

## Foolishness and Fools in Aquinas's Analysis

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(English translation by Alfredo H. Alves)

**Resumo:** Há um número infinito de tolos. Esta verdade, que é confirmada pela autoridade de Deus, é citada mais de vinte vezes por Tomás de Aquino, que a lê em Ecle 1, 15: "*stultorum infinitus est numerus*". Os tolos não só são infinitos, mas também apresentam-se sob diversas espécies: umas mais brandas; outras, mais graves; há tolices inocentes; outras são grave pecado etc... Ao longo de toda a obra do Aquinate encontramos toda uma tipologia de tolos. Neste artigo examinamos brevemente esses vinte e tantos tipos apresentados por Tomás, algumas das causas, efeitos e os remédios - quando há remédio... - que ele aponta para as tolices.

**Palabras chave:** Tolos; Tolices; Tomás de Aquino.

**Abstract:** Fools are legion. This self-evident truth, vouched for by Holy Scripture, is quoted more than twenty times by Thomas Aquinas: "*stultorum infinitus est numerus*" (Eccles. 1, 15). Not only is there an infinite number of fools, but they exist in a multitude of forms: some kinds are harmless, others bad; some foolish acts are innocent, others are mortal sins. In going through Aquinas's writings, we find a catalogue of all types of fools. In this article we shall examine briefly these twenty-odd types of fools presented by Aquinas and some of the causes as well as their effects of these types; and the remedies - insofar as there are any - for foolishness.

**Keywords:** Fools; Aquinas; Philosophy of foolishness.

Fools are legion. This self-evident truth, vouched for by Holy Scripture, is quoted more than twenty times by Thomas Aquinas: "*stultorum infinitus est numerus*" (Eccles. 1, 15).

Not only is there an infinite number of fools, but they exist in a multitude of forms: some kinds are harmless, others bad; some foolish acts are innocent, others are mortal sins. In going through Aquinas's writings<sup>1</sup>, we find a catalogue of all types of fools:

*Asyneti, cataplex, credulus, fatuus, grossus, hebes, idiota, imbecillis, inanis, incrassatus, inexpertus, insensatus, insipiens, nescius, rusticus, stolidus, stultus, stupidus, tardus, turpis, vacuus and vecors.*

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<sup>1</sup>. The quotations from Aquinas are found in the Latin original edited by Roberto Busa *Thomae Aquinatis Opera Omnia cum hypertextibus* in CD-ROM. Milano, Editoria Elettronica Editel, 1992.

In this article we shall examine briefly - just short notes - these twenty-odd types of fools presented by Aquinas and some of the causes as well as their effects of these types; and the remedies - insofar as there are any - for foolishness.

Firstly, Aquinas draws comparisons with animals. In the same way as “donkey” is used in English to designate a stupid person, Aquinas gives twenty comparisons of the ‘insipientis’ person with *jumentum* (donkey): for animals act through passion (a dog, for example, is no sooner irritated than it starts barking; a horse neighs when it wants something, and so on<sup>2</sup>). And the *insipientis* who forgoes the use of his reason (which is the same thing as forgoing his honour, as Aquinas says), reduces himself to being an ass or a donkey:

*Cum esset praeditus lumine rationis, sicut homo in honore constitutus, noluit illo lumine regi, assimilatus est jumentis insipientibus, et ideo facit sicut jumenta [.. ] (In Ps. 48, 10).*

He is compared to the ass, because an ass is an ass, a doltish animal: “*Quia asinus est animal stultum, unde dicitur asinus, idest insensatus. Sic homo insensatus...*” (*Sup Ev. Mt. cp 21 lc 1*).

*Comparatus est iumentis insipientibus, et similis factus est illis etc. et alibi Ps. 31, 9: nolite fieri sicut equus et mulus, in quibus non est intellectus (Sup Ev. Matt. cp 10 lc 2).*

And as we shall see, the ‘*stolidus*’ is compared to the lamb. The problem of foolishness hinges upon the lack of the right judgement of reality and above all of the *agibilia*. If the *sensatus* is the reasonable person who acts with common sense, the ‘*insensati*’ or ‘*asyneti*’ are those who are devoid of it (Aquinas points out, quite rightly, that only adults can be termed *insensati*, and not children).

*Insensatus autem proprie dicitur qui sensu caret (Super ad Gal. cp3 lc 1).*

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<sup>2</sup>. "Secundum dicit, comparatus est jumentis. Bruta animalia operantur ex passione; et hoc patet, quia canis statim cum irascitur, clamat, equus cum concupiscit, hinnit; sed non imputatur eis, quia carent ratione. Si ergo homo statim cum concupiscit, sequitur passionem, et iratus percutit, comparatus est in agendo jumentis insipientibus: Ps. 31: nolite fieri sicut equus et mulus etc." (In Ps. 48, 6)

*Unde secundum synesim dicuntur in graeco aliqui syneti, idest sensati, vel eusyneti, idest homines boni sensus, sicut e contrario qui carent hac virtute dicuntur asyneti, idest insensati (II-II, 51, 3, c).*

*Dicitur enim aliquis insensatus, si in aetate perfecta discretione careat, non autem in puerili aetate (In Met. X, 6, 20).*

A main characteristic of the different forms of foolishness is paralysis. This occurs, for example in the ‘*stupidus*’ (sometimes Aquinas uses the term ‘*cataplex*’ as a synonym – “[...] *cataplex, id est stupidus*” (*Sent. Libri Ethic.* II, l. 9, 11). The *stupidus* is so termed precisely because a kind of paralysis takes hold of him through *stupor*. *Stupor* is quite different from wonder, which is a positive attitude requiring explanation, whereas *stupor* precludes explanation or enquiry:

*Admirans refugit in praesenti dare iudicium de eo quod miratur, timens defectum, sed in futurum inquirat. Stupens autem timet et in praesenti iudicare, et in futuro inquirere. Unde admiratio est principium philosophandi, sed stupor est philosophicae considerationis impedimentum (I-II, 41, 4 ad 5).*

Paralysis is common to other types of foolishness. For example the ‘*turpis*’ is seized with it. And regarding this word, Isidore of Seville recalls the etymology of the *torpedo* or numbfish (electric ray), contact with which numbs (figuratively, stupefies) (*Etym.* XII, 6, 45). Aquinas includes the ‘*stultus*’ among the paralysed and quotes Isidore as deriving *stultitia* from *stupor*:

*Nomen stultitiae a stupore videtur esse sumptum, unde Isidorus dicit, in libro Etymol., stultus est qui propter stuporem non movetur (II-II, 46, 1 c).*

Besides paralysis, another important factor in the characterization of foolishness is in the (lack of) sensibility: in the article quoted, distinguishing between *stultus* and ‘*fatuus*’, Aquinas says that *stultitia* deadens the heart and dulls the intelligence “*stultitia importat hebetudinem cordis et obtusionem sensuum*”.

Fatuity is a total absence of good sense (the *stultus* has a sense of judgement but it is a dulled judgement...). *Stultitia* is a negation of the sensibility of a person who knows: sapience comes from *sapere* (to know

and at the same time to savour): in the same way that the sense of taste discerns different tastes or flavours, the wise man discerns and savours things and their causes: obtuseness is the opposite of the subtlety and discernment of the person who knows:

*Fatuus caret sensu iudicandi; stultus autem habet, sed hebetatum; sapiens autem subtilem ac perspicacem* (II-II, 46, 1).

The metaphor of taste, of sensibility in taste, as a paradigm of a person who knows how to savour reality is what comprises one of the principal theses of Aquinas on foolishness at the beginning of I-II. For example, discussing what is the last end of man, he considers the objection: "It would seem that man's happiness consists in wealth. For since happiness is man's last end, it must consist in that which has the greatest hold on man's affections. Now this is wealth: for it is written (Eccles. 10:19): 'All things obey money.' Therefore man's happiness consists in wealth". And he answers: "All material things obey money', so far as the multitude of fools is concerned, who know no other than material goods, which can be obtained for money. But we should take our estimation of human goods not from the foolish but from the wise: just as it is for a person whose sense of taste is in good order, to judge whether a thing is palatable" (I-II, 2, 1, ad 1)

It is always a question of a perception of reality: what is in fact bitter or sweet, seems bitter or sweet to one who has the right disposition in taste, but not to those who have a deformed taste. Everyone takes delight in that which they love: those who suffer from fever have a deformed taste and do not find sweet those things which are in reality sweet...

*Similiter etiam amara et dulcia secundum veritatem videntur illis qui habent gustum bene dispositum, et calida his qui habent tactum bene dispositum, et gravia bene diiudicant illi, qui habent virtutem corporalem bene dispositam. his enim qui sunt debiles etiam levia videntur gravia* (Sent. Libri Et. III, 10, 6).

When he characterizes the *stultus*, Aquinas says such a person is incapable of linking means to ends:

*In rationali vero respectu finis, stultitia, ut non afficiatur aliquis debite ad finem, et contra hanc est sapientia* (III Sent. d 34 q 1 a 2 c).

*Et ideo Gregorius sapientiam contra stultitiam ponit; quae importat errorem circa finem intentum (III Sent. d 35 q 2 a 1 c).*

Besides, what the *stultus* does is based on his false judgement, which considers good what is not good:

*Quia rectum iudicium habet de omnibus, quia circa unumquodque recte dispositus est, sicut qui sanum gustum habet, recte iudicat de sapore; solus autem spiritualis bene dispositus est circa agenda; et ideo ipse solus de eis bene iudicat (Sup. ad Gal. cp6 lc1).*

Aquinas distinguishes between speculative and practical *stultitia*: there are people of limited intelligence who, however, know how to act well; on the other hand, there are highly intelligent people who are *stulti* in their actions:

*Peccatum dicitur tenebra, quia intellectus obtunditur. Contra, multi peccatores inveniuntur qui habent optimum intellectum ad capiendum. Et dicendum, quod loquitur de obtusione intellectus practici, secundum quod omnis malus est ignorans; et non de obtusione intellectus speculativi (IV Sent. d 18 q 2 ar5 cex).*

Elsewhere, Aquinas, always careful with language, distinguishes between the *stultus*, who does not rise to higher knowledge, the *insipiens*, who does not savour the sweetness of knowledge, and the ‘*vecors*’, who lacks the quality of decision:

*Stultus, quantum ad cognitionem divinorum, insipientes, quantum ad experientiam dulcedinis ipsorum; vecordes, quia sine corde quantum ad electionem agibilium (Hier. cp 4 lc 7).*

And he follows up by indicating another difference between the *insipiens* and the *stultus*: the *insipient* can have a knowledge of earthly but not of eternal things, while the *stultus* lacks even a knowledge of earthly things:

*Differentia est inter insipientem et stultum. Insiptens est qui habet scientiam humanam, et non considerat aeterna; stultus est qui non considerat etiam praesentia. Vel insipientes est qui non attendit mala praesentia, sed futura; stultus est qui*

*attendit et non vitat; unde dicit, simul insipiens et stultus peribunt (Ps 48, 4).*

Another characteristic of the *insipiens* is that he believes that everybody is like him: “*cum ipse sit insipiens, omnes stultos aestimat*” (II-II, 60, 3). And when Aquinas looks at the etymology of the word, he draws to our attention that the *insipiens* is the *insapiente*, one who has no wisdom, who does not savour divine wisdom:

*Unde cum contradicat sapientiae divinae, vocat eam insipientem. Quasi dicat: insipiens... (Super I ad Cor. XI-XVI cp15 lc5).*

*Vir insipiens contemnit cognitionem divinorum (Ps 52, 1).*

Yet another constant in many fools is that they are obtuse, that is, the opposite of perspicacious; the perspicacious person sees reality very clearly: which is why we speak of “a sharp intelligence”, one which penetrates reality to its inmost recesses. The opposite of sharp is *hebes*:

*Hebes acuto opponitur. acutum autem dicitur aliquid ex hoc quod est penetrativum. unde et hebes dicitur aliquid ex hoc quod est obtusum, penetrare non valens. Sensus autem corporalis per quandam similitudinem penetrare dicitur medium inquantum ex aliqua distantia suum obiectum percipit; vel inquantum potest quasi penetrando intima rei percipere. Unde in corporalibus dicitur aliquis esse acuti sensus qui potest percipere sensibile aliquod ex remotis, vel videndo vel audiendo vel olfaciendo; et e contrario dicitur sensu hebetari qui non percipit nisi ex propinquo et magna sensibilia. Ad similitudinem autem corporalis sensus dicitur etiam circa intelligentiam esse aliquis sensus (II-II 15, 2).*

The obtuse person may be sinful, culpable in his obtuseness:

*Et ratio huius est, quia obtusi sunt sensus eorum, id est ratio eorum hebes est, et sensus eorum imbecilles et obtusi sunt, nec possunt videre claritatem divini luminis, id est divinae veritatis, absque velamine figurarum. et huius ratio est quia claudunt oculos, ut non videant, quia velum templi scissum est. et ideo est ex eorum culpa infidelitatis, non ex defectu veritatis, quia, remoto velamine, omnibus aperientibus oculos mentis per fidem clarissime veritas manifestatur (Super II ad Cor., cp 3 lc 3).*

*Augustinus dicit in IV Musicae, quod anima per peccatum facta est imbecillior. Diminuitur ergo bonum naturae in ipsa per peccatum (De malo, q. 2, a. 11, sc3).*

And from obtuseness come crass errors, great and crude errors, whence the imagery of crudeness of the intellect and the heart: ‘*incrassatus*’.

*Ideo cor populi huius, idest mens, incrassatum est, idest excaecatum. Quare? Quia sicut ad visionem corporalem puritas requiritur, sic ad spiritualem. unde intellectus dicitur vis superior, quoniam maxime spiritualis. incrassatur intellectus, quando applicatur grossis et terrenis (Super Ev. Matt. cp 13 lc 1).*

Another type of fool, the ‘*stolidus*’, lacks sensibility and is incapable of relating an effect to its cause:

*Designatur enim per hoc maxime hominis stoliditas, quod tam manifesta Dei signa non percipit; sicut stolidus reputaretur qui, hominem videns, eum habere animam non comprehenderet (CG III, 38, 5).*

The *stolidus* is compared to the lamb:

*Per ovem, quae est animal stultum, significatur hominis stoliditas... (Super Ev. Io. cp 2 lc 2).*

And - following Aristotle - Aquinas affirms that the Celts are the perfect type of the *stolidi*:

*Potest autem dici insanus, sicut dicitur de celtis qui sunt stolidi (Tab. L. Eth. cp t).*

Among the moral causes listed for the perception of reality, Aquinas gives first place to good will, which is like a light, whereas ill will drags one down to the darkness of prejudice:

*Responderunt ergo discipuli: et nos homines fuimus, rustici et obscuri in plebe; vos sacerdotes et scribae: sed in nobis bona voluntas facta est quasi lucerna rusticitatis nostrae; in vobis*

*autem malitia facta est quasi caligo scientiae vestrae (Catena Aurea, Mt cp 19, lc 7).*

Another important point in Aquinas's analysis of foolishness is - and this is self-evident - that there are different grades of intelligence (and foolishness...): the 'rusticus' cannot be compared to the subtle philosopher:

*Adhuc ex intellectuum gradibus idem facile est videre. Duorum enim quorum unus alio rem aliquam intellectu subtilius intuetur, ille cuius intellectus est elevatior, multa intelligit quae alius omnino capere non potest: sicut patet in rustico, qui nullo modo philosophiae subtiles considerationes capere potest (CG 1, 3, 5).*

From which we come to another type of fool: the 'idiota'. Always with an eye to the origin of words, Aquinas tells us that *idiota* means in its root the person who knows only his mother-tongue:

*Idiota proprie dicitur qui scit tantum linguam in qua natus est (Super I ad Cor. 11-16, 14, 3).*

However, this meaning is extended chiefly to the cultivation of the intelligence. The fool for lack of such cultivation is an idiot. Thus in the text quoted from the *Contra Gentiles*, Aquinas compares the "*intellectus optimi philosophi*" with the "*intellectus rudissimi idiotae*" and says that the idiot considers untrue what he cannot understand. He is, generally speaking, the 'inexpertus' ('*non habens scientiam acquisitam*') like the ignorant slave in Plato's *Meno* (I, 84, 3, 3).

Aquinas speaks also of the contrast between athletes who are *instructi* and those who are *idiotae*, that is, uncouth and with no experience:

*Et simile est de athleticis, idest pugilibus fortibus et instructis cum idiotis, idest rusticis inexpertis (Sent. Libri Ethic. III, 16, 11).*

The *rusticus* marvels at what to others is so well known as to be taken for granted:

*Potest autem causa effectus alicuius apparentis alicui esse nota, quae tamen est aliis incognita. Unde aliquid est mirum*

*uni, quod non est mirum aliis; sicut eclipsim solis miratur rusticus, non autem astrologus (I, 105, 7).*

'*Imbecillis*' is the term applied to weakness in general - moral weakness, lack of courage, weakness in faith etc. - and not specially to the intellect and so Aquinas speaks of *imbecillitas intellectus*, *imbecillitas sensus* and *imbecillitas mentis* to designate the '*tardus*' and his difficulty in understanding without similes:

*Ipsorum tarditatem ad ea capienda, ibi quoniam imbecilles (Super ad Hebr. cp 5 lc 2)*

*Et ratio huius est, quia obtusi sunt sensus eorum, id est ratio eorum hebes est, et sensus eorum imbecilles et obtusi sunt, nec possunt videre claritatem divini luminis, id est divinae veritatis, absque velamine figurarum (Super II ad Cor. cp 3 lc 3).*

Imbecility also means letting the senses rule the intellect, which means not getting over the primary stage of intelligence.

Polytheism is an example:

*Primum est imbecillitas intellectus humani. Nam homines imbecillis intellectus non valentes corporalia transcendere, non crediderunt aliquid esse ultra naturam corporum sensibilium; et ideo inter corpora illa posuerunt praeeminere et disponere mundum, quae pulchriora et digniora... (Symb. Ap. ar 1).*

Compared with God, man is slow of intellect (God knows all in one single act) and in order to learn, must have recourse to metaphors. A person of powerful intellect gleans much from little, whereas the slow of intellect need many examples to understand:

*Deus enim per unum, quod est sua essentia, cognoscit omnia: homo autem ad diversa cognoscenda diversas similitudines requirit. qui etiam, quanto altioris fuerit intellectus, tanto ex paucioribus plura cognoscere potest: unde his qui sunt tardi intellectus, oportet exempla particularia adducere ad cognitionem de rebus sumendam (CG II, 98, 12).*

The more tardy find it impossible to grasp reality and can only give gross explanations: the voice giving glory to Christ in the Gospel is mistaken for thunder by the ‘*grossioris*’:

*Quidam erant grossioris et tardioris intellectus, quidam vero acutioris; [...]. Desidiosi et carnales non perceperunt vocem ipsam nisi quantum ad sonum; et ideo dicebant tonitruum factum esse (Super Ev. Ioh. cp 12 lc 5).*

The ‘*nescius*’ is the ignoramus, whose ignorance may be either culpable or not:

*Sicut autem Caiphas nescius dixit: oportet unum hominem mori pro populo, sic milites nescientes faciunt (Cat. Aur. Mc cp 15 lc 3).*

The ‘*credulous*’ is superficial in the act of believing:

*Quod esse credulum in vitium sonat, quia designat superfluitatem in credendo, sicut esse bibulum superfluitatem in bibendo (De Ver. I, q. 14, a. 10, ad 6).*

In interpreting Matt. 5 22: "Whosoever shall say to his brother, *Raca*, shall be in danger of the Sanhedrin", Aquinas discusses the possible meanings of *Raca*. According to St Jerome, the word designates the ‘*inanis*’, the ‘*vacuus*’ (one who is empty-minded, who is brainless).

*Hieronymus. Vel racha hebraeum verbum est, et dicitur chenos, idest inanis aut vacuus, quem nos possumus vulgata iniuria absque cerebro nuncupare (Cat. Aur. in Mt cp 5, lc 13).*

The problem of fools is not always, strictly speaking, a problem of the intellect. For if the intellect is not a material power, nevertheless, it needs the bodily faculties such as the imagination and the memory in order to function. And if the functioning of these faculties suffers some physical impediment, the intellect cannot function properly.

*Sciendum est tamen quod, licet corpora caelestia directe intelligentiae nostrae causae esse non possint, aliquid tamen ad hoc operantur indirecte. Licet enim intellectus non sit virtus corporea, tamen in nobis operatio intellectus compleri non*

*potest sine operatione virtutum corporearum, quae sunt imaginatio et vis memorativa et cogitativa, ut ex superioribus patet. Et inde est quod, impeditis harum virtutum operationibus propter aliquam corporis indispositionem, impeditur operatio intellectus: sicut patet in phreneticis et lethargicis, et aliis huiusmodi. et propter hoc etiam bonitas dispositionis corporis humani facit aptum ad bene intelligendum (CG III, 84, 14).*

In face of all these disquieting cases - and of course fools always exist - we end by presenting briefly, Aquinas's remedies for foolishness (of ours as well as that of others).

Firstly, we must remember that among the works of mercy, the most important are the seven spiritual works of mercy, three of which are clearly related to what we are writing about. These are: to suffer bores (*'portare onerosos et graves'*), to teach the ignorant (*'docere ignorantem'*); and to give advice to those who need it (*'consulere dubitanti'*).

The remedy - if there is any at all - is the following, given by Aquinas:

In like manner spiritual needs are relieved by spiritual acts in two ways, first by asking for help from God, and in this respect we have *prayer*, whereby one man prays for others; secondly, by giving human assistance: First, in order to relieve a deficiency on the part of the intellect, and if this deficiency be in the speculative intellect, the remedy is applied by *instructing*, and if in the practical intellect, the remedy is applied by *counseling* [...] (II-II, 32, 2).

### *Referências*

THOMAE AQUINATIS. **Opera Omnia** (Latin original edited by Roberto BUSA). Milano: Editoria Elettronica Editel, 1992.

*Received on September 1, 2012.  
Accepted on December 20, 2012.*