When, exactly, was the Age of Stupid? Was it when people practiced human sacrifice to placate the brutal gods they worshiped? Was it when people believed the Earth was flat and everything else in the universe revolved around them? Or, was it when people thought that all diseases were due to an imbalance of the four humours and could be treated by bleeding the patient?

Maybe it was when they believed in witches and burned them alive at the stake for the on-lookers’ entertainment and spiritual enlightenment. Or perhaps it occurred more recently when people took “comet pills” to protect themselves from cyanogen gas in the tail of Halley’s Comet, which they believed would envelope the Earth and cause mass extinction.

Surely, the Age of Stupid was in full flower when people believed in Piltdown man and perpetual motion machines, zero-threshold environmental toxins, and catastrophic anthropogenic global warming. Or it’s the Age of Stupid today.

To paraphrase my favorite lines from the 1997 movie, "Men in Black":

1,500 years ago, everyone knew the Earth was at the center of the universe. 500 years ago, everyone knew the Earth was flat. 40 years ago, everyone knew that dioxin in the dirt was killing people. And, today, everyone knows that Global Warming will destroy civilization. Imagine what we will “know” tomorrow.

Given the timeless nature of humanity’s determination to embrace outrageously stupid ideas, maybe The Age of Stupid isn’t a specific time at all, but rather a persistent condition of the human race which has expressed itself throughout human history, and continues to do so, today.

Yet the mere fact of human progress, as slow and grudging as it is, testifies to the existence, and positive influence, of at least a few individuals, at every stage of human development, even during our stupid phases. To paraphrase "Men in Black" again: People in the aggregate are dumb, panicky, dangerous animals, and you know it; but individuals can be smart in any age.

Thus, even as the general public was burning witches, downing “comet pills”, or fretting over the
imagined hazards of the molecular basis of all life on this planet, there has always been a tiny minority of smart people who busied themselves with figuring out what really made things work the way they do, and how that knowledge might be applied to making everyone’s life a little bit better.

It has been an up-hill battle, though, because in every Age, there has also been another minority of smart people who sought, instead, to acquire wealth and power by playing on the ignorance & irrational fears of the majority. For the sake of this discussion, let’s call the first minority “scientists” and the second minority “salesmen.” Ideally, the former have no hidden, personal agenda while the latter always do.

Assuming, then, that The Age of Stupid has stretched from the Dawn of Man to the Present Day, the real question boils down to one of how to tell the difference between a real scientist and a salesman with a political agenda. Toward, that end, allow me to offer the following guidelines which, as a retired scientist, myself, I feel eminently qualified to share.

A good scientist would rather live with an unpleasant truth than embrace a comfortable lie.

Good scientists do not suppress debate, they insist on it.

Good scientists with opposing views attack one another’s arguments, but not each other.

A good scientist knows that skepticism, whether or not it is the sign of a heretic, is actually essential to the practice of good science.

A good scientist would rather be right than be President.

A good scientist knows that 2 + 2 = 4, always has, and always will, no matter who occupies the positions of power in politics or culture.

A good scientist knows that science is not a democracy, that scientific truth is not determined by a show of hands, and that consensus and authority are there to be challenged, not to be accepted without question. (If that were not the case, then I wasted a lot of time and money in graduate school, when all I really needed to do was brush up on my Aristotle.)

Anyone who is familiar with the defining characteristics of good scientists can always tell whether it is actually raining, or someone is just peeing on their leg. Anyone who consults the work of good scientists on matters of science, instead of heeding the irrelevant rants of Hollywood celebrities and media pundits on TV, will be much more accurately informed than those who do otherwise. And, finally, those who persist in behaving like witless sheep will be forever doomed to getting fleeced, on a regular basis, by the politicians, celebrities, and others whom they permit to do their thinking for them.
Doubtless, investigating the facts for themselves would require a lot more mental effort than most people are willing to expend, especially to understand a topic that half of them don’t really care about, anyway, but assuming that you think the global economy and modern industrialized society are worth preserving, the real consequences of not learning the scientific facts are actually much graver than the imaginary consequences of “man-made” global warming, for example. For, make no mistake, the priests of political correctness and other dangerous ideologues exercise more intense and widespread influence on Science today than at any other time since the Middle Ages. And, under such conditions, ignorance will most assuredly not be Bliss.

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