

# The Power of Stupidity

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Many times daily, we denote persons, events, or result as “stupid,” meaning that they lack wits, knowledge, or rational justification. But, what is stupidity, and how can it represent power? The word is of Latin origin and means “amazed or stunned.” Some 127 synonyms<sup>1</sup> of stupidity are available in dictionaries (a few examples in English are a dolt, idiot, dullard, pillock, poor fish, pudding head, etc.), but there is only one antonym known (bad ass).

**What is stupidity?** A shortcut to answering the question might be comparing stupidity to knowledge, although knowledge is not an exhaustive antonym to stupidity. Besides, knowledge, too, is defined in fuzzy terms, at least in philosophy. It is referred to as a justified true belief (JTB, for short). What this belief is based on varies, depending on the circumstances. It might be a belief justified by observations, formal proofs, some preconceived ideas, dogmas, or whatever else. The justification seems to be the factor that makes the belief true. This construct is so-called propositional knowledge, described by phrases of the form “knowledge that p,” with “p” representing some indicative sentence. For instance “sparrows fly.” In this form, a justified true belief has been sufficient to enable space exploration, burning or drowning witches, starting or averting wars, and many other human exploits. In 1963, the so-called *Gettier problem* (consisting of two cases) appeared. This problem points to the fact that justification, truth, and belief are insufficient for establishing knowledge. It is, therefore, important to ask what knowledge is. If we do not fully understand what it is, can we fully understand ourselves? And can we understand what stupidity is? Questions of this kind are ancient: they go all the way back to Plato.

In brief, knowledge is what we know. It is stored in our brains, which can be thought of as our private encyclopedia. This representation helps us find the locations of chunks of knowledge. It also stores our beliefs and expectations, linked together into a vast network of ideas, memories, predictions, and the like. The brain updates this map continually, using data and signals delivered by our senses. But, we do not base our decisions on the real world; we take them from this imaginary encyclopedia.

The brain stores interconnected pieces of knowledge (as well as data and information). But in this respect, the brain differs from the computer. Computers are not man-made brains. They do store facts and information and manipulate them as zeros and ones, but they have no idea about what they are doing with the data or what the information is good for. They do not “understand” the underlying processes, and cannot make any independent decisions unless the man-made software leads them to make specific decisions.

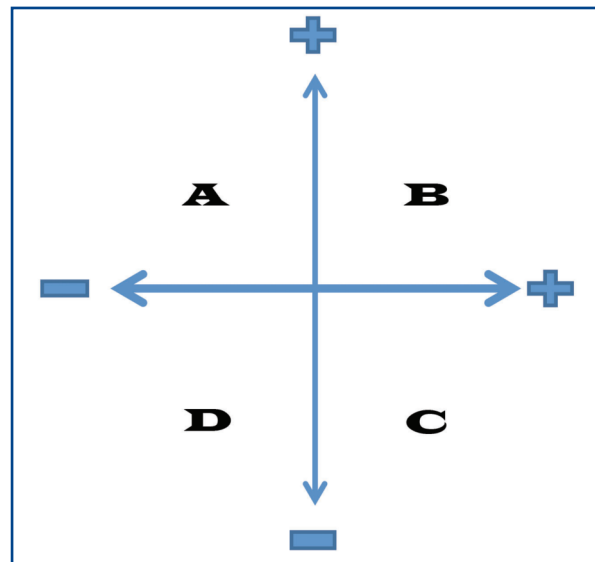
The crucial aspect here is that we are expecting “independent decisions.” The computer cannot make them; humans can. What matters is the quality of these decisions: are they optimal and compatible with human aspirations, the laws of nature, the laws of human society, etc.? If yes, they are wise decisions; if not they are “stupid” decisions. This division, at long last, brings us into the realm of stupidity as exclusively human property.

What is surprising is the small amount of study dedicated to such an important subject. Looking back, the history of stupidity research illustrates the scarcity of information on the topic in the pre-computer age. In the United States, *A Short Introduction to the History of Human Stupidity* was published in

1934 by a Columbia University professor, Walter B. Pitkin.<sup>2</sup> His book is still topical, in spite of the 80+ years since its publication. The author claimed that before his book, only two other books on the subject were available, both published in Germany between the First and the Second World Wars. They were the books by Max Kemmerich (2013, re-edition)<sup>3</sup> and Leopold Loewenfeld (1921),<sup>4</sup> respectively. At this point, the reader probably exclaims, “WHAT?!? Is it true that some 60,000 years after the appearance of *Homo sapiens* in Europe and the Old World, there were only two books dedicated to *Homo*’s most salient property?”

Fortunately, it is not particularly challenging to find the answer. A brief review of books in German, French, and Latin in Google Scholar reveals that, in reality, quite some books had existed, many of them in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for example, Baillarger 1843,<sup>5</sup> Bateman 1897,<sup>6</sup> Chaslin 1895,<sup>7</sup> Étoc-Demazy 1833,<sup>8</sup> and Sauze 1852.<sup>9</sup> One big problem nowadays is that the bibliography of those books is not complete, and few exact data on the year of publication, the publisher, etc., are available. In the post-WWII period, interesting works were published, predominantly in German. My subjective selection includes the works by N. Sachser (2004),<sup>10</sup> E. Kowalski (2017),<sup>11</sup> R. Musil (1937, 1978),<sup>12</sup> H. M. Enzensberger (2007),<sup>13</sup> and van Boxsel (2001).<sup>14</sup>

The breakthrough in a systematic and targeted study of stupidity came as recently as 1976. In that year, Carlo M. Cipolla, a professor of economic history at the University of Berkeley, published his now-famous *Laws of Stupidity* in an Italian magazine.<sup>15</sup> In Cipolla’s opinion, stupidity is a force that is humanity’s greatest existential threat. Why? Because, as Cipolla put it, stupid people cause problems without an apparent benefit to themselves, they are irrational, and they are abundant. I would add that they also are very self-centered.



**Fig. 1: Human behavior in the light of Cipolla’s laws**

Here are citations of Cipolla’s fundamental laws of human stupidity taken from the 1987 edition of the Laws in *The Whole Earth Review*:

**Law 1: Always and inevitably everyone underestimates the number of stupid individuals in circulation.**

**Law 2: The probability that a particular person be stupid is independent of any other characteristic of that person.**

**Law 3: A stupid person causes losses to another person or a group of persons while himself deriving no gain and even possibly incurring losses.**

This law is, in Cipolla’s words, the Golden Law of Stupidity. This law also introduces three additional phenotypes that Cipolla says co-exist alongside stupidity. A graph, shown in figure 1, represents the set of the four phenotypes.

**Law 4: Non-stupid people always underestimate the damaging power of stupid individuals.**

Most often, non-stupid people always forget that at all times and places and under any circumstances, dealing and associating with stupid people turns out to be a costly mistake.

## Law 5: A stupid person is the most dangerous type of person.

Giancarlo Livraghi (1966, 1997) proposed the following three corollaries to Cipolla's laws:<sup>16</sup>

**First Corollary:** In each of us there is a factor of stupidity, which is always larger than we suppose.

**Second Corollary:** When the stupidity of one person combines with the stupidity of others, the impact grows geometrically—i.e., by multiplication, not addition, of the individual stupidity factors.

**Third corollary:** The combination of intelligence in different people has less impact than the combination of stupidity, because “non-stupid people always underestimate the damaging power of stupid people” (Cipolla's Fourth Law).

In figure 1, the horizontal coordinate represents a person's self, with + being a gain and – a loss. The vertical coordinate represents the gain (+) or loss (-) other people incur. These give rise to four quadrants having the following characteristics.

Quadrant A illustrates a situation when a person behaves in a LOSE-WIN manner. This person is naïve and helpless. His behavior benefits others at his own expense. It is called *Cretinous Behavior*. Quadrant B depicts a situation when a person's behavior results in gain (+) for others, as well as a gain for the person in point. It is a WIN-WIN situation, and the behavior is denoted as *Intelligent*. In Quadrant C, the person is the winner, whereas others are losers. Cipolla called this behavior *Bandit Behavior*, i.e., a WIN-LOSE situation. Finally, Quadrant D shows *Stupid Behavior*, or a LOSE-LOSE situation, when the protagonist's behavior leads to losses both for himself and for the society. Also, one can develop a variety of combinations, such as smart bandits or stupid bandits, depending on the “benefit-damage ratio.”

As an illustration of the academic research carried out in recent decades in the field of “stupidity,” I have selected one set of results, obtained in 1999 by psychologists Justin Kruger and David Dunning (K&D) from Cornell University.<sup>17</sup> They carried out three experiments, with undergraduate students as their test subjects.

**Experiment 1** Humor. The authors asked 65 test subjects to rate how funny certain jokes were. They then compared each test subject's ratings with ratings done by eight professional comedians on a scale from 1 (not funny) to 11 (very funny). It turned out that some test subjects had a very poor sense of what others find funny—but they viewed themselves as very good at it.

**Experiment 2** Logical Reasoning. The test subjects were 45 undergraduate students. They took a 20-item test of logical reasoning based on a Law School Admission Test preparation guide. The goal was to make three estimates: (1) A comparison of a student's general logical reasoning ability with that of other students, expressed as their percentile ranking; (2) the students' estimate of how their score on the test would compare with that of their classmates; and (3) each student's estimate of how many questions out of 20 he thought he had answered correctly.

**Experiment 3** – Grammar. In phase 1 of this test, the 84 participants had to complete a test assessing their knowledge of American Standard Written English; to rate their overall ability to recognize correct grammar; to assess how their test compared with that of their peers; and to estimate how many test items they had answered correctly.

In phase 2 of this test, using the Wason (1966) test of logic,<sup>18</sup> the participants had to assess themselves similarly as in the previous experiments. Half of the participants took part in a short training session to improve their logical reasoning skills. To test their metacognitive skills, they had to indicate

which items they had answered correctly and rate their ability and test performance.

The results of the above experiments had many overlapping features, indicating that incompetence manifests itself similarly, no matter the task. The main findings of the research were as follows:

- gender does not affect the overall results
- the test subject's assessments of ability correlated modestly with the subject's actual ability
- the subjects tended to overestimate their ability relative to their peers' ability
- those subjects that performed exceptionally poorly compared to their peers were unaware of this fact
- the participants in the bottom quartile overestimated the number of correctly answered test items by 50%
- participants falling in other quartiles overestimated their ability much less than did those in the bottom quartile
- participants in the top quartile underestimated themselves
- participants who received the training graded their tests more accurately; those who initially scored in the bottom quartile were as accurate in monitoring their test performance as those who had initially scored in the top quartile
- the incompetent participants are incapable of learning from life experience about their lack of skills

The results obtained by K&D show that incompetence is worse than it appears to be. It most often concurs with cluelessness, i.e., a state when the majority of the consequences of an action are unpredictable at the time of decision (Graeves 2016).<sup>19</sup> The incompetent persons do not perform up to speed. They do not recognize their lack of competence. Moreover, they do not even acknowledge the competence of other people.

This quantitative study of stupidity is interesting, although it might be more appropriate to talk about categorizing the test

subjects' intellectual performance into quartiles, rather than assessing their "stupidity." Since the test subjects were university students, they could hardly be stupid, i.e., intellectually impaired in the sense some members of the general population might be. For a more detailed account of the K&D experiments, the reader might like to peruse the original article.

Confronting the K&D experiment with Cippola's laws, one thing that muddles the analysis is that in a given situation, it is somewhat difficult to distinguish between "incompetence" (that can be rectified) and "stupidity" (that is irreversible). An intermediate stage between the two seems to be the "stupid action," or a "stupid result." These are not an exclusive domain of "stupid" (i.e., low-IQ) people, but intelligent and educated people can produce them, as well. Therefore, prudence probably fits better as a counterweight to stupidity.

K&D's findings confirm statements on stupidity pronounced by famous people. Here follows a brief selection of great quotations. The most ancient one is from Euripides: "Talk sense to a fool, and he calls you foolish."<sup>20</sup> The famous English humorist Jerome K. Jerome stated, "It is so pleasant to come across people more stupid than ourselves. We love them at once for being so."<sup>21</sup> One more apt quotation is by Albert Einstein: "Only two things are infinite, the universe and human stupidity, and I am not sure about the former."<sup>22</sup>

K&D's experiments, combined with the quotations stated above, lead us to believe that the etiology of stupidity is more complicated and more multi-dimensional than is its reduction to a few symptoms. One relevant fact that follows from K&D's experiments is that there is an affinity between the magnitude of the stupidity displayed and the intellectual environment in which a task is given, the subject's handling of knowledge, and the strength of the



relationships between some critical parameters. The affinity manifests as relations between curiosity, concentration, and other values involved.

**Is that all?** In the discussion so far, stupidity has been mostly exposed in negative terms as a human property characterized by the absence of cognitive values. Few natural phenomena, however, are only black or white. Usually, they appear as shades of gray. Can it apply to stupidity, too? And can stupidity have a bright side to it?

Cipolla had indicated that the stupid people even occur in quadrants A, B and C. This idea, in fact, is not entirely new. In the 16th century already, Erasmus of Rotterdam, one of the greatest thinkers of his time, considered human folly as a property standing out prominently in human behavior. Human folly manifests as indifference or disaffiliation concerning cognitive values, and lack of *bon ton*, prudence, and foresight. Folly is thus vaguely related to stupidity. Erasmus (1978), in *The Praise of Folly*, lays bare the various manifestations of folly in society.<sup>23</sup> Examples include the folly of theologians, the ubiquity of folly in marriage and friendship, self-love, delusion, ignorance, or academic and social classes. All these manifestations of folly fit into the quadrants A, B, and C.

Even more penetrating are Musil's contributions (1937, 1978). In *The Man without Qualities*, an unfinished novel over 1000 pages long written between 1930 and 1943, he dissects a wide range of existential topics related to feelings and humanity.<sup>24</sup> Musil discloses an intimate relationship between stupidity and learning (education, formation, cultivation). This link is most conspicuously apparent in the dependence between stupidity and smartness. If the forces in a segment of society act very asymmetrically, the weaker partner finds his salvation in pretending to be more stupid than he is. The stronger partner is less irritated when the weaker party *cannot*

accomplish something than when he *does not want* to do it. In this case, the reduced performance due to smartness and cunningness should not be confused with lack of intelligence or incompetence.

Thus, the above assertion results in two models of stupidity. One is closely associated with vanity and cognitive impairment. It resides in quadrant D. The other, representing an intelligently applied stupidity proffered by an intelligent person, can occur in any of the quadrants A, B or C. Often the latter variety of stupidity is the only way to save one's skin and make one's autonomy and freedom possible. Some authors make vague references to irony as related to the intelligently applied stupidity. *The Praise of Folly* is full of irony.

**Where does the power of stupidity come from?** In the classical Cipolla setting, it comes primarily from the feeling of satisfaction and confidence the low-percentile decision makers get from their presumed decision-making and problem-solving excellence. Those in the uppermost percentile, by contrast, are not sure whether they have investigated all possible solution alternatives and consequences in sufficient depth, or perhaps have missed something of great significance.

One of the intellectually most intensive parameters in dealing with stupidity is intellectual curiosity. It incites man to investigate where the boundaries of what we perceive are. The people we denote as "stupid" lack, in my opinion, the capability to use curiosity to obtain information and convert that information into knowledge. The stupid person is not very curious. In fact, he cares little about the boundaries. Instead, he perceives fragments of information as wholes and their constituent parts as closed entities of which there is nothing more to know. That explains why the less-rational people have a feeling of accomplishment even when obtaining mediocre results and why they think

their performance is outstanding. Nobody has expressed this more succinctly than one of the greatest thinkers of the previous century, Bertrand Russell (1946): “The trouble with the world is that the stupid are cocksure and the intelligent are full of doubt.”<sup>25</sup>

Gleaned from Cipolla’s laws, the power of stupidity stemming from vanity and intellectual impairment can thus be explained by the following fundamental concepts:

*Consistency.* No matter how the non-stupid people act, they are somewhat erratic in their behavior. They can perform anywhere in the quadrants A, B, and C (or even D) for a while. The stupid, by contrast, are models of consistency. Cipolla explains it by the fact that intelligent people find it challenging to understand irrational behavior. They do not think it is impossible to understand the logic underlying a helpless person’s or a bandit’s behavior. The latter is not bright enough to increase his well-being creatively, so he devises ways of doing so at someone else’s expense. It is not morally correct, but it is rational and thus predictable.

*Ubiquity.* The actual number of stupid people at any given place is impossible to estimate. However, from the First Law, it follows that their number is higher than anyone thinks.

The ubiquity of the stupid further aggravates this problem. They are represented in all substrata of human society and at all segments of time.

*Destructive power.* An increase in the number of the stupid members of a given society inevitably strengthens the destructiveness of the stupid ones.

The power of the intelligently applied stupidity in a given setting primarily depends on the cleverness with which the presumed stupidity is presented and used, because, in this case, the subject is gaining a personal advantage at the expense of the stronger and more unwelcome partner.

There is a third combination, following from a different blend of the shades of reality. Smart “bandits” (quadrant C) may win significant power in society because of their sophisticated application of pretended stupidity at the expense of others. Examples of such combinations are abundant in the circles of tax evaders, privatizers, and other speculators. A self-study of the various combinations shown in figure 1 possibly will warn us against the antics of selfish and unscrupulous individuals, because—like it or not—stupidity is all around us. Knowledge and prudence are only its special cases.

## NOTES

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