bewilderment and lucidity, discovery and loss, between agent and patient, is the rhythm of study"³⁰.

The essential distinction made here by Agamben and Lewis is that between potentiality and actuality. To study means to dwell in impotentiality, to accept the unfinished thought and to remain there, resisting the temptation to conclude: "Nothing resembles [study] more than the condition which Aristotle, contrasting it with the act, defines as "potential". Potential is, on the one hand, passive potential, passivity, a pure and virtually infinite undergoing, and on the other hand, an active potential, an unstoppable drive to undertake, an urge to act"³¹. In Aristotelian terms, stupidity is the state of potential which allows for the actualisation of thinking, which comes in unpredictable moments.

Stupidity is what we feel when we engage in studying and we are in the presence of other's thinking by reading texts, it is a state in which we are not yet thinking, not yet reaching our potential, that Deleuzian n-th power of thought. To feel stupid while studying is a certain feeling of vertigo and indeterminacy: „Studying and stupefying are both forms of a collision that leave us without balance, without stability, without sense of orientation. The collision introduces a kind of vertigo poised between the inability to think and the ability to think"³².

Why would we then put ourselves through the state of studying if it will always bring with it this experience of feeling stupid and lost? Because, as Agamben shows, we cannot will ourselves into thinking. Nobody ever said, 'I want to think, therefore I think', rather, we hope for inspiration, or for what in the old days was called genius. Studying is characterised by "not work, but inspiration, the self-nourishment of the soul"³³. To study means to put oneself in the way of stupidity in hope that inspiration may come through a brilliant thought. This putting oneself in way of stupidity happens through certain practices and techniques such as reading other's texts or roaming through libraries. Studying involves techniques of deliberately getting oneself lost in the thinking of others: "not only can study have no rightful end, but does not even desire one"³⁴.

The activity of studying does not guarantee that we will actually be struck by inspiration and as a consequence begin to think, there is always the possibility that we may remain stuck in our own feelings of stupidity. There is a risk in studying which must be assumed: "Studying therefore does not deliver us from stupidity but rather returns us to a primordial experience of stupidity as a kind of ontological structure"³⁵. In studying, we put ourselves in the way of thinking but equally, in the

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

³² Lewis, *On study*, p. 131.

³³ Agamben, *Idea of prose*, p. 65.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

³⁵ Lewis, *On study*, p. 132.

way of stupidity. Studying thus entails equally both the risk of stupification and that of brilliant findings. With study, we aim to think by allowing ourselves to be overcome by our own limits, our own stupidity and impotentiality. Only from this ground of passivity can thinking emerge as event.

***STUPIDITAS* AND *LA BÊTISE*, OR ON THE PUBLIC ROLE OF THINKING**

By now, it should be obvious to the reader that *stupiditas* and *la bêtise* are two different experiences of the failing of thinking. Although both terms are usually translated in English with “stupidity”, we will argue further that there are fundamental differences between these two experiences of unthinking and that, furthermore, the only way out of being trapped in *la bêtise* seems to be through *stupiditas*. The first difference lies in the fact that *stupiditas* is an experience of self-awareness: we experience ourselves as stupid while studying and our own feeling of stupidity makes us want to study more; we experience ourselves as incomplete or lacking when we read the writings of others who thought before us. With *la bêtise*, on the contrary, there is no self-awareness. People may promote stupid thoughts with assiduity because they are never visited by self-doubt. In *la bêtise*, thinking is serial, and it propagates itself to the other members of the community as a virus. What allows for this propagation of the commonly shared certainties is that the actors never experience any doubt about what they say. In our deepest moments of stupidity as *la bêtise*, we are the most self-assured and confident. As Robert Musil has put it, moments of stupidity strikingly resemble moments of genius as a first-person experience: “And after all, if stupidity did not, when seen from within, look so exactly like talent as to be mistaken for it, and if it could not, when seen from the outside, appear as progress, genius, hope, and improvement, doubtless no one would want to be stupid, and there would be no stupidity”³⁶.

In both accounts of *stupiditas* and *la bêtise*, stupidity is understood as that which causes thinking. But there are essential differences between the two accounts: in the philosophical account of *la bêtise*, it is the stupidity of others which makes us think, by giving thinking the force to be violent and thus rise to the n-th power. Thinking appears as destruction projected towards the outside world, the individual philosopher thinks against the collective of un-thinkers. This view implies that philosophy’s mission is the salvation from stupidity and that philosophy is the only viable critique of the present. As Deleuze has put it, philosophy can justify itself only as a critique of the stupidities of its own time:

“Stupidity and baseness are always those of our own time, of our contemporaries, our stupidity and baseness. Unlike the atemporal concept of error, baseness is inseparable from time, that is from this rapture of the present, from this

³⁶ Robert Musil, *The man without qualities* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995 (1943)).

present condition in which it is incarnated and in which it moves. This is why philosophy has an essential relation to time: it is always against its time, critique of the present world.”³⁷

This particular view was inspired by Nietzsche’s remark, in its turn a comment on Diogenes the cynic, that “what Diogenes said when someone praised a philosopher in his presence: ‘How can he be considered great, since he has been a philosopher for so long and has never yet *disturbed* anybody?’ That, indeed, ought to be the epitaph of university philosophy: ‘it disturbed nobody’”³⁸. This cynicism-inspired view that philosophy should disturb the society of its own time, was then taken up by Deleuze when framing philosophy as violence against stupidity. Inspired by Nietzsche, Deleuze claimed that “A philosophy that saddens no one, that annoys no one, is not a philosophy. It is useful for harming stupidity, for turning stupidity into something shameful. Its only use is the exposure of all forms of baseness of thought”³⁹.

In the Deleuzian reading, and also that of several of his interlocutors such as Stengers or Derrida, philosophy emerges as a weaponisation of thinking against stupidity, but also against our own animal nature which does not want to think, and thus delegates thinking to something external like an apparatus. It would seem that in Deleuze, as in many other philosophers, one encounters, again and again, a reduction of all genuine thinking to philosophy and, ultimately, a *pro domo* plea. However, one can equally ask, is it possible to be a philosopher and not to do violence to other’s thinking? Furthermore, one can also ask whether we need only philosophy to fight stupidity. If a stupidity is uttered in mathematics, should one call for philosophers to fight it? Or, rather, should we not let the mathematicians deal with it, trusting them that there is thinking also in mathematics, a thinking raised to the power of the n-th?

In the educational account of *stupiditas*, the sudden realisation of our own stupidity makes us want to think further, the impulse to think arises from experiencing a state of impotentiality, of feeling stupid because others’ works are so wonderfully complex that we are completely lost. Stupidity gives rise to a thirst or a longing to think and thus enter into a dialogue with the thinkers which wrote before us. In the educational account, resentment and violence have nothing to do with thinking, rather the beauty of other’s thinking gives us an impulse to think. Stupidity leads to a state of humility. In discovering our own stupidity, it is not just that we discover something unpleasant about ourselves, rather, we discover that something needs to be thought and we want to do it, although, in this moment, we are incapable of doing it. Stupidity is the feeling of being called to do a task which is overwhelming, clearly beyond our powers, yet we must do it because we have

³⁷ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and philosophy*, p. 107.

³⁸ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Untimely meditations*, Cambridge texts in the history of philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 194.

³⁹ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and philosophy*, p. 106.

been called. Stupidity while studying is about putting oneself in a state of passivity where one waits for genius or inspiration to visit. We call for thinking and hope it may come.

The two conceptualisations to the phenomenon of unthinking, called “stupidity” in both cases, give rise to two opposite approaches to thinking and to conceptualising the mission of the philosopher in the present times. In the Deleuzian tradition of philosophy as critique, thinking should change society by exposing its shared and unquestioned stupidities. This implies, like many other critical approaches, the assumption that the philosopher sees more clearly than one’s own contemporaries. Thus, critical tradition “conceives of the work of philosophy as the work of judgement, ordering, justification, selection, concept clarification, interpretation and explication, and is ‘critical’ in the sense that it is in one way or another oriented towards validity claims (either ethical/normative or epistemological). This means that it puts reality (...) to the test of its own thinking.”⁴⁰ The philosopher emerges as the judge and jury of one’s own time, always putting reality to the test of thinking. This critical stance places the philosopher outside the world to be judged and thus making the philosopher immune to one’s own stupidities. What makes the critical stance difficult to undertake is the consequence that the philosopher always thinks alone, against the others. There is no possibility for a community of thinkers because there is always the danger that what brings consensus might be a *bêtise*.

There is, however, in the history of philosophy, an alternative to the critical stance, what Jan Masschelein has called the ascetic tradition, following Foucault: “In this tradition, the work of philosophy is in the first place a work on the self – that is, putting oneself to the test of contemporary reality’, implying an enlightenment not of others but of oneself – however, of oneself not as subject of knowledge but as subject of action”⁴¹. In this ascetic tradition, thinking emerges from practices and from our work on our own selves, to be better than we are. Following this line of thought, to fight stupidity as *la bêtise* means to fight it first and foremost in ourselves. Thinking turns from the world to our own way of life, but this does not necessarily imply a violence against one’s own stupidity or way of life. Rather, a continuous examination of the self and of one’s own convictions needs to take place all the time, thus not allowing oneself to dwell in certainties and self-reassuring ideas. Thinking in the ascetic tradition is a continuous struggle with oneself while dealing with the world is postponed.

The Agamben-Lewis approach to stupidity as *stupiditas* is more in line with the ascetic tradition and, furthermore, it has a decidedly messianic undertone: thinking may save us from the stupidity of our times, but it implies a continuous

⁴⁰ Jan Masschelein, “Philosophy of Education as an Exercise in Thought: To Not Forget Oneself When ‘things Take Their Course’,” *European Educational Research Journal* 10, no. 3 (2011): 356, doi:10.2304/eej.2011.10.3.356.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

work on the self and nobody will see it when it comes. Messianism, or a particular reading of it inspired by Saint Paul's letters, has been linked with studying in the work of Agamben:

"For Agamben, the messianic is not concerned with perpetual waiting for a savior to come and redeem the world. Rather, it concerns the radically open potentiality for action within the contemporary moment (...) For Agamben, the action that, more than any other, represents the messianic moment is the act of studying, or studious play. The temporality of weak utopianism is not simply the messianic time of the now but also the temporality of perpetual study, where the student holds judgment in suspension in order to experience the potentiality of thought itself"⁴².

Whenever we undertake the task of thinking against our own *stupiditas*, we open up a potential for action, something new may happen in the world as a consequence of our own thinking. Agamben was inspired by Arendt's understanding of thinking as that which makes possible the emergence of the new into the world: "Only insofar as he thinks (...) does man in the full actuality of his concrete being live in this gap of time between past and future"⁴³. We live in our present time only insofar as we think about it and through it, from this unique perspective of our time and place. This means that nothing can save us from the task of thinking, no tradition can replace this unless we settle for living in the past. Thinking makes the new possible to emerge in the world, thus thinking effectively changes the world. This would amount to the Agambenian reading of messianism: the world may suddenly be changed while we will not even notice it.

We are thus left with two attitudes towards the public duty to think. Either, following Deleuze, the duty of the intellectual is to think against the stupidities of one's own time, which amounts to a thinking against the consensus and the stabilisations of thinking, a thinking against the world in the hope that the world may change. Or, in an Agambenian understanding, thinking may change and thus save the world from its own *bêtise*, but this cannot be planned or foreseen. Rather, the only task of the philosopher is to think incessantly, to work with humility on one's own self and hope that somehow this will also amount to a salvation of the world. Thinking can change the world in both instances, yet in the ascetic reading of thinking, the change of the world begins with ourselves. We would like to argue that the two ways of conceiving stupidity and thus arriving at two different public duties of the intellectual are not incompatible. Rather, if the intellectual takes seriously the task of thinking in order to change the world, this change begins with oneself. One cannot think against the stupidity of others without experiencing first one's own impotentiality and limitations of thought and then, after this experience

⁴² Tyson E. Lewis, "The Architecture of Potentiality," *Utopian Studies* 23, no. 2 (2012): 355–56, doi:10.5325/utopianstudies.23.2.0355.

⁴³ Hannah Arendt, *Between past and future: Eight exercises in political thought*, Penguin classics (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 13.

of the humility of thinking, one can try to think with others around their own limitations. The public duty to think should not happen against the others, not by doing violence to others, but together with them, thus assuming from the start that one can be stupid and yet be saved by thinking.

CONCLUSIONS

The two accounts of stupidity examined thus far imply that there are two ways of being a philosopher in the world, or two ways of relating to the world through thinking. The critical or philosophical account, championed by Deleuze, is that we think against the stupidity of others, against our own animal nature. Thinking emerges as violence against the animal nature. But, if we look at Sartre's example, then philosophical thinking asserts itself against politics and against certain forms of human community. The philosopher is the individual which destroys everything with a hammer. What makes us think is what makes others join in communities governed by apparatuses. The philosopher appears here as the outsider, the outcast. This stance can be also understood as implying that one can actually think alone, against the world, without needing any input or feedback. From the educational or ascetic perspective, thinking emerges as something collective that we partake in. It is a dialogue in which we wish to enter. When we study, we read the texts which constitute the dialogue which happened before us and we aim to respond somehow to it. We feel stupid because, in the moments of study, we feel incapable of entering a dialogue of thinkers, we feel overwhelmed. Stupidity is here the humility in front of other's thinking which may give rise to an exercise of admiration. This stance assumes that we can never think alone and that we need others to think with – either by studying their prior work or by discussing with others. But, in order to subject our thinking to a dialogue of the minds and to the gaze of the other, we must already accept the hypothesis of our own stupidity, our *stupiditas*. To think with others cannot happen unless there is a grain of humility in oneself and the acceptance that one must sacrifice one's own ego in the process. To think with others while studying their work implies letting go of vanities and accepting always the risk of feeling stupid and worthless, the risk of impotentiality on which the potentiality of thinking is grounded on. The only salvation from *la bêtise* lies in accepting our own stupidity.

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