

## *A Backward Look at Ignorance*

THE NATURAL SCIENCE OF STUPIDITY, by Paul Tabori.  
Philadelphia: Chilton Company, 1959. 288 pp. \$4.50.

IRVING LEE used to contrast proper evaluation and stupid behavior. Paul Tabori, by describing historical examples of stupidity, apparently aims to offer a basis for understanding, by contrast, the requirements for that training in wisdom which he says "no one has yet thought of forcing stupid people to undergo." His scope is limited, however, by the fact that none of the examples are up-to-date. Hence I must consider this as a book of anachronisms. In these dangerous times of ample stupidity, muddle-headedness, incapacity, shortsightedness, folly and several other serious deficiencies of both vision and courage in fighting cold wars, any gain in historical perspective which this book may offer may be offset by lack of insight into *current* misevaluations.

"The present is no more exempt from the sneer of the future than the past has been," wrote C. J. Keyser, one of the precursors of general semantics. Unfortunately, Tabori may be misunderstood as one who merely sneers at the past. Of course it is the author's prerogative to limit his analysis to stupidities in the past, but I wish that he had included examples of understanding today's stupidities by viewing them in that perspective which the passage of time offers the historian. To label tyranny as "in a way, organized and comprehensive stupidity," is neither original nor particularly helpful in the absence of any astute analysis of the stupidities which made today's tyrannies possible. Particularly dangerous nowadays are those stupidities which breed stupidity, like academic stupidity, for example, and those innumerable misevaluations broadcast by the mass media in the name of entertainment. Tabori's mapping of superstitions, red tape, stupidities in practicing law, and the vanities of infatuations are not much more helpful because he does not make his historical interpretations meaningful in the present. In this respect, *The Mind in the Making*, by James Harvey Robinson, might have been an approximate model of excellence.

IN SPITE of these shortcomings, however, we may recognize Paul Tabori as a friend because he prefers fact to myth, wisdom to merely accumulating more and more trivial information, action to endless inaction, science to pseudoscience. And we may welcome optimism: for example, "the wise or intelligent man will be able to sublimate and overcome his prejudices; the stupid man will be their hopeless thrall." Elsewhere, Tabori seems to evaluate mental health by lack of prejudice, which makes me wonder how the wise or intelligent man became prejudiced. Through ignorance? No; because Tabori claims that ignorance "in a way . . . is another form of stupidity . . . like fever being part of an illness but not the illness itself." Would the prejudiced man be ignorant because he was stupid, or stupid because he was ignorant? The difference would make a difference in teaching, but Tabori did not include his answer to any such question.

In the author's chapter on "The Stupidity of Doubt," there are examples of unconditional behavior. Opposed to the stupidity of doubt, apparently, is genius: "instinct and thought . . . completely merged"; we are left to interpret *genius* as "the perfect cooperation of instinct and reason."

The foregoing are fairly typical examples of Tabori's critical treatment of historical stupidities. Teachers of general semantics, especially the younger ones, may wish to harvest from Tabori's contribution a few of his best examples of misvaluations. These will be less likely to get the teacher in hot water than the daily harvest from newspapers, mass media, faculty meetings. . . .

ELTON S. CARTER

*State College, Pennsylvania*