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# How Much Stupidity Do Organisations Need? A Psychodynamic Perspective on Functional Stupidity

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## Abstract

How much stupidity do organisations need to function effectively? The paradox coined by management researchers Spicer and Alvesson may seem baffling. According to these authors, organisations require a certain amount of uncritical obedience to function properly. The idea of 'functional stupidity' put forward by the authors to account for this phenomenon is no less ambiguous. In addition to overlooking the ethical implications of such a notion, it fails to provide a coherent explanation of its causes in organisations. Our proposal is based on the psychodynamics of work, founded by Christophe Dejours. We focus primarily on the subjective experience of work, which involves the worker's body, and the way in which a whole theory of moral sense at work emerges from this experience. Adopting the form of an essay, we will support our argument with illustrative vignettes: stupidity will be interpreted here as the exact opposite of what the psychodynamics of work considers to be subjective intelligence at work, that is, ordinary sublimation. In so doing, we propose to extend the scope of the notion of organisational stupidity by adding a phenomenological, clinical and ethical dimension. We conclude by suggesting future avenues for research, through a 're-eroticisation' of work.

Without doubt, there is something provocative in the paradox coined by management scholars Alvesson and Spicer (2016). These two authors put forward the following hypothesis: while organisation readily perceive themselves as entities entirely devoted to the production of knowledge, rationality and efficiency, it turns out that they excel just as much, if not more, at producing passive, uncritical obedience – or what the authors suggest calling 'functional stupidity' (also translatable by the perhaps more idiotic French expression, 'bêtise organisationnelle'). This stupidity is organisational in the strongest sense of the term, in that it has nothing to do with any individual deficiency, but rather with a given organisational context that fosters and sustains its emergence.

Despite what may at first appear to be a damning observation, Alvesson and Spicer are careful not to condemn the phenomenon they identify. Indeed, the two authors argue that, counterintuitive as it may seem, this organisational stupidity is necessary in the ordinary life of an organisation; the relentless questioning of a firm's imperatives and operating procedures,

far from ensuring its smooth running, quite the contrary threatens to ruin its effectiveness. Stupidity may be essential, but not too much – albeit crudely summarised, this seems to be the point of view of Spicer and Alvesson, who conclude by calling for the most deleterious effects of this insidious organisational stupidity to be compensated by a good dose (a healthy dose, we might say) of stupidity. The ambiguity, however, lies in the supposedly 'functional' nature of this stupidity. Managing the nonsense that every organisation seems to produce spontaneously may prove to be more challenging than Spicer and Alvesson suggest.

What are we to think of the case described by Alvesson and Einola (2018) of investment banking juniors who clock up nearly 100-h work weeks; a case that they themselves confess to finding inept, if not downright counterproductive? Or the puzzling situation in a Swedish public administration, studied by Paulsen (2018), where stupidity and apathy inhibit any consideration of the organisation's ethical values? So, while other researchers have addressed the issue, and indicated the ambivalence of the notion of functional stupidity (Fagerberg

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et al., 2020), the fact remains that certain organisational and ethical questions require further clarification if the notion is to reach its full heuristic potential for management research (Ahmadzadeh et al., 2022; Butler, 2016).

Our proposal, in the form of an essay, invites the reader to shift the focus to the question of stupidity, while extending the reflection initiated by the previously cited authors. Given the exploratory and speculative nature of our proposal, several illustrative vignettes based on cases from the literature will be detailed. Our approach is based primarily on the field of the psychodynamics of work, founded by Christophe Dejours. This theoretical framework, subsequently enriched by other authors working in that tradition, presupposes a point of view which, in our case, may prove heuristic in terms of the relationships that could be established between ethics and the subjective experience of work.

In this essay, we will focus primarily on the notion of ordinary sublimation, which we interpret as the opposite of, if not the antidote to, organisational stupidity, while seeking to clarify the causes that promote or, on the contrary, hinder sublimation at work. The conclusion will open up a number of exploratory issues, in particular by addressing questions relating to sexuality[1] and pleasure at work, which we interpret here from the broader theoretical framework in which the psychodynamics of work has its origin, namely Freudian psychoanalysis. Incorporating, in the strongest sense of the term, the aesthetic, affective and bodily issues at stake in the workplace today, could thus serve as a counterpoint, if not a bulwark, to a functional vision of management. A vision defined by the abstraction of numbers and a rationality that, by forgetting the body and its resources, always risks sliding towards stupidity.

## Stupidity and power in organisations: Ethical issues of functional stupidity

If stupidity is of interest to the field of organisation studies and management, and more specifically to critical studies, it is because this notion seems to have a close relationship with the problem of power and its organisational implications (Fagerberg et al., 2020; Paulsen, 2018). It is disturbing to consider that organisational stupidity is defined less by an employee's disengagement than by a voluntary shutdown of his or her ability to think, resulting in a pernicious, albeit entirely functional behaviour (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016). Stupidity is therefore constraining, but no less 'functional'.

And yet, paradoxically, employees willingly enter this state of passive obedience – or so it seems, consciously numbing their

thinking and even rationalising their own servitude. To this extent, stupidity, although an organisational issue fostered by certain management devices and dynamics (Ahmadzadeh et al., 2022), cannot be solely reduced to a phenomenon of power, as classically described in the study of organisations and its critical current; whether from a Marxist perspective, in the mode of class domination and its 'manufacturing of consent' (Bouquin, 2010; Braverman, 1998; Burawoy, 1978, 2012), or in a more Foucauldian register, through the impersonal exercise of discursive or material management devices that 'shape' subjects to meet the organisation's requisites (Collinson, 2003; Fleming, 2013; Kondo, 1990; O'Doherty & Willmott, 2001; Willmott, 1993). Both of these approaches suffer from the more or less tacit bias of considering the psychology of actors as the mere ideological byproduct of power relations (Fotaki et al., 2012, 2017; Stavrakakis, 2008). Any finer-grained analysis of the subjectivity of actors, and the ambivalence of obedience relationships, simply seems to be ruled out.

To this extent, stupidity is some kind of a test, even an adversity, for critical management studies. Contu (2008) has already identified the risk of criticism becoming 'decaffeinated', because of methodological and conceptual inertia. For this reason, although intellectually stimulating, and even polemical, the concept initially coined by Alvesson and Spicer is nonetheless particularly ambiguous, especially for critical management studies. On this topic, and although still inchoate, the literature on organisational stupidity leads us in the direction of certain questions that will provide our essay with its anchor points.

The first point concerns the very nature of the relationship between ethics and stupidity. Butler (2016), criticising the notion in a polemical note, suggests that it is essential to distinguish between cases of stupidity depending on the organisational context and the ethical stakes implied by the behaviours in question. For while some organisational routines are indeed necessary for the continuity and smooth running of organisational life, in the case of social workers for example, other forms of routine that obliterate the moral ends they pursue are, on the other hand, harmful in their scope, since they contribute to the emergence of attitudes that jeopardise the mental health of employees and naturalise relationships of domination and power (Fagerberg et al., 2020).

More precisely, this leads us to the second point, concerning the specific organisational causes that preside over the emergence, and subsequent maintenance, of this form of stupidity in organisations. While excessive workloads (Alvesson & Einola, 2018) and bureaucratic structures appear to be major issues in functional stupidity (Fagerberg et al., 2020), the precise organisational and psychodynamic causes remain rather unclear, with the few empirical studies on the subject being fairly exploratory (Ahmadzadeh et al., 2022). Indeed, types of workers as diverse as public service caregivers in Sweden, or young executives working in investment banks, are not spared from

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[1] Sexuality is not understood here in the genital sense of actual intercourse, but defines, according to the psychoanalytical approach, the affective force that binds individuals in larger entities (groups, organisations, institutions and societies). In other words, the life drive that Freud called 'Eros' (Green, 1997; Laplanche, 2008).

organisational stupidity (Alvesson & Einola, 2018; Fagerberg et al., 2020; Paulsen, 2017).

The third point, following on from the previous ones, is a question that directly concerns critical studies, and, more broadly, management practitioners. When stupidity threatens to corrode employees' moral sense, by no longer engaging their reflection and subjectivity, but only their servility and use of numerical abstractions, a real risk looms on the horizon in terms of the concrete consequences for workers' psychological wellbeing (Fagerberg et al., 2020). While organisations are built, at least in part, on the principle of efficiency and performance, it seems that they are built just as much on the principle of repressing the body and its affects (Carpentier-Roy, 1992). Given that organisational stupidity is characterised by a paralysis of thought and an inhibition of moral sense, what weapons could critics use when confronting this new form of 'voluntary servitude'? This question calls for a multidisciplinary perspective that goes beyond the field of organisational studies, since stupidity seems to constitute a true 'calamity' in contemporary societies (Isenberg, 2018; Stiegler, 2015).

Our proposal is to move this discussion forward, drawing primarily on the psychodynamics of work, a theory and practice founded by Christophe Dejours, and which today has many representatives in France, gathered mainly around the French journal *Travailler*. In terms of management research, the psychodynamics of work remains fairly unexplored, except for a few propositions (see in particular the work of Dashtipour & Vidaillet, 2017). However, this theoretical proposal seems to be highly promising for tackling the problem we are interested in. In addition to taking as its premise a genuine phenomenology of the subjective experience of workers, the psychodynamics

of work identify the worker's ability to engage subjectively in their task, by relying on their bodily experience, as paramount in the genesis of moral sense in organisations.

In other words, the ability to think and formulate ethical judgements emerges from the bodily dispositions involved at work, opening access to the process of what Dejours calls 'ordinary sublimation'. In this sense, the psychodynamics of work simultaneously enables us to understand stupidity as an interruption in the process of ordinary sublimation, while it contributes to clarifying some of the organisational causes that preside over the emergence of organisational stupidity. The next section will therefore be dedicated to a brief summary of the foundations of the psychodynamics of work, especially the key concept of ordinary sublimation.

Nevertheless, before introducing the theoretical discussion, we include an illustrative vignette consisting of an exploratory case of organisational stupidity based on a field study led by Alvesson and Einola (2018). This case highlights how a culture of excellence that permeates an entire organisation can be surprisingly quick to generate a highly efficient form of functional stupidity.

## The case for psychodynamics of stupidity

### At the heart of the psychodynamics of work: Subjective experience and the experience of the body

In this section, we propose to move our perspective forward by anchoring it in the field of the psychodynamics of work. From this point of view, whether or not the experience of

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**Vignette 1.** Stupidity pushed to excellence: An exploratory case of organisational stupidity.

The case, described by Alvesson and Einola (2018), offers an analysis of two organisation settings that, according to the authors, appear to generate a form of organisational stupidity. Although based on a theoretical reflection, the authors illustrate two types of organisation: the first refers to a previous study in a consulting firm; the second stems from ongoing research with juniors in investment banking. The aim of their article is to understand what might lead individuals to accept excessive working hours.

The authors identify a number of factors which, according to them, contribute to maintaining such a situation, such as: a demanding work regime, extrinsic motivations, or competition between employees and between organisations; so many factors that would contribute to employee's withdrawal into a narrow sphere of activity, as well as a tendency to over-functionalise their thinking process. In other words, according to the two authors, this is a typical case where organisational stupidity, despite the obvious intelligence of employees, 'radiates triumphant' (Alvesson & Einola, 2018, p. 294).

Of course, the authors mention the fact that such a gruelling working regime, especially in an investment bank, largely contributes to limiting the ability to reflect and take a step back. But more fundamentally, it is the employees' ability to keep their critical mind alert or not that is the proper signal of organisational stupidity − independently, therefore, of the sheer volume of hours.

In this respect, the case of the consulting firm described by the authors relates to a situation where the state of affairs is confounded as a norm, to the detriment of any ability to envisage things differently, under the alibi of a culture of excellence: 'Social groups treating what exists as something natural and impossible to approach with imagination − and thus agency − may be just a sign that the community is stuck in functional stupidity' (Alvesson & Einola, 2018, p. 295).

Finally, the authors emphasise the extent to which the emergence of stupidity protects individuals from any challenge to the (flattering) self-image promoted by the organisation − and is akin, according to the authors, to a genuine form of 'faith' in their organisation on the part of the employees. This remark, in line with those of other authors (Paulsen, 2018), may indicate that organisational stupidity can be interpreted as a psychological defence, actively put in place by individuals, and does not simply result from the systemic exercise of relations of domination, nor even, as one might think, from a simple loss of motivation.

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work can lead to a possible sublimation, it first seems necessary to recall what the notion of 'work' means in the psychodynamics of work. One of the essential definitions – inspired here by French works in the field of ergonomics (Dessors, 2013) – is the distinction between 'real work' on the one hand, and 'prescribed work' on the other. Prescribed work defines all the formal norms and prescriptions explicitly defined at the level of the organisation, more or less matching the expectations of the job description; 'real work', on the other hand, escapes this formal level and depends on the tacit and informal skills of the employee, but also on the subjective resources specific to the psychic and bodily experience of each individual – intelligence, cunning, affectivity, sagacity, tenacity, etc. (Dejours, 2006b; Molinier, 2010).

Thus, the psychodynamics of work defines work very precisely, as the subjective effort of the worker who, in order to bridge the gap between these two levels of work, mobilises all of his or her resources and intelligence:

> To work is to bridge the gap between the prescribed and the real. [W]ork is defined as what the subject must add to the prescriptions in order to achieve the objectives assigned to him; or what he must add from himself in order to cope with what does not work when he scrupulously sticks to the execution of the prescriptions (Dejours, 2009b, p. 26).

Nonetheless, this experience manifests itself beforehand to the worker in the form of suffering, and more precisely in the failure of his or her attempt to control reality through his or her work. As an obstacle to his/her effort, real work is what *resists*; thus, conversely, for the worker, to contain suffering means to engage in a process of overcoming this suffering through what Christophe Dejours calls 'ordinary sublimation'. This notion, which forms both the heart and the crowning achievement of the theory of the psychodynamics of work, is decisive for understanding the roots of organisational stupidity. Consequently, although other articles have proposed a summary of ordinary sublimation (Dejours, 2014; Demaegdt et al., 2019), a succinct restitution is nonetheless relevant insofar as it invites us to consider the notion of organisational stupidity differently, in both its psychic and organisational roots.

Ordinary sublimation takes place on three levels: 'corporeal', intersubjective, and socio-political. The first level of ordinary sublimation underpins what the psychodynamics of work calls 'corpspropriation' (or: *appropriation by the body*); namely: it is through their bodily experience that workers can appropriate the matter of their work (this may be abstract, as in the case of an actor, for example) (Dejours, 2014; Grenier-Pezé, 2003; Molinier, 2007). This first level implies the worker's familiarity with the reality of the work in question, and engages all of his/her subjective resources, cunning, intelligence, willpower and so forth, ultimately determining his/her ability to acquire new skills.

At a second level, work acquires an inter-individual framework that guarantees the production of shared work norms. This level, described as 'deontic', assumes that all working rules simultaneously imply rules that are aesthetic, qualifying what is commonly called a 'well done' or 'beautiful' craft that is carried out according to the rules of the art, but also ethical, judging what is or is not allowed within the working collective (Demaegdt et al., 2019). Yet, these norms are directly, and often tacitly, elaborated by the working collectives, confirming that they are invested with a directly ethical and normative function within organisations. In short, doing one's job well means respecting certain rules, but above all certain values which, when flouted, lead to suffering at work (Dejours, 2022).

Finally, the last level of ordinary sublimation comes into play through the ethical value of work at the level of its wider social and political implications: here, ordinary sublimation becomes the vector of social ties within the organisation of work, and, beyond that, creates shared values within political life itself (Pagès, 2014).

This summary, albeit brief, nevertheless provides a panoramic view of the psychodynamics of work, with ordinary sublimation as the pivot of its entire architecture. Starting from the subjective and bodily experience of the worker, and from the latter's engagement with the matter of his or her work, the psychodynamics of work describes a vast network of relations that leads from the experience of the body to that of the construction of ethical and moral norms at work, and finally to the very nature of social relations between individuals at the political level (Demaegdt et al., 2019). In this way, we can see how the highly virtuous dynamics of ordinary sublimation prove to be all the more precarious as they are exposed, along this sinuous circuit of sublimation, to numerous hindrances that are properly 'anti-sublimatory'.

### On the path of the 'enemies of sublimation'

Thus, based on the insights of the psychodynamics of work, we can only speak of organisational stupidity if we refer to its opposite: intelligence is not so much a cognitive faculty, as the ability to initiate a process of ordinary sublimation, synonymous with the capacity to think in the strongest sense of the term. This means that thinking is about making normative, collective judgements within the organisation. As a clinical practice, however, the psychodynamics of work helps us to identify the enemies of sublimation: it is above all organisational causes that preside over this erosion of employees' subjectivity, mainly as a result of management devices that block access to ordinary sublimation, and, in short, act as catalysts for an alienation that tends towards stupidity. In other words, efficiently and functionally following inane directives, or even violating professional standards, underpins a more serious personality disorder than mere stupidity, and possibly indicates a form of psychopathological symptom: 'Good adaptation to a pathogenic work organisation does not imply intact mental

functioning, but is built at the cost of a serious personality deviation' (Dejours, 2012, p. 156).

More specifically, among the pathogenic devices that are pervasive in the erosion of ordinary sublimation, the psychodynamics of work mainly identifies individual evaluation (Gernet & Dejours, 2009) or the dislocation of trade collectives (Dejours, 2013); two trends that, through the mutilation of 'living work' that they imply, are likely to provoke a true 'discontent in civilization' (Lay & Rolo, 2017). While these trends are by no means definitive, and are opposed by forms of local, informal and multiple resistance based on professional solidarity (Dejours & Bègue, 2009), the fact remains that the breaking down of working collectives coincides with the proliferation of individual modes of evaluation. These tendencies are based on the same functionalist, numerical and narrowly individualistic conception of work, to the detriment of its bodily and affective underpinnings, which are more difficult to identify and evaluate from a mere objective point of view (Dashtipour & Vidaillet, 2017). By abstracting living work and the eminently carnal and affective dimension of work (Carpentier-Roy, 1992), these organisational devices and processes of evaluation merely contribute to the destabilisation of both individual and collective identity within organisations (Dejours, 2006b).

It is at this level that a pathological form of adaptation to this organisational setting is likely to be prolonged, and sedimented, in a form of stupidity that indicates a true interruption of thinking, and culminates in the denial of the body. More seriously, this denial of the body implies a distortion of the individual's sense of reality: individuals find themselves alienated from their affective and aesthetic experience, the warrants of moral sense in their relationship with others. If the sublimatory dynamics are disrupted within the organisation, the normative institution itself could collapse. In fact, stupidity grows on the soil of suffering that has been unable to find a sublimating issue within the organisation. As Dejours and Gernet (2009) point out:

> When the intelligence of the body is blocked, when conviviality disintegrates, all that remains is suffering. The non-recognition of the mobilization of ingenuity and cooperation, the use of 'tactics of secrecy' and silence, lead to the alteration of the collective. Not being able to discuss technical arguments in organizations, or the ethical values called upon in the exercise of work, can lead to dangerous breakdowns in our relationship with reality. (p. 32)

### When organisations stand in the way of ordinary sublimation: From suffering to stupidity at work

To sum up what we have said so far: suffering induced by an organisational impediment to ordinary sublimation is likely to provoke defensive reactions that can be identified as a form of 'stupidity'. Indeed, among the main ailments observed by clinical investigations of work, a central place is given to phenomena surprisingly contiguous to that of 'stupidity', in particular

cases of 'voluntary servitude', characterised by a similar refusal to think and the atrophy of the moral sense.

Yet, clinical knowledge shows that in terms of its causes, these dynamics of psychic alienation are always preceded by great subjective suffering, and above all by a failure to find a positive outcome at work, in the absence of working collectives capable of initiating a dynamic of ordinary sublimation:

> Suffering begins when the relationship between man and the organization of work is blocked, when the worker has used to the maximum his intellectual, psychosensorimotor and psychoaffective faculties of learning and adaptation. When a worker has used all the knowledge and power he has over the organization of work and when he can no longer change task: that is, when the defenses against physical constraint have been exhausted (…). The certainty that the level of dissatisfaction reached can no longer decrease significates the entry into suffering. (Dejours, 2015 [1980], p. 74)

There is one difficulty, however, concerning the manifestations of this suffering at work, that can assume the most paradoxical and counterintuitive forms. The spectrum of these defensive modalities can be very broad, and confusing to say the least. It is not uncommon to see denial rubbing shoulders with the most cynical humour, in an atmosphere of morbid exuberance, or forms of over-investment in the task that can pass for great efficiency (Dejours, 2005), while sometimes the exaltation of risk and suffering itself are set up as a working culture, in the case of professions exposed to physical risks (Demaegdt et al., 2019; Duarte, 2018; Molinier, 2006, 2010).

The vignette that follows therefore nuances an interpretation of organisational stupidity that tends to equate it with purely operative behaviour, devoid of affect and leaning towards apathy. The study of call centres by Lay and Rolo (2017), which recalls that of Le Guillant (2010 [1956]) and his 'telephone operator neurosis', clearly exposes the coincidence of an unbridled form of enjoyment and the neutralisation of the moral sense as a defensive reaction of workers to the suffering generated by 'anti-sublimatory' devices.

Despite this diversity of defensive attitudes, their objective remains the same: to protect the subject, in the short term, from the most harmful repercussions of suffering at work and mental collapse. However, the use of these defences is double-edged, and often leads to the same deleterious result: the atrophy of sensitivity culminating in the cessation of thinking. A true mortification of subjective life, this psychic over-adaptation also comes at the price of a *de facto* acceptance of working conditions, which are then kept at a distance from any critical intention, and even from the ability to question them (Dejours, 2006a). This denial of suffering paradoxically deprives the worker of the only resource that would enable him or her to engage in a process of intellectual and ethical reflection: the access to the experience of his or her own body at work. In this sense, subjective body and moral sense are inextricably linked, as the destabilisation of the former by anti-sublimatory

Several organisational studies have taken call centres as empirical cases, an almost paradigmatic rationalised organisation, where economic injunctions and a culture of fear tend to provoke a mix of suffering and moral inhibition. Yet, the widespread suffering induced by a working context entirely devoted to customer satisfaction appears to be euphemistic, and even denied by the employees themselves, who, against all odds, seem to actively make themselves the subjects of this fierce competition (Winiecki, 2007).

Paradoxically, as Lay and Rolo (2017) insist, these working environments are not devoid of a genuine 'culture of fun' (Fleming, 2005; Fleming & Spicer, 2003), where cynicism translates into a joyous moral indifference and lack of concern for the consequences of one's actions. While it would be wrong, as Paulsen (2017) warns, to equate organisational stupidity with simple disengagement, since stupidity can be quite 'playful' and uninhibited, the fact remains that when suffering at work is disregarded, adaptive and defensive behaviours emerge, reinforcing further the atmosphere of insecurity and suffering. In these situations, it is indeed stupidity, in the sense of our definition, that prevails, with its share of behaviours that can range from euphemism to denial, or lying, cheating and even the explicit violation of professional ethical standards (Lay & Rolo, 2017).

The role of managers is crucial here because of their responsibilities, and even more so insofar as certain attitudes can add to the situation of *denial of a denial*, so to speak, compounded by an endorsement of these behaviours, which may be integrated into the organisation's culture or the extent of which may be radically denied (Tweedie, 2013). Paradoxical as it may seem, one way out of stupidity, whose natural inclination is to paralyse and cement intelligence and sensitivity, lies in the salutary ability to recognise, especially on the part of managers, the limits of rationality in management, and quite simply acknowledge the human aspects of fallibility (Deslandes, 2015; Linstead et al., 2014; Moriceau et al., 2017).

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management devices confines the worker to a suffering and isolation that renders him or her incapable of feeling and then thinking.

In this way, stupidity, insofar as it relates to these pathological defence mechanisms, is more worrying and complex than it appears. The question goes beyond the merely cognitive or affective, and directly addresses ethical issues in that, by blocking thinking and feeling, stupidity prevents us from asking the question of what is right and wrong at work, and alters our relationship with reality and with others (Dejours, 2022). Ethical violations are thus never far away when we evoke the notion of organisational stupidity, immersing workers and the organisation in a zone of moral indifference, and sometimes even outright cynicism. Understood, therefore, as a paradoxical defence against an impeded dynamic of sublimation, stupidity belongs legitimately to the field of work-related psychopathology, as its causes are above all organisational.

Two essential points can be summed up from the above. On the one hand, stupidity can be interpreted as a form of prevention of ordinary sublimation, or even its exact symmetry, insofar as it is a process initiated and reinforced by certain management devices that we set out to identify and illustrate along this essay. On the other hand, stupidity is rooted in the deleterious effects of defence mechanisms triggered as responses to suffering; the result is the atrophy of the subjective experience of the body, which contributes to preventing the elaboration of thinking and moral sense at work. In other words, when the enemies of sublimation proliferate within organisations, it is first the body, and only then the mind, that is alienated, as suffering becomes the prodrome of stupidity. It is by simultaneously taking these two aspects into account that we can suggest possible remedies for organisational stupidity.

## Discussion and conclusion. Can organisations be 're-eroticized'?

The aim of our heuristic proposal was to extend a reflection initiated by various authors on the notion of organisational stupidity, while inviting the reader to shift focus by adopting a perspective inspired by the psychodynamics of work. As we have tried to demonstrate, the notion of stupidity, while stimulating, comprises certain ambiguities that limit its rigorous extension to the field of organisational behaviour. The main aim of our argument has been to clarify the relationship that could be established between the emergence of stupidity and what the psychodynamics of work defines as ordinary sublimation. While in our opinion these two notions can be understood as symmetrical, we have sought to specify the organisational dynamics and devices that promote or hinder either of these dispositions. More specifically, we wanted to extend the scope of the notion of stupidity by endowing it with a phenomenological, clinical, and ethical component.

On a phenomenological level, we have observed that stupidity corresponds to a failure of the worker's subjective resources as a result of what we have described as 'anti-sublimatory' management devices. Simultaneously, the analysis of stupidity takes on a truly clinical dimension, in that we have been able to identify both its prodromal stages (in this case, suffering at work, which involves no sublimating issues), and the harmful effects of psychological defences against suffering (moral indifference, tendency to cynicism, refusal to think). Thus, not only does stupidity threaten the mental health of workers, it also jeopardises, in the more or less long term, the very foundation of social bonds at work, namely the relationship with the body, with reality, and with others. The *tour de force* of the psychodynamics of work, and all the works that refer to it, is to provide a coherent framework that links these three dimensions of organisational stupidity.

Having reached this point in our essay, we would like to outline a few avenues for future reflection, which are exploratory in nature and therefore not exhaustive. If stupidity can be understood as sensitive and ethical anaesthesia, we propose here to formulate a set of hypotheses that we group together under the heading of an 'eroticisation' of work, which calls for

a rediscovery of the subjective meaning of work, focussing on the bodily and aesthetic dimensions at stake in the construction of moral sense in organisations. Of course, these hypotheses need to be rigorously supplemented, supported, and even refuted by future field studies.

First, let us recall that, in the context of the psychodynamics of work, sexuality is an essential aspect of psychological health and fulfilment, both personal and professional: 'sexuality and work can only come together', recalls Christophe Dejours, 'in an architecture of the body which is nothing less than the immanent condition of life itself' (Dejours, 2009b, p. 21). Acknowledging the 'erotic' dimension of work in organisations means first and foremost recognising that their existence, and their durability, is only based on the condition that affective relationships are always dependent on access to bodily experience (Deslandes, 2016). While work, and management in particular, suffers from a certain *disembodiment* (Dujarier, 2017), it is important to remember that every organisation involves a *hand-to-hand* ('corps-à-corps') relationship with work and its matter – even if this matter is highly abstract, as in the case of a poet, a psychoanalyst or ... a manager (Dejours, 2021). The disintegration of affective ties often corresponds to a breakdown in relationships at work, which rapidly disrupts organisations (Deslandes, 2016). This is because the 'erotic' threads established at work ensure the intertwining of the most destructive tendencies, both individual and collective; *Eros* only effectively assumes its binding task when the lure of domination and the direct satisfaction of drives and impulses are channelled through work pursued and defined in common. If contemporary organisations think they can do without the intelligence of the body, they run the risk of falling prey to endemic stupidity, with all its suffering and symptoms of moral decay.

Those whom psychologist and psychoanalyst Marie Grenier-Pezé (2009) describes as 'athletes of quantity' experience this bitterly:

> Our athletes of quantity, perfect cogs in the wheel of the productivism expected of them, get excited, then wear out, disappearing into illness, quickly replaced by others. The intensification of work, the unattainable increase in objectives, the strategic conviviality, the individualized evaluation of work are all organizational models ensuring the loss of solidarities and organizing the solitude of the worker. (p. 82)

From this perspective, the psychodynamics of work calls for a subversion of the presuppositions on which management builds a fantasy of rationality, calculability and omnipotence based on governance by numbers (Supiot, 2015) reducing management to the 'handling of people' (Le Texier, 2016). Quite the contrary, we have to argue that the body is the fundamental locus of experience at work, at once erotic, ethical and cognitive.

However, and this constitutes our second proposition, we must be wary of sharing an overly ecumenical conception of love and its good deeds in organisations. Instead, let us wager that eroticism, while it may occur in the workplace and some may even call for it (Deslandes, 2023), must also be *critical*. Sexuality remains an ambivalent object, and management criticism must remain attentive to it (Fleming, 2007). As we have suggested, one of the risks would be to associate stupidity strictly with simple apathy or disinvestment in work. For, while organisational stupidity attests to a lack of thought, it can also coincide with a certain form of 'cynical enjoyment', as Edouard Pignot (2023) reminds us in his study of private chauffeurs. What is more, the call for autonomy, freedom and even for forming a 'family' (Casey, 1999) often hides the mortifying will to dominate (Abdallah, 2022; Daudigeos et al., 2021), if not directly an injunction to enjoy one's work, which reactivates the most deleterious forms of normative control (Fleming, 2005, 2007).

As a result, the problem for critical management studies is posed quite differently than in simple terms of self-alienation, a syntagm which, by mere repetition, loses its substance (Contu, 2008). Facing the challenge posed by stupidity may require other avenues for critical management research. One of the most creative ways may lie in the resources offered by the 'post-critical' current in the human sciences and philosophy (Sutter, 2019). Aiming to move away from a critical approach that is overly focused on cognitivist and intellectual presuppositions, the notion of 'post-criticism' (Kompridis, 2011) does not claim to define a strict research agenda, but refocuses on the reflexive, aesthetic and ethical dispositions of actors in order to rediscover a genuine 'art of meaning' in organisations (Moriceau, 2019; Moriceau & Paes, 2013). As Butler (2016) initially insisted in his critique of Spicer and Alvesson's inaugural article, critical research needs to be very careful in its handling of the notion of organisational stupidity, as the positive propositions it may be led to formulate flow directly from it.

Finally, and this will be our last point, these calls to reconnect with the body and meaning at work, while critical, can only reach their full potential if two essential conditions are met – and these are practical. The first is obviously to continue to carry out robust empirical work, which may or may not invalidate some of the hypotheses put forward here. The second is of direct interest to the management practitioner, and is aimed at ensuring that managers fully assume their role in this 'erotic economy' of the organisation in the face of the perils of stupidity.

From an empirical point of view, due to lack of space and the very form of this essay, we can only call for a typology of stupidity in organisations. Let us simply mention the fact that, while rigorous, scrupulous, compulsive obedience to the norm can lead to genuine attitudes of stupidity (Alvesson & Einola, 2018; Fagerberg et al., 2020), or even to 'normopathic'

behaviours, where the norm is considered an absolute (Dejours, 2012; Enriquez, 2010; McDougall, 1978), other forms of stupidity might perhaps be identified in quite different contexts – and quite unexpected. Some smaller, less bureaucratic structures, such as start-ups (Buquet et al., 2017), are not exempt from quasi-magical thinking, with the fainting, if not disappearance, of critical thinking, through a process that psychoanalyst and group theorist Anzieu (1975) described as 'group illusion' ('illusion groupale'), where a loving identification ('identification amoureuse') with the leader intermeshes with an idealisation of the group as an entity above criticism. Is this a singular case of stupidity, where identification with the leader replaces blind adherence to norms? If love makes you blind, can it also make you stupid, at least in some cases? Empirical studies will have to put these propositions to the test.

Finally, there is a key role to be played here by managers, a role that needs to be recalled, and to some extent reconsidered, in these situations. What role can they play in the 'eroticism' of organisations, and as a bulwark against stupidity? Beyond the obviously ideological forms of control that take the guise of a call for autonomy, or that feign recognition for the simple purpose of further subjugating employees (Tweedie, 2013; Tweedie et al., 2019), there is also, as the aforementioned example of call centres illustrates, attention on the part of managers to the subjective, more tacit, and indeed less quantifiable elements in organisations. In other words, anything that cannot be measured nor optimised in the near future should not be dismissed as irrelevant.

In this respect, it is impossible not to mention the way in which certain sectors, notably healthcare (Brasseur et al., 2022; Molinier, 2010), suffer structurally from this crucial deficit of recognition, due to the difficulty of observing and evaluating all the gestures that are essential in such a task. For, as the psychodynamics of work reminds us, the dynamics of ordinary sublimation fundamentally depend on a whole economy of recognition: recognition by peers, but also by the hierarchy. What is more, by stressing the importance of collective deliberation within organisations on the nature of 'real work' and the subjective resources involved, the manager's role is also slightly modified. In a kind of displacement, the manager can no longer simply provide more or less sincere tokens of recognition, but rather plays a crucial, pivotal role in this dynamic of recognition. Access to 'real work' presupposes a joint development of experiences, at all levels of the organisation; a process that can be facilitated by the position, as a sort of interface, that the manager is likely to occupy.

This paradoxical, devious form of resistance to stupidity on the part of managers implies no less than venturing into, and assuming, the fractures and dissensus that characterise every organisation, even the most seemingly rationalised (McCabe et al., 2020). This is certainly a weaker form of management (Deslandes, 2020), in that it provides less assurance, certainty

and control, and destabilises the manager's self-image as a conductor, a leader of men, or a numbers person – images that are, moreover, filled with unconscious fantasies (Driver, 2009; Kosmala & Herrbach, 2006) – causing the manager to face up to his or her own finitude. But we would not therefore hazard putting a definitive end to this discussion, which certainly calls for more debate – since stupidity, as Flaubert wrote, lies in … wanting to draw conclusions.

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