

**Let Me Explain It Again
So You Still Won't
Understand**

REASONED STUPIDITY

by DAVID WOLF



SHORT ABSTRACT

Let Me Explain It Again So You Still Won't Understand introduces **Reasoned Stupidity**: a recurring form of error in which a defective premise is pursued competently, or a useful rule, category, metric, method or procedure is carried beyond the conditions that justified it. From ancient Mesopotamia, Greece, India and China to modern armies, schools, academia, bureaucracy, business and sport, the book traces how intelligence, expertise, measurement and authority can preserve error rather than correct it. Combining documented history, analysis and satire, it identifies a common architecture behind seemingly different failures. Its central warning is simple: **good reasoning can make a bad assumption more convincing, more durable and much harder to stop.**

Introduction

Sleep Faster

I was much younger when I first discovered that advice can solve a problem without making the slightest improvement to reality.

A friend and I were exhausted. We had too much to do, too little time in which to do it, and nowhere near enough time left for sleep. We complained about this to someone who was in a position to offer advice. We were not asking for a philosophical reconsideration of human existence or a new theory of fatigue. We were tired. We wanted more time to sleep.

The answer came immediately.

“Sleep faster. You’ll manage.”

I remember trying to understand what had just been proposed. We had asked for more time and had somehow been given greater speed. The shortage of hours had become a performance problem, and our principal failure was apparently the disappointing rate at which we were sleeping. Perhaps there was something we did not know. Somewhere, highly efficient sleepers might have been completing eight hours in five, waking refreshed and using the three hours they had saved to learn Portuguese, reorganize a garage or simply sleep again at a more competitive pace.

The sentence stayed with me because, ridiculous as it was, it was not gibberish. If there is too little time to finish something, doing it faster is often sensible. We walk faster when we are late, pack faster when the taxi is waiting and eat faster when lunch has been reduced to twelve minutes. The rule is useful. Apply it to sleep and the reasoning remains intact.

The only difficulty is sleep.

Years later I discovered that the advice had distinguished ancestors. A traditional Yiddish saying puts the matter with even greater efficiency: *Shlof gikher, men darf di kishn* — sleep faster, we need the pillows.

My adviser may therefore have been less an innovator than a late contributor to an established school of thought.

The Yiddish version improves the absurdity because it supplies a reason. You are not merely required to accelerate unconsciousness. Somebody else needs the pillows. The demand is perfectly understandable. The proposed solution is perfectly clear.

Only reality has failed to cooperate.

Yogi Berra wandered through the same territory with remarkable regularity. He reportedly took “a two hour nap from one to four” and advised people to “pair up in threes.” These are attractive specimens because they fail without requiring advanced mathematics. Two, three, one and four have committed no offence. The problem begins when perfectly respectable components are assembled into a proposition that cannot survive the thing it is describing.

But Berra also provides a useful warning. “Nobody goes there anymore. It’s too crowded” sounds like a contradiction until ordinary context restores the meaning: the old regulars no longer go because too many other people do. The sentence is odd. The reasoning is not.

That distinction matters.

This is not a collection of sentences that sound stupid.

For years I remembered “sleep faster” simply because it made me laugh. Much later I began noticing that it had relatives. They appeared in military folklore, classrooms, offices, sport and commerce, and eventually in stories written centuries and even millennia before anybody had invented the modern management seminar. Sometimes they had apparently been spoken in earnest. Sometimes folklore had polished them until the original speaker disappeared. Sometimes an intelligent writer had deliberately placed them in the mouth of a fool because the audience was expected to recognise the failure immediately.

What connected them was not merely that they were wrong. Plenty of wrong things are boring. Nor were they examples of people failing to think. Quite often the opposite had happened. A premise had been accepted, a rule applied, a calculation performed, a category trusted or a perfectly reasonable objective pursued. Thought was present, sometimes quite a lot of it.

The machinery could work beautifully.

It was the destination that caused concern.

I began calling the phenomenon **Reasoned Stupidity**.

The name is deliberately narrower than stupidity itself. This is not a book about stupid people, and I have no reliable instrument for identifying them. Intelligent people say ridiculous things. Educated people make elementary errors. Experts can apply a method brilliantly to a problem for which the method was never designed. A person who produces a magnificent piece of nonsense at ten in the morning may solve something genuinely difficult before lunch.

The object of interest is the failure, not the person.

Reasoned Stupidity requires a route we can follow. Somebody wants to achieve something real. A rule, assumption, category, measurement or method enters the reasoning. The next step makes sense. Often the next one does too. The failure appears because something useful has been carried beyond the conditions that made it useful.

A tool has exceeded its jurisdiction.

Speed is useful. It does not therefore follow that sleep has a speed.

Measurement is useful. It does not follow that everything measured has been measured meaningfully.

Authority is useful. It has yet to alter geometry.

That is enough theory for now. The rest of the book will provide more than adequate opportunities to damage perfectly respectable ideas by applying them enthusiastically.

This is also why the book is not a history of ignorance. A physician who lived before germ theory was not stupid because microbiology had not yet been discovered, and an astronomer cannot reasonably be mocked for failing to observe what the instruments of the period could not reveal. Knowing something that became known centuries after another person died is not much of an intellectual victory.

Mostly, we arrived later.

The examples that matter here must fail by standards already available to the people who first heard them. Three people did not constitute a pair in antiquity. An absent person was no more capable of raising a hand at roll call two thousand years ago than today. Half plus two thirds already exceeded one before anyone invented the spreadsheet.

No scientific revolution was required.

The objection was already in the room.

Nor am I interested in proverbs that sound foolish until somebody explains the wisdom hidden inside them, paradoxes designed to disturb ordinary language, or verbal collisions whose creators know perfectly well what they are doing. Those belong to respectable traditions of philosophy, literature and comedy.

A genuine specimen of Reasoned Stupidity behaves differently.

It becomes worse under examination.

The closer we look, the less there is to rescue.

The strongest specimens also possess practical ambition. Somebody is trying to organize people, save time, measure performance, enforce a rule, allocate resources, improve a result or solve a problem. This is what gives the absurdity its peculiar force. The foolishness is not merely wrong. It has been given something useful to do.

Once foolishness acquires a job, it can acquire a career.

Human beings discovered the comic possibilities of this arrangement very early. Mesopotamian scribes played with professional forms and procedures. Greek writers mocked investigations in which method acquired more dignity than purpose. Indian and Chinese storytellers created characters who used measurements, evidence and sensible principles so faithfully that they damaged the very thing those tools were supposed to protect. Greek and Roman humour developed the learned fool, whose problem was not that he could not reason but that he could.

That historical trail matters because it removes one comforting explanation. The modern commander, teacher, official, academic, coach or manager who produces a magnificent piece of broken reasoning is not a recent invention. He has ancestors. The vocabulary changes. The uniforms change. The forms improve.

The mistake survives.

Certain failures keep returning. Numbers can look precise without being meaningful. Instructions can be perfectly clear and impossible to obey. A solution can succeed by destroying whatever the problem was supposed to protect.

And time, despite several thousand years of complaints about its management, has remained particularly resistant to persuasion.

The sources for these examples will be treated seriously. If an ancient story has a documented origin, I want to know it. If a quotation is doubtful, it will remain doubtful. If something belongs to folklore, folklore is what it will be called. A good joke does not become a historical event merely because enough people repeat it, and attaching a famous name to anonymous nonsense does not improve the nonsense.

The point is not to turn this into an academic monograph. It is simply that genuine absurdity is more satisfying than counterfeit evidence.

Once the evidence is secure, however, restraint becomes less urgent.

Later in the book, some of history's finest examples of Reasoned Stupidity will receive the scholarly attention they never requested. Hypotheses will be developed.

Classifications will be devised. Questions that should perhaps have been allowed to die quietly will be examined with unnecessary seriousness.

The facts will remain real.

What we do to them afterwards is another matter.

There is one serious idea beneath all this. Human beings are often very good at reasoning once a premise has been admitted. We are not always equally good at checking the admission papers. Intelligence does not necessarily protect us. Sometimes it merely gives the mistake more processing power. Expertise can refine it. Measurement can dignify it. Procedure can preserve it. Authority can keep it moving.

None of those things repairs the premise.

And explanation does not necessarily repair it either. Once the wrong assumption has settled comfortably into the argument, explaining the argument more clearly may simply make the misunderstanding more efficient. At that point I can explain it again, with greater precision, so that you still will not understand.

That is why these examples are funny, but also why they matter. The idiot who knows nothing is easy to dismiss. The more interesting danger is the proposition that arrives with reasons, numbers and respectable vocabulary, survives several intelligent people and continues moving because each individual step looks familiar.

Eventually reality objects.

Reality has poor manners that way.

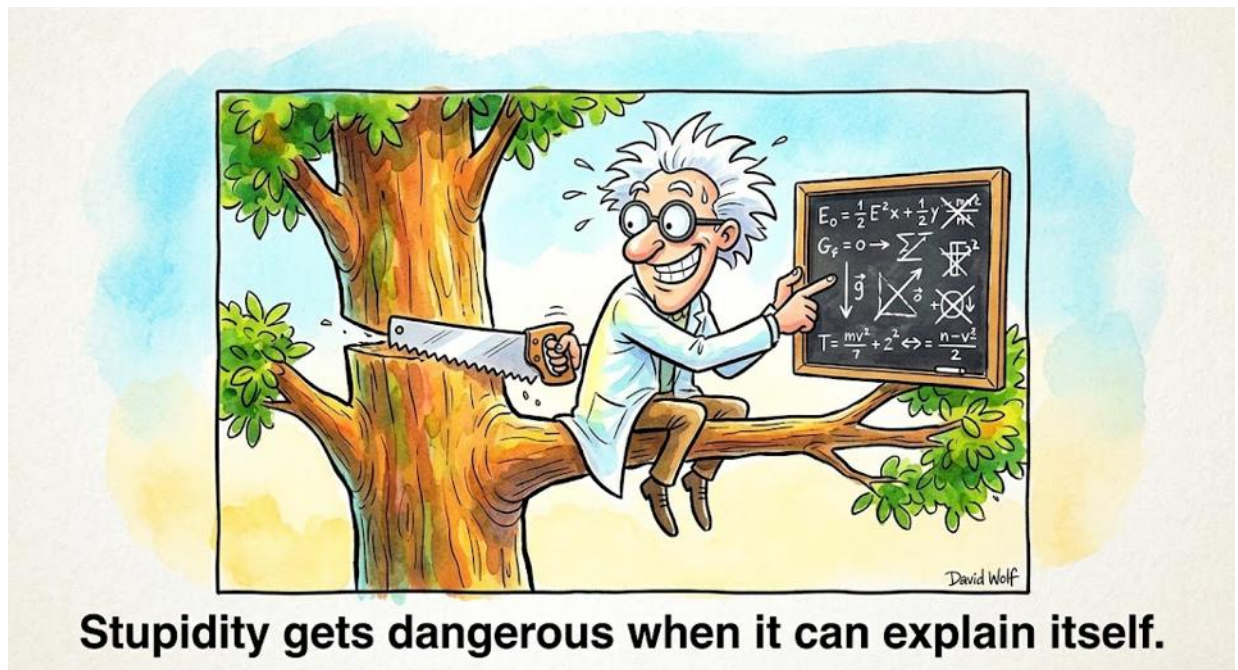
But that is enough seriousness for a book that began with two tired young men asking for more sleep. We had a simple problem and received a clear solution. It took me decades to appreciate how little was wrong with the reasoning once one removed the inconvenient requirement that it actually work.

We should have slept faster.

Apparently, somebody needed the pillows.

Part I - Before There Were Sergeants

Chapter 1



What Counts as Reasoned Stupidity?

The first difficulty in writing a book about stupidity is deciding what deserves admission. If every wrong answer, bad decision, failed prediction, embarrassing sentence and regrettable purchase qualifies, the category becomes useless almost immediately. Humanity has produced more than enough material without enlarging the collection, and the word *stupid* itself is so accommodating that it can be applied to almost anything once the speaker is sufficiently irritated. This book is therefore not about identifying stupid people. I have no reliable test for doing that, and I would be suspicious of anyone who claims to possess one. Intelligent people say ridiculous things, educated people make elementary errors, and experts occasionally apply sophisticated methods to problems those methods were never designed to solve. A person who produces a magnificent piece of nonsense at ten in the morning may still solve something genuinely difficult before lunch.

What matters is the failure itself. Somewhere between a problem and its proposed solution, a premise is accepted, a category is trusted, a rule is applied or a method begins to operate. The reasoning may then proceed quite competently, which is precisely what makes the phenomenon worth examining. Pure confusion offers little to follow; competent reasoning moving confidently in the wrong direction gives us a journey. The interesting question is not whether somebody thought badly in some general sense, but how an apparently sensible route remained open after the conditions

that made it sensible had disappeared. Calling this Reasoned Stupidity is the easy part. Deciding what deserves the name is harder.

The first condition is that the failure must have been visible by the standards of its own time. This immediately excludes a vast and tempting collection of historical mistakes. Ancient people believed many things that later proved false, just as we almost certainly do today. A physician who lived before germ theory was not stupid because microorganisms had not yet entered medicine, and an astronomer cannot reasonably be mocked for failing to observe what the instruments of the period could not reveal. A navigator using the best map available may reach the wrong place without having committed any offence against reasoning. There is no intellectual achievement in knowing something that became known centuries after somebody else died. Mostly, we were born later.

For a historical example to qualify, the objection must already have been available. If the problem is arithmetic, the arithmetic needed to expose it must have been understood. If an instruction is impossible, no future scientific discovery should be required before somebody can notice the impossibility. Three people did not constitute a pair in antiquity, an absent person could no more answer roll call two thousand years ago than today, and no scientific revolution was needed to establish that half plus two-thirds exceeds one. Historical distance makes condescension dangerously easy. Ancient texts often reach us without the assumptions, wordplay, professional conventions or everyday knowledge that once surrounded them, and unless enough of that world can be reconstructed to show that the defect was recognisable there, the example stays outside. If the meaning of an ancient joke has been lost, that tells us nothing by itself about whether its original audience understood it. Sometimes the missing piece is ours.

The second condition is that there must be a route from the problem to the proposed solution that can be reconstructed. Pure nonsense is not enough. People misspeak, reverse expressions, choose the wrong word, forget the beginning of a sentence before reaching its end and occasionally arrive somewhere that bears only a diplomatic relationship to where they started. Such moments can be funny, but there may be nothing behind them except a tongue that moved faster than quality control. Reasoned Stupidity requires more. Somebody wants to accomplish something, accepts a premise or rule and proceeds in a way that remains intelligible for at least part of the journey. The best specimens often contain several perfectly respectable moves before the structure collapses.

“Sleep faster” illustrates the point neatly. When there is too little time to complete an activity, increasing speed may help. We walk faster when late, pack faster when the taxi is waiting and occasionally eat faster when lunch has been reduced to an administrative rumour. The underlying rule is sensible. The failure appears when that rule is transferred to sleep and continues operating as though nothing important has changed. Nothing is inherently wrong with the tool; it has simply been sent somewhere it cannot work. A strong specimen therefore reveals not only that the conclusion is absurd, but how a plausible rule reached a place where its usefulness ended.

The third condition is that the defect must be structural rather than a simple verbal accident. If somebody says “three” when he meant “two,” immediately notices the mistake and corrects himself, almost nothing remains to investigate. The absurdity disappears with the correction because the underlying reasoning was never committed to it. A stronger case survives long enough to reveal an assumption, category, rule or method that was genuinely doing work. This excludes many excellent comic lines. “Shut your mouth when you’re talking to me,” “Don’t look at me in that tone of voice,” and “If you break both legs, don’t come running to me” all contain splendid internal collisions, but in most of their surviving forms the collision is deliberate. Whoever shaped the line already knew what was wrong with it. The contradiction is the joke itself, whereas the central specimens in this book require somebody inside the reasoning who has not yet noticed the failure.

Folklore complicates the matter because human memory is a poor archivist and an excellent comedy editor. A foolish instruction can circulate for decades, losing unnecessary words, acquiring better timing and eventually attaching itself to a sergeant, professor, politician or famous comedian who was nowhere near its birth. That does not make folklore worthless; it changes what can responsibly be claimed. A quotation preserved in a contemporary source is one kind of evidence. A military saying with no recoverable speaker is another. A joke attributed simultaneously to three celebrities, two armies and somebody’s grandfather has probably ceased to be reliable biography, although it may be enjoying a distinguished career as folklore. Comic quality and historical status must remain separate. A joke does not become a historical event merely because it deserves to have happened.

The fourth condition is that invented foolishness may qualify when somebody inside the story takes the reasoning seriously and the audience is expected to recognise why it fails. This matters because some of the oldest and most revealing examples in the book are literary. A playwright can create a learned fool, a storyteller

can invent an official who applies a rule with disastrous precision, and an entire imaginary town can cooperate in a project whose principal weakness is the project itself. None of this proves that a corresponding event really occurred. It establishes something narrower and very useful: the pattern of failure was recognisable enough to sustain a joke.

Historical event and historical recognition are different kinds of evidence. A surviving document may allow us to say that a particular instruction was actually issued. A literary joke permits a different claim: people already recognised that kind of reasoning as ridiculous. Satire cannot tell us the average intelligence of Greek philosophers, Egyptian scribes or medieval villagers, nor should it be asked to. It exaggerates, compresses and rearranges precisely because ordinary reality is often inconsiderate about comic timing. Its value lies in the fact that the distortion still had to be intelligible. If the audience does not know what a sensible person should have done, there is nothing for the fool to overturn.

Paradox belongs outside for almost the opposite reason. Some statements sound absurd because they are designed to disturb ordinary assumptions about logic or language. Gongsun Long's famous claim that a white horse is not a horse is an obvious temptation until one begins examining it. The argument concerns the relationship between a general category and a qualified member of it, and analysis makes the problem more interesting rather than less. That is bad news for this book. If closer examination reveals conceptual depth, philosophy may keep the specimen. Reasoned Stupidity usually behaves in the opposite direction: the more carefully it is inspected, the less there is to rescue. Wise proverbs receive the same exemption. Their literal wording may be impossible while their meaning becomes perfectly sensible once explained. "Sleep faster" has had several decades to reveal such hidden wisdom to me and has so far declined.

The fifth condition is that the reasoning must at least pretend to solve a problem, answer a question or achieve a real objective. Reasoned Stupidity needs practical ambition. Somebody wants to save time, allocate resources, organise people, enforce a rule, obtain information, improve performance or remove an obstacle. The proposition becomes interesting because it presents itself as useful. "A triangle has four sides" is simply false. Imagine instead a supervisor assigning four guards to the four corners of a circular room. Security is a real objective, assigning guards is a sensible activity, and the concept of *corner* has somehow retained administrative authority after the room stopped supplying any. The foolishness has acquired a job.

Once it has a job, it can become surprisingly durable. Authority may prolong a bad premise because the listener first has to consider whether the instruction has been misunderstood. Numbers create similar hesitation. Precision and correctness are not the same thing, but “37.4 per cent” possesses a professional confidence that “something around a third” can only envy. Procedures add another layer of reassurance because following an established process feels safer than asking whether the process still serves its purpose. None of these things creates the original error, but each can help it survive. Later chapters will examine what happens when metrics, procedures and authority stop merely decorating bad reasoning and begin protecting it from correction.

Taken together, the five conditions provide a practical test without pretending that human speech can be sorted with mathematical purity. The questions are straightforward: what was the person trying to accomplish; was the information needed to expose the failure available at the time; is there a route from premise to conclusion; does the defect survive correction of a mere verbal slip; and is somebody within the event or story actually relying on the reasoning? Borderline cases will remain. Human beings did not organise their conversations for the convenience of future taxonomists.

There is also a quicker field test: repair the specimen. If changing one word turns it into a normal instruction, it is probably a slip. If explanation uncovers a deeper meaning, it is probably a proverb or paradox. If modern scientific knowledge is necessary before the error becomes visible, the problem is historical ignorance. If reasonable context makes the apparent contradiction sensible, the candidate should be released with its reputation restored. But if correcting the central assumption destroys the entire method by which the proposed solution was supposed to work, the specimen is probably close to the territory of this book.

The repair test protects the collection from material that is funny but unstable. Consider the familiar suggestion, “Drive faster so we reach the petrol station before the fuel runs out.” It resembles “sleep faster,” but closer inspection produces an escape route: depending on distance, speed and fuel consumption, reaching the station sooner might actually matter. The joke asks us to pretend that the physical relationship is simpler than it is. There is too much good material available to admit weak candidates merely because they are funny. A strong specimen should remain absurd after reasonable cross-examination.

The category also has intellectual neighbours, and pretending otherwise would be an unfortunate way to begin a book about defective reasoning. Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman showed how useful heuristics can produce systematic errors in judgement

under uncertainty (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Mats Alvesson and André Spicer later used the term *functional stupidity* for organisational conditions in which reflexivity and broader intellectual engagement are restricted (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012). Charles Goodhart and Donald Campbell identified influential problems involving indicators whose behaviour changes when they become instruments of control or targets of policy (Goodhart, 1975; Campbell, 1976). These traditions overlap with parts of what follows, but none is simply another name for the category being developed here.

The difference lies in what the analysis follows. A cognitive bias may explain why someone accepts a defective premise; an organisational culture may explain why nobody challenges it; incentives may explain why a distorted metric survives. Reasoned Stupidity asks what happens when the chain of reasoning itself is reconstructed and a useful rule, category, representation or method is found operating beyond the circumstances that justified it. The claim is not that the mechanisms in this book have gone undiscovered. It is that failures usually discussed in separate contexts begin to resemble one another when the reasoning, rather than the thinker, becomes the unit of analysis. The bricks are familiar. What matters is the architecture they repeatedly form.

That is enough novelty to claim without manufacturing more. Some cases in the chapters ahead will fit comfortably inside established theories, while others will combine mechanisms usually treated separately. Their place here depends not on whether psychology, economics or organisational studies already have something intelligent to say about them, but on whether there is a traceable movement from a legitimate starting tool to an illegitimate destination. A book about Reasoned Stupidity would place itself in an awkward position if its first act of originality were to ignore everyone who had previously studied error.

Interpretation requires the same discipline. Once patterns become visible, it becomes tempting to insist that every ridiculous sentence reveals something profound about authority, institutions, language or the human condition. That would merely replace one form of excessive reasoning with another. Sometimes a stupid sentence is simply a stupid sentence, and I am prepared to allow it that dignity. Larger patterns have to emerge because similar structures recur across periods and settings, not because every joke is forced to carry a theory on its back. The factual layer of the book will therefore remain separate from the liberties taken after the facts are secure. If an ancient source is known, it will be identified. If an attribution is doubtful, doubt will survive. If something belongs to folklore, it will be called folklore. Genuine absurdity is much more satisfying than invented evidence.

Caution also applies to the people who produce these failures. Reasoned Stupidity must never become a permanent diagnosis attached to an individual. Once somebody is dismissed as belonging to a class called “idiots,” the mechanism disappears behind the insult. Intelligence may even make a defective proposition more durable. A weak idea expressed clumsily can die quickly; the same idea explained elegantly may survive because it looks as though somebody has thought about it. Give it confidence and people may hesitate. Give it numbers and they may start taking notes. Give it an office and correcting it may eventually require a budget of its own.

At that point the subject begins to move beyond comedy without abandoning it. The solitary fool in a story usually harms himself, his horse, his garden or whichever object has been unfortunate enough to enter the plot. The same reasoning structure becomes more consequential when its owner has authority, when a measurement determines rewards, when a procedure governs an institution or when several competent people each perform one sensible step inside a collectively absurd process. Scale is not part of the definition, but it changes the consequences. Power improves the ability of reasoning to travel. It does not select the direction.

The borders are now narrow enough to proceed. Historical ignorance remains outside because the necessary knowledge was genuinely unavailable. Pure nonsense remains outside because there is no route worth reconstructing. Verbal slips and deliberate verbal collisions do not qualify merely because they are funny, while paradoxes and proverbs leave the collection when explanation rescues them. Fiction remains admissible as evidence of historical recognition when the character takes the faulty reasoning seriously. The neighbouring literatures remain exactly that: neighbours, not synonyms.

What we are looking for is more specific: reasoning directed toward a real objective, moving through recognisable steps, in which an assumption, rule, category, measurement or method continues to operate after the circumstances that made it useful have ended. The reasoning may be disciplined, sophisticated and even elegant. None of that guarantees that somebody checked whether the road was still there.

Now we can go looking for its ancestors.

Chapter 2



Civilization began. So did documented stupidity.

Mesopotamia and Egypt: The First Professional Who Didn't Understand What He Was Doing

Long before anyone invented the management consultant, human beings had already discovered the professional. This was a considerable improvement over asking whichever person happened to be standing nearest. A society could train someone, give him specialised knowledge, recognise his role and expect him to know what he was doing. The arrangement worked well enough to become indispensable, but it also created a new comic possibility: the professional could possess the training, vocabulary, tools and title while the practical sense that justified them had apparently taken the afternoon off. We cannot identify the first person to achieve this distinction. He probably lived before writing, which was fortunate for him. What the surviving record allows us to see is something more useful: once expertise became important enough to acquire recognisable forms, people also became capable of laughing when those forms remained intact after their purpose had begun to disappear.

Professional incompetence, however, is not automatically Reasoned Stupidity. A scribe who cannot calculate may simply be a bad scribe, just as an official who has forgotten a procedure may be careless rather than conceptually interesting. A stronger

case requires something we can follow: a legitimate form, objective or method remains in operation while its connection with the purpose that justified it weakens or vanishes. Ancient evidence must therefore pass the same border controls as modern evidence. Some texts will provide genuine specimens, others will show that ancient audiences already recognised the relevant kind of failure, and a few very attractive candidates will remain outside because four thousand years of missing context cannot be repaired merely by enthusiasm.

Mesopotamia is a natural place to begin because writing there became part of specialised professional life very early. Scribes learned complex systems of signs, copied lexical, literary and scholarly texts, performed calculations and produced documents required by temples, palaces, households and administration. Writing did more than preserve information. It allowed organised society to act through information: transactions could affect property, calculations could distribute resources, and letters could carry authority beyond the physical presence of the person who sent them. Once professional forms became important, they also became available for parody. Assyriologist Shana Zaia has shown that humorous compositions belonged to the world of first-millennium BCE Mesopotamian scribal culture and could function pedagogically rather than merely interrupting serious education. A form could be learned, among other ways, by watching someone make it misbehave (Zaia, 2025).

One of the most useful examples is the Neo-Assyrian composition conventionally called *Real Estate for the Birds*. It imitates the machinery of a land transaction while allowing the contents to become increasingly ridiculous. Property, parties, payment, witnesses and authentication remain recognisable, while supernatural and avian elements invade the business. The text's association with scribal education is strongly suggestive rather than certain because its colophon is lost. What matters here is that the document remains recognisably legal even after the substance has become comic. The form does not object to its cargo. It continues carrying nonsense with the composure of a procedure that has been properly completed.

That does not make *Real Estate for the Birds* a central specimen of Reasoned Stupidity. Nobody inside the performance needs to believe that Assyria has

established a functioning property market for birds. The absurdity is deliberate, and deliberate nonsense has already been excluded from the centre of the category. The text matters for another reason: its comedy assumes that professional form can be detached from sensible content while continuing to look authoritative. The scribe understands the form well enough to exploit that separation. A correctly structured document, the joke suggests, does not acquire an internal alarm merely because what it is processing has become ridiculous. Humanity would later add forms in triplicate, approval signatures and electronic workflow, but the underlying discovery required only clay.

The *Gilgamesh Letter* offers a related example without requiring a long detour. The Sultantepe composition belongs to the Mesopotamian genre of fictional letters, works written long after the kings or heroes they purported to represent and associated with scribal training. Kurtuluş Kıymet describes the Sultantepe *Gilgamesh Letter* as a seventh-century BCE fictional royal letter in which Gilgamesh makes extravagant demands, fitting a genre in which famous rulers and heroes could be used for deliberately exaggerated correspondence (Kıymet, 2024). Again, the value lies less in the supposed decision than in the recognisable professional vehicle carrying it. Authority can be imitated perfectly while the content is made absurd on purpose. That is not yet failed reasoning, but it shows how early the external language of competence could itself become an object of comedy.

Mesopotamian literature then gives us a figure who comes considerably closer to the centre. The *aluzinnu* was a comic, burlesque figure whose precise place in Mesopotamian culture resists a neat modern label. Scott B. Noegel describes him as a male trickster and quasi-clown who mocked professional and religious expertise, and records an episode in which he claims mastery of the exorcist's arts. His procedure begins with recognisable ritual competence: he takes control of the troubled house, prepares the holy-water basin and binds the scapegoat. He then stuffs a mule skin with straw, binds reeds, sets them alight and throws the fire inside. The episode caricatures the exorcist as a bungler whose attempt to fumigate the house against demons and dangerous creatures proceeds rather more comprehensively than the owner might have preferred (Noegel, 2019).

This example comes much closer to Reasoned Stupidity because there is a route worth reconstructing. The problem is unwanted and dangerous occupants of a house; the specialist acts to remove them; his intervention becomes so comprehensive that the house itself is endangered along with whatever was supposed to leave. The joke depends on the audience understanding that a successful procedure cannot sensibly be judged without remembering what the procedure was meant to protect. A later chapter will examine this mechanism in full. For the present historical argument, one point is sufficient: Mesopotamian comedy could already recognise a specialist who remained committed to his procedure after the procedure had ceased to serve the person who needed it.

This remains evidence of historical recognition, not proof that an actual Mesopotamian exorcist burned down an actual client's house. Somebody fashioned the joke, and an audience could be expected to understand why the exorcist's energetic competence had become ridiculous. Mockery of professional failure presupposes some idea of professional success. A useless exorcist is funny only where a useful exorcist is imaginable, just as a bad scribe matters because writing matters. The satire does not undermine the existence of expertise; it depends upon it.

A Sumerian proverb offers the opposite lesson. In the Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature, a dog enters a tavern and announces that it cannot see anything and will "open this one." The wording survives, but whatever once made the line immediately intelligible has proved less durable. Wordplay, cultural convention or some tavern association obvious to its audience may have vanished while the sentence survived. Declaring the Sumerians irrational because we no longer understand their joke would simply turn our missing information into a judgement on theirs. The dog therefore remains acquitted, not because the line has suddenly become clear, but because uncertainty is evidence of uncertainty and nothing more.

The exclusion matters. Antiquity is dangerously easy to turn into a warehouse of strange sentences whose original instructions have been misplaced. The greater the distance, the more tempting it becomes to confuse missing context with missing logic. A historical argument gains credibility not only from the examples it admits but from the examples it is prepared to reject. Some jokes cross thousands of years because

their mechanism depends on arithmetic, physical movement or a practical objective that remains transparent. Others arrive with essential parts missing. Age alone cannot supply them.

What Mesopotamia gives us is already sufficient. Professional forms could be parodied; specialised knowledge could become comic material; audiences could recognise a difference between performing expertise and preserving the purpose that gave expertise value. The *aluzinnu* adds the strongest element: a specialist can remain busily engaged in solving the stated problem while ordinary judgement is already asking whether the treatment has become worse than the complaint. Writing did not invent this possibility. It merely gave some of its early comic forms the enormous historical advantage of surviving the people who told the joke.

Egypt offers a different kind of evidence because professional competence itself becomes the subject of sustained literary attack. Papyrus Anastasi I, preserved in the British Museum, is a Nineteenth-Dynasty hieratic literary manuscript containing the composition conventionally known as *The Satirical Letter*. Hans-Werner Fischer-Elfert's edition and commentary established the text as a major source for the study of Egyptian scribal culture (Fischer-Elfert, 1983, 1986). The composition stages a contest between the scribes Hori and Amenemope in which Hori subjects his rival's claims to professional competence to prolonged ridicule. The joke is not merely that Amenemope is insulted. Hori repeatedly accepts the professional identity being claimed and then asks what that identity can actually do. The British Museum itself lists Fischer-Elfert's 1983 text edition and 1986 translation and commentary in its catalogue record for the papyrus.

That is a much more dangerous form of criticism. A title can survive mockery surprisingly well; practical demands are less polite. The professional world invoked by the text includes mathematics, construction, provisioning, travel and administrative knowledge, because an Egyptian scribe could be expected to do considerably more than produce elegant writing. Hori's attack works by placing advertised competence beside the tasks that give it meaning. If the title says that someone can calculate, quantities eventually appear. If it implies competence in logistics, materials and

people have to move. If it claims familiarity with foreign routes, the road is entitled to participate in the evaluation.

Annette Imhausen's study of mathematics in ancient Egyptian culture is especially useful because it prevents this portion of the satire from being turned into a modern school examination with a convenient answer sheet. Her discussion of Papyrus Anastasi I identifies practical mathematical contexts including digging a lake, constructing a brick ramp, transporting an obelisk, erecting a colossal monument and calculating rations for an expedition (Imhausen, 2016). The point is not that Amenemope is simply unable to perform five elementary sums. Several of the ancient problems resist the sort of unique reconstruction a modern textbook exercise encourages. The satire is broader: Hori invokes the body of practical knowledge that professional status is supposed to represent.

For our purposes, those examples need not be inspected one by one. They all apply the same pressure. Construction forces reputation to meet quantities; provisioning turns numbers into food for actual bodies; monument transport reminds the administrator that stone retains mass regardless of the elegance of the person describing it. A professional title may carry prestige, but it does not reduce the number of bricks required for a ramp or persuade an obelisk to cooperate with logistics. The mathematical material matters because it moves the dispute from verbal boasting toward tasks whose demands cannot be negotiated away by style.

Hori eventually takes the examination beyond calculation and onto the road, invoking places and practical difficulties associated with travel in Syria-Palestine, horses, equipment and chariots. Once again, the underlying method is simple. Knowledge that sounds impressive in a room is required to survive contact with terrain. A memorised place name is not yet a journey completed, and familiarity with the vocabulary of a chariot does not repair one when something breaks. Hori's satire repeatedly places professional description beside professional performance and allows the growing distance between them to do the insulting.

Most of Papyrus Anastasi I is not, by itself, a clean specimen of Reasoned Stupidity. If Amenemope merely lacks the mathematical, geographical or administrative

competence expected of a good scribe, the joke concerns incompetence, and incompetence has already been excluded as a sufficient condition. The text is more useful precisely because we do not force it across that border. It shows a culture in which expertise mattered enough to have standards, and in which those standards could be turned satirically against the person who claimed the title. Professional identity, vocabulary and prestige were already separable from demonstrated capacity. The strongest attack on expertise was not to declare expertise worthless but to accept its promises and ask the expert to keep them.

Mesopotamia and Egypt therefore contribute different parts of the historical picture. Mesopotamian scribal parody shows that professional form can remain recognisable while its content becomes ridiculous. The *aluzinnu* shows that a procedure can continue with great purpose after ordinary judgement has begun to question what the procedure is accomplishing. Papyrus Anastasi I shows that professional identity itself can be tested by placing the title beside the work it supposedly certifies. These are not identical mechanisms, and forcing them into one would weaken the very category this book is trying to define. What connects them is an increasingly visible separation between the appearance or machinery of competence and the practical sense that gives competence its value.

There is also a simple reason why the earliest surviving evidence is so heavily populated by scribes and specialists. The written record is not a representative sample of human foolishness. Farmers, labourers, merchants, soldiers and parents presumably produced material of formidable quality, but most conversations disappeared when the people involved stopped having them. Scribes possessed the technology capable of preserving both professional knowledge and jokes about professional knowledge. The educated fool therefore entered the historical record with an unfair advantage: better documentation. The archive does not prove that professionals were the first people to reason badly. It merely proves that they were among the first whose colleagues could arrange for the evidence to outlive them.

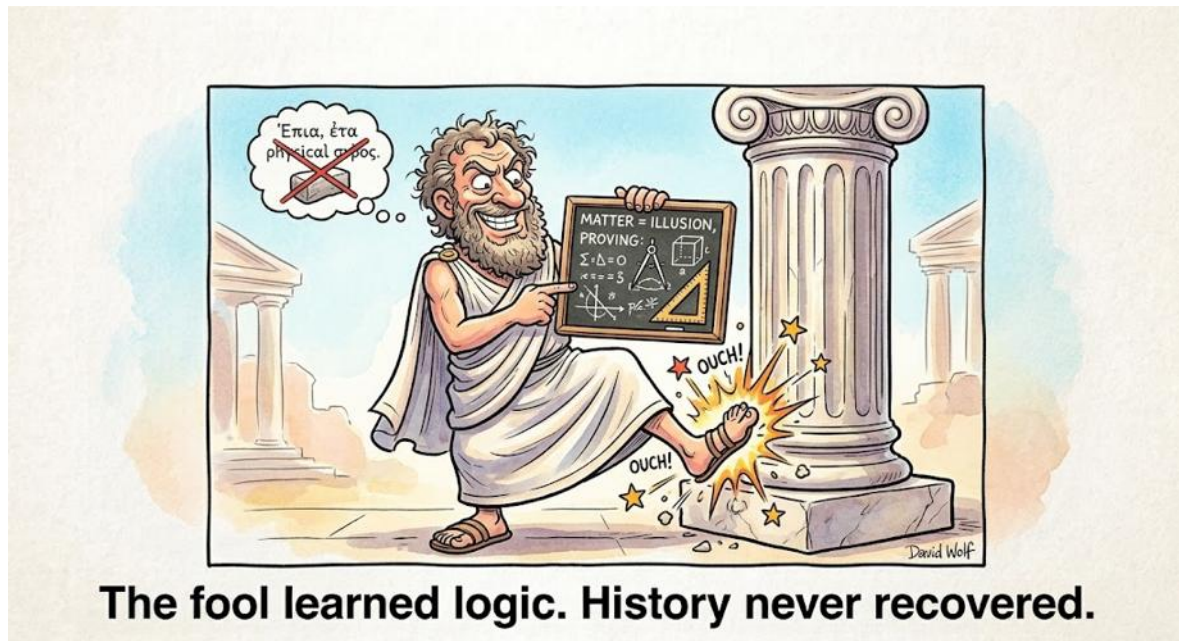
Writing gave absurdity another advantage as well. A spoken mistake usually remains attached to an occasion and a speaker; a written one can be copied, reshaped and handed to someone who never met either. A professional joke can become educational material, a literary type can survive its original setting, and a reasoning mechanism can travel after the owner has disappeared. That development will become increasingly important as the book moves through later cultures. Names, professions and costumes can change with surprising ease while the structure underneath remains recognisable.

The people who produced these texts had their own genres, educational traditions, professional rivalries and reasons for laughing. There is no need to lend them a modern taxonomy they never used. What their surviving literature does permit us to say is narrower and stronger: sophisticated scribal cultures could already laugh when professional form became detached from sensible content, when specialised activity lost touch with the purpose it was supposed to serve, and when a title proved easier to possess than the competence it advertised.

That removes one comforting explanation before the historical journey has travelled very far. Modern corporations, bureaucracy, management theory, spreadsheets, PowerPoint and email did not invent the possibility that professional machinery might continue after common sense had left the premises. They would later expand the facilities, improve distribution and provide excellent opportunities for meetings about the matter, but they arrived late. Clay tablets were already capable of preserving formal nonsense, and papyrus was already asking whether the man with the title could actually do the job.

The first professional who failed that test remains anonymous. The archive was kinder in those days. What survives is more useful than his name: evidence that once expertise became visible, human beings were already capable of recognising the comic distance between knowing the form and understanding what the form was for.

Chapter 3



Greece, Rome, India and China: The Fool Learns to Think

By the time we leave the scribes of Mesopotamia and Egypt, foolishness has already acquired professional clothing. A legal form can remain impeccable while its contents become ridiculous, a specialist can continue performing after the purpose of the procedure has begun to disappear, and a title can prove considerably easier to possess than the competence it advertises. The ancient world did not leave the fool there. As philosophy, rhetoric, teaching and other forms of specialised inquiry became more visible, the comic possibilities expanded. The fool could now observe, compare, measure, classify, infer from evidence and construct a method. He no longer needed merely to know too little. He could think quite hard and still arrive somewhere that common sense had wisely declined to visit.

Classical Athens provides an early and unusually sophisticated stage in that development, although it should not be mistaken for a clean specimen of Reasoned Stupidity. In 423 BCE Aristophanes produced *Clouds*, a comedy in which the stage Socrates and his intellectual circle are comic constructions rather than dependable portraits of the historical philosopher. Early in the play, Strepsiades hears of an investigation involving Socrates, Chaerephon and a flea. The researchers want to determine how many of its own feet the flea can jump. To obtain the appropriate unit, wax is used to take an impression of its feet, producing tiny slippers from which the jump can supposedly be measured. The episode belongs to Aristophanes himself; later generations did not have to improve it for us.

It would nevertheless be a mistake to admit the experiment simply because its practical value is difficult to identify. Serious inquiry has often begun with questions whose usefulness was far from apparent, and intellectual history would have been considerably poorer if every investigator had first been required to satisfy a procurement committee. Aristophanes gives us something narrower and more useful: an early comic image of the **learned fool**, the investigator whose refinement of method has become disproportionate to ordinary judgement about what the method is accomplishing. The measuring apparatus is wonderfully fitted to the flea. Whether the question deserves this level of ingenuity has received less attention. The scene therefore belongs primarily to the history of recognition rather than to our central specimen collection. An Athenian audience could already laugh at a thinker whose technique appeared to have become more impressive than his judgement.

That distinction matters because the fool has acquired new equipment. In the earlier scribal world, professional form could lose contact with practical function; here, thought itself becomes comic when technique acquires momentum of its own. An ignorant person reaching a wrong conclusion offers little machinery to inspect. A comic intellectual provides the opposite pleasure: the audience watches intelligence working, understands the ingenuity of the procedure and nevertheless senses that somebody should have looked up from the apparatus earlier. The equipment intended to improve thought has joined the joke. The fool is no longer intellectually underfunded.

A second development follows once jokes begin to travel independently of the people to whom they were first attached. Ancient references show that joke books and collections of reusable comic material existed long before the surviving *Philogelos*. Classicist Stephanie West notes references in Plautus to joke books and stresses that *Philogelos* is the only ancient example of the genre to survive substantially intact, not the first such collection ancient people knew (West, 2016, 2017). Once a comic mechanism becomes reusable, biography becomes optional. A foolish action attributed to one general may later belong to a scholar, a doctor, a provincial stereotype or whichever character an audience is already prepared to suspect. People die; successful jokes arrange alternative ownership.

The Roman general Lucius Mummius provides a useful example precisely because the history is less tidy than the joke. After Corinth fell to Rome in 146 BCE, Greek paintings and statues were transported to Italy. Writing more than a century later, Velleius Paterculus portrays Mummius as so lacking in artistic appreciation that he warned those carrying the works that, if they lost them, they would have to replace

them with new ones. Strabo preserves a separate tradition of Mummius' indifference to valuable Greek art, but not the same replacement remark, so the two accounts should not be fused into a single eyewitness story.

We cannot treat Velleius' anecdote as a transcript from the harbour at Corinth. Its literary purpose is obvious, and later discussion has raised the possibility that a replacement clause may originally have reflected an ordinary principle of transport liability. That uncertainty does not ruin the example; it tells us what kind of example it is. The strongest claim is not that Mummius unquestionably reasoned this way, but that an ancient author expected his readers to understand why attributing such reasoning to him made him ridiculous.

The comic mechanism is exceptionally clean. A sensible rule for replaceable goods has been transferred to a category where equivalence no longer works. Ordinary cargo may be replaced by another quantity or object of the same kind. A particular work of art cannot become the same work merely because someone produces another painting of similar dimensions. The general rule remains useful; what has failed is its jurisdiction. The physical object can be replaced. The identity and history that made it valuable are less cooperative.

This matters because Reasoned Stupidity does not always require a false rule. Quite often the rule is perfectly respectable. The trouble begins when a category such as *cargo* conceals a difference that matters. Once that happens, competent reasoning can proceed from a classification that has already done most of the damage. Later versions of comparable jokes no longer require Lucius Mummius at all. Once the mechanism is recognised, a stock fool can inherit it and spare history the inconvenience of verification.

India gives us something stronger because the reasoning itself is preserved in a compact instructional story. The Buddhist Jātaka tradition contains closely related versions of the *Ārāmadūsaka Jātaka*, the "Garden Spoiler," in which a gardener leaves the watering of young trees to monkeys while he attends a festival. Their leader accepts a genuine constraint: water is limited and should not be wasted. He therefore proposes differentiated treatment. Trees with large roots should receive more water and those with small roots less. So far the management principle sounds almost suspiciously modern.

Unfortunately, the roots are underground.

The monkeys solve the measurement problem by pulling up the trees so that the roots can be inspected before water is allocated according to size. They carry out the

procedure conscientiously and achieve the result available to any garden whose plants are repeatedly uprooted for the purpose of improving their care. The tale survives in closely related forms as Jātakas 46 and 268, and the tradition identifying the scene with a Bharhut relief goes back to Alexander Cunningham's documentation of the monument and the early English Jātaka translation (Cunningham, 1879; Chalmers, 1895).

This case enters our collection much more comfortably than Aristophanes' flea. There is a practical objective, a real resource constraint and an intelligible chain of reasoning. Water should be conserved. Different trees may require different quantities. Root size is selected as the relevant variable. Root size must therefore be determined. The failure lies in the method chosen to acquire the information. The monkeys are neither lazy nor rebellious; they are organised, economical and attempting to allocate a scarce resource according to need. What they fail to notice is that the act of measurement destroys the object the information was supposed to help.

The garden has acquired evidence-based management before acquiring a survival plan.

The story itself uses foolish effort as instruction, but its reasoning structure is more useful to us than its explicit moral. "Do not destroy the object in the process of collecting information intended to improve it" is excellent advice and has almost no chance of surviving as a popular story for two thousand years. Monkeys carefully uprooting trees in order to water them more accurately have better retention characteristics. Comedy does not merely decorate the lesson; it gives memory something shaped like a handle.

Chinese texts push the development further because two famous stories explicitly connect failed reasoning with **changing circumstances**. The first appears in the *Lüshi Chunqiu*, compiled in the late third century BCE. A man from Chu is crossing a river when his sword falls from the boat into the water. He immediately cuts a mark into the boat at the place where it fell. When the boat later stops, he enters the water from the marked point and searches for the sword.

Nothing is wrong with the mark. That is what makes the case so good. It accurately records where the sword entered the water relative to the boat at the moment the event occurred. The boat then moves. The sword does not. The information survives perfectly while the relationship that made the information useful disappears. The man has preserved the record and lost the reference system. The author scarcely needs to explain the methodological failure; the boat has already completed the peer review.

The original context makes the story more important still. The *Lüshi Chunqiu* does not merely tell it to ridicule a traveller. The anecdote appears in a discussion of governing changing circumstances: laws that remain fixed while times change are compared with the man searching for the mark on the moving boat. The ancient text itself therefore makes the conceptual move we need. Something that was once correctly positioned can become useless without itself changing, because the reality to which it refers has moved. The defect lies not in having a record or a rule but in treating past validity as permanent jurisdiction.

A second Chinese example, preserved in the *Han Feizi*, gives us a related but distinct failure. A farmer from Song is working in his field when a rabbit runs into a tree stump, breaks its neck and dies. The farmer receives an unexpected benefit without having hunted for it. He responds by abandoning his normal work and waiting beside the stump for another rabbit to repeat the performance. None does, his field remains uncultivated, and he becomes a laughing-stock.

The farmer is especially useful because he possesses **evidence**. The rabbit really did strike the stump. The event really did produce a desirable result. His conclusion is not fantasy invented without contact with reality. The failure begins when one successful accident is promoted into a repeatable method without examining the conditions that produced it. One observation enters the evidence base and is immediately appointed director.

Again, the original political context matters. *Han Feizi* uses the story against people who imagine that methods suitable to former rulers can simply be reproduced in the present despite changed conditions. The farmer has learned from experience; he has merely learned far too much from one experience. The event deserves to enter his memory. It does not deserve to become agricultural policy.

The sword owner and the farmer therefore fail in complementary ways. One preserves accurate information after its reference point has moved; the other preserves a successful precedent after the circumstances that produced it have vanished. Both possess something legitimate, and that is precisely why the failure matters. The ancient texts then enlarge the joke beyond the individual, using these compact absurdities to expose the danger of rules and methods that remain fixed while reality changes.

Across the chapter, the progression is now clear without requiring the cultures to share a theory or influence one another. Greece supplies the comic investigator whose technique can outrun judgement; Rome a valid rule enlarged beyond its proper category; India a rational allocation principle coupled to a destructive measurement

method; China the persistence of once-valid information and precedent after conditions change. In each case, the reasoning remains recognisable enough for the audience to follow it and continues just long enough for the audience to overtake it.

By late antiquity the process becomes still more economical. *Philogelos*, “The Laughter Lover,” is the only ancient joke book known to survive substantially intact. Traditionally associated with the otherwise obscure Hierocles and Philagrius, it contains roughly 265 jokes in its modern composite form. Doctors, astrologers, misers, cowards and regional stereotypes all appear, but the collection’s dominant recurring intellectual fool is the *scholastikos*. West describes him as a figure whose learning itself has become part of the joke: study has equipped him with intellectual habits while leaving him vulnerable to factors obvious to ordinary judgement (West, 2016, 2017). Because the manuscript tradition and modern numbering do not divide the material in an entirely uniform way, there is little advantage in pretending that one exact percentage defines the type. His prominence is not in doubt.

One *scholastikos* wants to know what he looks like while asleep, so he closes his eyes before a mirror. When one of a pair of twins has died, another asks the surviving brother whether it was he or his twin who died. A scholar who has been told that an acquaintance is dead later encounters the supposedly dead man but continues to give greater weight to the report because he regards its source as more trustworthy. Another boards a ferry with his horse and remains mounted because he is in a hurry. Then there is the scholar who buys a raven so that he can personally test the claim that ravens may live for more than two hundred years. West herself uses the raven joke as a representative example of the learned fool.

That is enough jokes. Their importance lies not in proving that late antiquity enjoyed a surprisingly good evening, but in showing that a stable literary carrier had emerged for several different forms of defective reasoning. The mirror joke disables the observation while attempting to perform it. The report of death allows trusted testimony to outrank exceptionally strong contradictory evidence standing in front of the observer. The horse on the ferry carries one means of travel into a second context as though its original contribution remains unchanged. The raven owner designs an empirical test whose duration creates an obvious problem for personal verification. Different mechanisms can now inhabit the same comic identity: the learned fool.

A stock character gives failed reasoning an important evolutionary advantage. A historical anecdote requires a biography and, if we are behaving properly, evidence. A comic type arrives partially assembled. The audience already knows what kind of mismatch to expect, leaving the joke free to concentrate on the mechanism. When the

story later moves into another culture, the *scholastikos* can become a professor, cleric, bureaucrat, village intellectual or whichever local figure is expected to possess knowledge while remaining vulnerable to the occasional departure of judgement. The costume can change without disturbing the reasoning underneath.

This portability also explains why attribution becomes progressively dangerous. West points out that some *Philogelos* jokes have parallels attached elsewhere to historical individuals and that joke books existed before the surviving collection (West, 2016, 2017). A durable comic mechanism can migrate from an identifiable person to a stock type and later acquire another name entirely. Asking who “really said it first” may therefore be less informative than asking what survives when the owner changes. Change the century, language, profession and victim, and the audience may still recognise the error because the reasoning has retained its shape.

The comparison across Greece, Rome, India and China should not be mistaken for evidence that these societies were exceptionally foolish. Such a conclusion would be historically lazy and methodologically impossible to support. What survives instead is evidence that audiences in very different cultures could recognise ways in which thought fails **while thought is operating**. A method can become more elaborate than its purpose warrants. A correct rule can cross into the wrong category. Measurement can damage the object it was intended to improve. Information can remain accurate while its reference point changes. A successful precedent can outlive the circumstances that made it successful. Testimony can remain trusted after direct evidence has contradicted it. None of these failures requires the absence of intelligence. Several require recognisable intellectual competence before the collision occurs.

That is why the learned fool matters so much to the larger argument. Education and foolishness have stopped behaving as opposites. The *scholastikos* is funny precisely because he possesses capacities that should help him: he can observe, compare, trust sources, construct tests and preserve information. Those capacities can make reasoning more elaborate, disciplined and persuasive, but they do not guarantee that the premise remains sound, that the category still fits or that the method continues to belong in the situation to which it is being applied.

The reader, meanwhile, enjoys an unfair advantage. We see the boat moving while the man from Chu remains loyal to the mark. We know what uprooting will do to the trees before the monkeys complete their measurements. We can see that a living acquaintance constitutes unusually strong evidence against a report of his death, and we can anticipate the scheduling difficulty in personally testing a claim involving two

centuries of raven survival. Fool stories make broken reasoning easy to recognise partly because they remove the pride, investment, habit and urgency that make similar mistakes difficult to abandon when they are ours. For the duration of the joke, the reader becomes quality control.

By late antiquity the fool had therefore changed considerably from the professional figures of the previous chapter. He could investigate, measure, infer, generalise, preserve evidence, design a test and defend a conclusion. He could also become a reusable literary type whose reasoning survived changes of name, profession and century. What he had not yet acquired was scale. Most of the damage still belonged to the fool, his sword, his field, his raven, his horse or whichever unfortunate object happened to be standing nearby.

The next development began when foolishness discovered that it did not have to work alone. A mistaken premise could acquire neighbours, helpers and eventually an entire community willing to carry it out. The learned fool had learned to think. Soon, the mistake would learn to organise.