

**Voegelin's Use of Musil's Concept of "Intelligent Stupidity"❖
in *Hitler and the Germans***

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In his 1964 lecture course in Munich on "Hitler and the Germans,"❖ Voegelin's searing analysis of the state of spiritual debility characterizing German society during the Hitler era--and his accompanying critique of present-day German intellectual and spiritual life--is aided by his critical use of the Austrian novelist Robert Musil's brilliant 1937 lecture "On Stupidity."❖1 [1] In particular, Musil's distinction between what he calls "honest stupidity"❖ and "intelligent stupidity,"❖ or "the higher stupidity,"❖ serves Voegelin's purposes extremely well in his analysis both the National Socialist leadership and the German political culture of the Hitler period. What I shall do here is first present relevant features of Musil's original lecture, and then discuss Voegelin's selective use of them, which will indicate how Voegelin was able to find in Musil's analysis of "intelligent stupidity"❖ both explanatory substance and validation for his diagnostic category of "pneumopathological disease"❖--a crucial category, in Voegelin's view, for our philosophical understanding of a culture in a state of spiritual collapse.

I

1 [1] Published as Robert Musil, "On Stupidity,"❖ in Musil, *Precision and Soul: Essays and Addresses*, eds. and trs. Burton Pike and David S. Luft (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 268-286.

We should note the time and place of Musil's lecture "On Stupidity" -- March of 1937, in Vienna, precisely a year before the *Anschluss*, Hitler's occupation and annexation of Austria. This helps us to understand why he contextualizes his analysis in the following manner:

Ladies and gentlemen! . . . [The] moral concepts, *freedom* and *reason*, which have come down to us as tokens of human dignity . . . have since the middle of the nineteenth century, or slightly later, not been in the very best of health. . . . [O]ur task, and the sense of the trials laid upon the spirit, will [be] to complete the always necessary, indeed deeply desired, transition to [a] new [regenerative understanding of these concepts] with the least possible loss. . . . [In] carrying out this activity we need help from ideas of what is true, reasonable, meaningful, and clever, and also, by inverse reflection, *from ideas of what is stupid*.

In other words, the recovery and protection of true ideas of reason, truth, freedom, and dignity, depend in part upon our clearly understanding the mental aberrations, oversights, and presumptions that have undermined the cogency of these concepts in contemporary thought and social life. Thus, Musil reasons, "a question gradually arises that refuses to be put off: Just what *is* stupidity?"² [2]

In his search for insights to help him in answering this question, Musil notes the commonly accepted notion that stupidity is nothing more than "a deficiency of understanding," or a notion of "physical and mental deficiency in general." But this notion, he argues, is psychologically *naïve*. "Older psychology," he states,

distinguished among sensation, will, feeling, and the ability to form ideas, or intelligence; for this psychology it was clear that stupidity was a lesser degree of intelligence. But contemporary psychology has robbed the basic discriminations among the soul's capacities of their importance and recognized the mutual dependence and interpenetration of the soul's various accomplishments, and in doing so has made much less simple the answer to the question of what stupidity signifies psychologically. . . . This difficulty in keeping reason and feeling separate in the notion of intelligence is naturally also reflected in the notion of stupidity.³ [3]

2 [2] Ibid, 268, 280-81 (emphasis added).

3 [3] Ibid., 281.

In other words, in the more sophisticated context of what the philosopher Bernard Lonergan calls "the shift [beyond] faculty psychology,⁴ [4] in order to understand what *intelligence* and *stupidity* truly are, we have to consider human consciousness in terms of the dynamic unity and interdependence of its operations, where questioning and feeling and imagining and understanding and judging and deciding are all intimately intertwined in the functioning and malfunctioning of the life of the soul in its responses to the challenges of living.

By recognizing this complex interdependence of all the elements operative in consciousness, Musil is able to make a critical distinction between two basic types of stupidity. He states:

In life one usually means by a stupid person one who is "a little weak in the head."⁵ But beyond this there are *the most varied kinds of intellectual and spiritual deviations*, which can so hinder and frustrate and lead astray even an undamaged innate intelligence that it leads, by and large, to something for which the only word language has at its disposal is [still] stupidity. Thus this word embraces *two fundamentally quite different types*: an honorable and straightforward stupidity, and a second that, somewhat paradoxically, is even a sign of intelligence. The first is based rather on a weakness of understanding, the second more on an understanding that is weak only with regard to some particular, *and this latter kind is by far the more dangerous.*⁵ [5]

Musil has differentiated a kind of stupidity that is not a matter of an innate incapacity for achieving insights, for engaging in sound reasoning or decision-making, or for recognizing genuine values. It concerns, rather, a person capable of all of these, but where a certain blindness has taken hold, where there is an occlusion of some significant elements concerning human existence in the world. It is not an honorable and straightforward stupidity; it is dishonorable, devious, intelligent, and dangerous.

Honorable stupidity, Musil states, is common and not alarming; it is in fact a bit endearing, in its poverty of words and ideas, its predictably slow comprehension, its stubborn

4 [4] Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 343.

5 [5] *Ibid.*, 282 (emphasis added).

preference for what is already grasped by and familiar to it. "Honorable stupidity has more than a little of life's rosy cheeks," he states.⁶ [6] But the other stupidity--intelligent stupidity--deserves our closer attention and analysis, for it is not commonly recognized for what it is, while at the same time it can appear at the highest levels of social and political power, and can have a broad influence in the shaping of culture, even in the guidance of political or military affairs of state.

Musil focuses especially on three characteristics of what he calls "intelligent stupidity" or the "higher stupidity": first, its presumption to insights and accomplishments that actually lie beyond its reach; second, its orientation in important matters by emotions that overrule or ignore reason, thus establishing blind spots in intellectual and spiritual perspective; and third, its inventiveness in using its often outstanding intelligence to produce convincing rationalizations for its viewpoints and actions. Here are elements of his analysis and conclusions:

The higher, pretentious form of stupidity stands only too often in crass opposition to [its] honorable form. It is not so much lack of intelligence as *failure* of intelligence, for the reason that it presumes to accomplishments to which it has no right; This higher stupidity is the real disease of culture . . . and to describe it is an almost infinite task. *It reaches into the highest intellectual sphere* Years ago I wrote about this form of stupidity that "there is absolutely no significant idea that stupidity would not know how to apply; stupidity is active in every direction, and can dress up in all the clothes of truth." . . . *The stupidity this addresses is no mental illness, yet it is most lethal; a dangerous disease of the mind that endangers life itself.*⁷ [7]

In Vienna in 1937, the targets of this critical diagnosis of "the higher stupidity" would have been glaringly obvious: first and most proximately, the rise to power and the appeal of National Socialism in Germany (and its strong appeal in Austria), with its aberrant and lethal vision of a revivifying and unifying culture based on race, blood, and soil, a vision that had no lack of support in intellectual and educational circles; second and more generally, the rise of totalitarian ideologies whether in National Socialist, Fascist, or Soviet forms. Musil is alluding to tremendous resources of intelligence and inventiveness at the disposal of powerful leaders whose

⁶ [6] Ibid.

⁷ [7] Ibid., 283-84 (emphasis added).

minds are diseased. Not that such leaders are, as he explains, "mentally ill"; and they are certainly not "stupid" in the honorable sense. Rather, Musil is distinguishing a type of stupidity characterized by a distorted use of genuine and energetic intelligence which makes sweeping, arrogant claims regarding its knowledge of the most important matters--unwarranted claims, arising from a lethal mixture of wayward emotions unchecked by critical reason, blind spots of intellect and sensibility, and a spiritual disorientation resulting from these. Musil does not hesitate to state that, in the last analysis, such stupidity pertains less to intellect than to the whole of consciousness in its unified, spiritual being and significance. "'Intelligent' stupidity," he states, "has as its adversary not so much the understanding as the *spirit* [*Geist*], and if one is willing to imagine as 'spirit' not merely a little heap of emotions, the *sensibility* [*Gemüt*] as well."⁸ [8]

Let us now look at how Voegelin takes up Musil's analysis of the "higher stupidity" and elaborates precisely on this last point: that there is a stupidity that has as its principal "adversary," not difficulties of thought or understanding, but consciousness as a whole in its openness of spirit and sensibility.

II

Voegelin's aim in his 1964 lecture course on "Hitler and the Germans" was principally to diagnose "the spiritual level of . . . German intellectual life and, in general, of German political culture," both in the Hitler era and, significantly, in the present.⁹ [9] It is for this purpose that

⁸ [8] Ibid., 285 (emphasis added).

⁹ [9] Quoting Detlev Clemens, in "Editors' Introductions," in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 31, *Hitler and the Germans*, eds. and trs. Detlev Clemens and Brendan Purcell (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 2.

he draws on Musil's lecture "On Stupidity," most distinctively in both using and refining Musil's concept of the "higher stupidity."¹⁰ [10]

First, Voegelin points out the importance of asking the question, "[W]hat kinds of stupidity are there?"¹¹ He then emphasizes the significance of Musil's differentiation and account of "the higher stupidity."¹² He begins:

Musil distinguishes between the honorable, or simple, stupidity and the higher, or intelligent, stupidity. This is a very important distinction By "honorable" or "simple stupidity" is meant what one could call a lack of understanding. One speaks of people who are slow on the uptake.¹¹ [11]

But when Voegelin goes on to describe the "higher stupidity," we see immediately why it is important to his theme: this is the stupidity that can, sometimes with great intelligence, obscure or reject the *spiritual meaning and ultimate orientation of human existence*, together with its obligations to others and to the transcendent mystery that embraces us all. This intelligent eclipse of the spiritual dimension, Voegelin asserts, is a "stupidity" of pride and existential revolt. He states:

The higher stupidity, [Musil] says, "presumes to accomplishments to which it has no right." So here comes the element of presumptuousness, of *hybris*, or spiritual arrogance. Higher, or intelligent, stupidity is a disturbance in the equilibrium of the spirit. The spirit now becomes the adversary, not the mind. It is not a defect of the mind as with simple people, but a defect of the spirit, *a revolt against the spirit*, which gives rise to saying or doing things against the spirit. Therefore this condition of higher stupidity is not a . . . sickness in the sense of psychopathology, but something quite different.¹² [12]

¹⁰ [10] For Voegelin's development and application of Musil's analysis of stupidity, see *Hitler and the Germans*, 60-63, 85-90, 98-109.

¹¹ [11] Voegelin, *Hitler and the Germans*, 98, 101.

¹² [12] Ibid., 101 (emphasis added).

This sickness of intelligent stupidity, Voegelin explains, is a rejection of both the *rational soul*, insofar as reason properly functions in an ultimate openness of seeking the divine ground of existence, and of *spirit* in the sense of being "open" to the drawing of the divine Beyond through its presence in emotional life and in the "word" of Scriptural or other teachings. Voegelin links the original Greek philosophical understanding of reason, *nous*, with the Israelite and Christian understanding of spirit, *pneuma*, in their parallel recognition that a human being is human precisely through existential openness to, and conscious *participation in*, the divine mystery that grounds all things--a mystery typically in the West referred to as "God." "The specific dignity of man," Voegelin writes, "is based on this, on [human] nature as theomorphic, as in the form and in the image of God." When one's *reason* refuses to recognize its own nature as participating in divine reality and as lovingly reaching out toward it, and when one's *spirit* closes itself off from loving encounter with divine presence in immediacy or as mediated through the "word" that has arisen historically from spiritual experiences, the result is not merely that one "dehumanizes" the human image, but that one also suffers an unavoidable disruption in the overall functioning of thought and sensibility. As Voegelin writes in his essay "Reason: The Classic Experience" (1974), if reason in its dynamic core "is existential *philia* [love], if it is the openness of existence [toward the divine ground] raised to consciousness, then the closure of existence, or any obstruction to openness, will affect the rational structure of the psyche adversely." 13 [13]

In other words, however intelligent or even brilliant one may be, one is being stupid when one becomes the adversary of spirit, because one then can't think straight about crucial questions concerning the elemental purposes of human existence, about what constitutes the good life and true human fulfilment, about how and for what to organize the collective power of a people for action in history, about our participation in a universal humanity that includes all the vast diversity of peoples and individuals, or about the dimension of divine depth in reality. From these considerations so pertinent to the theme of his lectures, Voegelin derives a definition of

13 [13] Ibid., 86-87; Voegelin, "Reason: The Classic Experience," in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 12, *Published Essays, 1966-1985*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 274.

intelligent stupidity: "Stupidity shall mean here that a man, because of his loss of reality, is not in a position to rightly orient his action in the world, in which he lives. So when the central organ for guiding his action, his theomorphic nature and openness toward reason and spirit, has ceased functioning, then man will act stupidly.❖14 [14]

This notion of "intelligent❖ stupidity, Voegelin then explains, has its corollaries in the classic vocabulary of philosophical and spiritual diagnosis. In the Israelite context it corresponds to the folly, *nebala*, of the fool, *nabal*, who does not believe in God. In the Greek context, it corresponds to Plato's *amathia*, the "irrationally ignorant❖ person who neither himself has, nor recognizes in others, the authority of reason. In Thomistic philosophy, it corresponds to *stultitia*, the folly or silliness of the one who denies God in his heart. The *stultus*, in Voegelin's words, "has suffered loss of reality and acts on the basis of a defective image of reality and thereby creates disorder.❖ And there is nothing to keep a person, a Hitler, from being both a brilliant politician and a *stultus*; or to keep the political rulers of any country from being dominated by persons characterized by this "intelligent stupidity,❖ thereby creating disorder in the extreme.15 [15]

The higher stupidity, therefore, must not be understood as a psychopathic condition. It is instead a kind of "spiritual sickness,❖ a type of what Voegelin calls "pneumopathology.❖16 [16] And those sick in spirit may appear in the pink of intellectual health. They may also enjoy an almost unbounded capacity to invent ingeniously plausible explanations to justify their actions in the world, and to rationalize their views and behavior through combining accurate accounts of incontrovertible facts with subtle half-truths and attractive falsehoods.

14 [14] Voegelin, *Hitler and the Germans*, 89.

15 [15] *Ibid.*, 89-90, 97-98.

16 [16] Voegelin credits Schelling as the source for his discovery of the term *pneumopathology* (though Voegelin scholars have as yet been unable to find this precise term in Schelling's works). Cf. Voegelin, *Hitler and the Germans*, 101.

In this context, let me remark upon a marvelous example of the classical diagnosis of the higher stupidity. In Plato's *Alcibiades I*--a dialogue of disputed authenticity now among scholars, but in antiquity considered not only authentically Platonic but as *the* introduction to philosophy--we find Socrates attempting to convert Alcibiades, whom he cannot help but love, to genuine self-knowledge, and to dissuade him from exploiting for mere political gain his obvious gifts of keen intelligence and high ambition. We know from the later career of Alcibiades--a paradigm of the ruthless abuse of political and military power--that Socrates was unsuccessful in his efforts of conversion. Now at the very midpoint, and dramatic climax, of the dialogue, we find Socrates trying to reveal to Alcibiades that there is a kind of stupidity that is not a lack of intellectual capability--a capability Alcibiades has in abundance--but what Socrates calls a "disgraceful sort of stupidity." This stupidity consists in assuming that one knows all about the most important things--such as what is "just and admirable and good and advantageous" in life--when one doesn't truly know. Alcibiades is repeatedly given the opportunity by Socrates to become aware that he is guilty of precisely this disgraceful form of stupidity; and we witness Alcibiades cleverly evading opportunities to become conscious of it in himself throughout the dialogue. But in the end he will not take conscious responsibility for this half-conscious evasion, leading Socrates to exclaim: "Good God, Alcibiades, what a sorry state you're in! I hesitate to call it by its name, but still, since we're alone, it must be said. You are wedded to stupidity, my good fellow, *stupidity in the highest degree*--our discussion and your own words convict you of it." It can easily be seen that this Socratic/Platonic notion of "stupidity in the highest degree" corresponds in essence to the "intelligent stupidity" discussed by Musil and Voegelin.¹⁷ [17]

Honest stupidity, we may say in conclusion, has both its charm of simplicity and, within limits, its moral excuses, since the situation may be complicated, and the capacity to understand it may be lacking. The intelligent stupidity discussed by Voegelin and Musil, on the other hand, while it may have certain dark charms of its own, has no excuses. It is a closure of the soul

17 [17] Plato, *Alcibiades* [also known as *Alcibiades I* or *First Alcibiades*], trans. D. S. Hutchinson, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 557-95 (quotes at 575; emphasis added). This passage in *Alcibiades* was brought to my attention by Professor Mark Morelli, Philosophy Department, Loyola Marymount University .

toward the ultimately spiritual meaning of human reason and existence--and, as such, it is culpable. This is what Voegelin means when he remarks in one of these lectures that "there is no right to be stupid.❖18 [18] No one has the moral or political right to deform his or her existence by rejecting the openness of reason and spirit to its ultimate source in divine mystery. On the contrary, in this regard, everyone has the moral and political obligation to be intelligent--not in the sense of intellectual talent, but in the sense of that "higher intelligence❖ which is a decisive constituent of spiritual health.

III

I will conclude with three points suggested by Voegelin's relating of Musil's concept of the "higher stupidity❖ with pneumopathological disease and spiritual closure.

First, since the "higher stupidity❖ consists not in an *inability* to understand but in a *refusal* to understand, any healing or reversal of it will not occur through rational argumentation, through a greater accumulation of data and knowledge, or through experiencing new and different feelings. Considering Voegelin's analysis, we may say that the reversal of a spiritual sickness must entail a spiritual cure. It will involve a conversion: from a posture of closure toward the full scope of reason and the reality of spirit, to an existential openness toward the divine ground. And this cannot occur without an anxious and humble renunciation of the pride, the presumptuous *hybris*, that motivates and sustains existential closure toward the divine ground of being. Humility, repentance, and the emergence of some effective measure of faith, hope, and charity in responding to the challenges of spiritual life, are thus prerequisites for the transformation of the "higher stupidity❖ of pneumopathological revolt into the "higher intelligence❖ of spiritual health.

18 [18] Voegelin, *Hitler and the Germans*, 107.

Second, for both Voegelin and Musil, openness toward the divine ground of reason and spirit is not necessarily a characteristic of those who call themselves "religious." In fact, those who passionately proclaim their religious devotion are sometimes precisely those who have existentially closed their souls to the divine mystery through embracing one form or another of religious *ideology*--where by *ideology* I mean an explanation of divine reality and its relation to history and individual destiny that is claimed to be known by a particular person or community as the *complete, all-encompassing, final, exclusive, absolutely certain, and completely known, truth*. Such an embrace truncates reason and stunts the spirit by obscuring (1) the mystery of divine transcendence, (2) the mystery of the ultimate meaning of human participation in transcendence, and, especially, (3) the *universality* of human participation in the divine ground. It prevents crucial insights into our actual spiritual situation from emerging, while providing a comfortable equilibrium of religious self-righteousness. Religious fundamentalists who fit this description indicate a pneumopathological condition just as clearly as do the "intelligently stupid" who revolt against the very idea of spiritual reality. It is wise to remember that spiritual illiteracy, as a powerful and disorienting influence in the highest spheres of society, applies not only to the harshly dogmatic secularists of the intellectual marketplace, but also to smugly exclusivist Christian, Jewish, or Islamic formulators of cultural opinion, or devisers of policy in the political sphere, who mistake an assumption of ideological certitude for faith. The fool is not only he who has said in his heart that there is no God; there is also the fool who unquestioningly assumes in his heart that whatever he might think and choose to do is God's will.

Thirdly and finally, it seems to me that Musil's and Voegelin's analysis of "intelligent stupidity" could diagnostically illuminate elements in the work of certain postmodern philosophers, particularly those committed to denying or invalidating, at all intellectual costs, the fact of transcendent reality--the fact of transcendence that grounds, as George Steiner so succinctly puts it, the very "meaning of meaning."¹⁹ [19]

To end on a generalizing note, it seems to me that the above discussion is enough to make a case for (1) acknowledging that an analysis of the various forms of stupidity has a rightful

¹⁹ [19] George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 216.

place in philosophical deliberation and diagnosis, and (2) for granting the concept of "intelligent stupidity" -- especially in its manifestation as pneumopathological revolt and spiritual illiteracy -- proper philosophical status as a *terminus technicus* for identifying "eminently important forces in the social process." 20 [20]

20 [20] Voegelin, *Hitler and the Germans*, 97-98.