*The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity* is a short essay written by the Italian economist Carlo Cipolla. The first edition was written in English and released in 1976. Originally, it was intentionally distributed only among his friends on a confidential basis. The reason is simple. That book was intended as a sort of joke, where he faced a few serious topics in a lighthearted and not-to-be-taken-too-seriously way.

The most famous excerpt is the one on human stupidity. When addressing such a sensible theme, he came up with an extravagant and interesting theory, which earned him incredible success. Not only was the essay officially published, but it was also translated into many languages and distributed worldwide. Now, it represents a milestone on [the controversial topic of human stupidity](https://medium.com/mind-cafe/the-3-causes-of-human-stupidity-1e42578fe27e).

Let’s dive into the 5 basic laws of human stupidity.

**First Basic Law**

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

Stupid people exist, but according to Cipolla you may be deeply underestimating their number and influence in our society. He was so strongly convinced about this that he asserted that “*any numerical assumption would turn out to be an underestimate.*” This statement was obviously an exaggeration, part of his playful writing style. On the other hand, such an idea should not be taken too lightly. After all, this is not the first law by accident.

Please, think about all the people that you had judged intelligent, before realizing they were actually behaving stupidly and obtusely. If you are still not convinced, Cipolla suggested an experiment. Go out in the street and see how many people insist on obstructing you for no apparent reason. What would you call their behavior if not stupid?

**Second Basic Law**

*The probability that a certain person is stupid is independent of any other characteristic of that person.*

Cipolla considered stupidity as a human characteristic, like having blond hair or black eyes. Consequently, it cannot but be distributed roughly equally in all walks of society, regardless of people’s level of education. “*Whether one frequents elegant circles or takes refuge among cannibals, whether they lock themselves up in a monastery or decide to spend the rest of their life in the company of a beautiful partner, the fact remains that they will always have to deal with the same percentage of stupid people,”* he concluded.

In this pessimistic view, human beings are doomed to deal with stupidity. Also, according to Cipolla, there are no safer places or solutions to avoid it. The only thing you can do is accept this and live with it for the rest of your existence.

**Third Basic Law**

A stupid person is one who causes losses to another person or a group of people while they gain nothing or may even suffer losses.

Carlo Cipolla considered this the golden and most important law, never to be forgotten. He did not consider stupidity a matter of IQ, but rather a lack of relational skills. In particular, he believed that [it is possible to classify people based on their behavior](https://medium.com/mind-cafe/what-makes-stupid-people-stupid-522028d6569f). Stupid people are the ones who harm others and often themselves. On the contrary, the behavior of intelligent or overly naive people is aimed at helping others.

Specifically, he believed that stupid human beings behave in an irrational and difficult-to-understand way. This does not mean that their actions do not have an impact on your life. On the contrary, you are very likely to remember people who hindered you, causing you difficulties, frustrations, and suffering. What is even more surprising is that such stupid people may not even gain anything from their behavior. In fact, Cipolla stated that *“there are people who, by their illogic actions, not only cause harm to other people, but also to themselves. Such people belong to the genus of the super stupids.”*

**Fourth Basic Law**

*Non-stupid people always underestimate the damaging power of stupid individuals. In particular, non-stupid people constantly forget that in any time and place and circumstance dealing and/or hanging out with stupid people always turns out to be a costly mistake.*

To make this law clearer, Carlo Cipolla added that *“stupid people are deadly dangerous because reasonable people find it difficult to imagine and understand stupid behavior.”* In such a view, stupid people’s attacks always catch intelligent ones by surprise. This makes it even more difficult to come up with a rational defense. On the other hand, this would be of little use since illogical actions cannot be understood using logic.

As a result, by underestimating their power, you are vulnerable and always at the mercy of stupid people’s unpredictability. He was also convinced that intelligent people tend to think that the stupid ones can only harm themselves, that they are immune to their actions. This is a huge mistake making reasonable people feel invulnerable, dangerously lowering their guard.

**Fifth Basic Law**

*Stupid people are the most dangerous type of people.*

This law comes as a natural consequence of the previous and fourth basic law. Also, if you have no clue about what Cipolla meant here, he made it even more obvious by adding the following corollary:

A stupid person is more dangerous than a bandit.

Of the five laws seen so far, this should be the most understandable and reasonable one. In fact, common sense tells us that intelligent people, no matter how hostile they may be, are predictable. In contrast, stupid people are not. This subtle difference makes [stupid people incredibly more fearsome than intelligent people](https://medium.com/mind-cafe/the-definition-of-intelligence-according-to-an-ancient-philosopher-59544ba35cef). In conclusion, this should be regarded as a kind of compendium of his entire theory on human stupidity.

**Conclusion**

The Italian economist Carlo Cipolla taught us that by using only irony and common sense, it is possible to conceive captivating ideas. As we have just seen, he was able to lightheartedly address human stupidity in a clear and incisive way. By summarizing such a complex and controversial subject in five basic laws, he devised a genuine and fascinating theory. Initially shared only with his friends, that theory became internationally known, and it is now studied in many disciplines. Although it should not be taken too seriously, this theory is something to keep in mind when inevitably hampered by human stupidity.

THE KNOBE EFFECT

# “Stupid people deserve what they get”: The effects of personality assessment on judgments of intentional action.

Knobe argues that people's judgments of the moral status of a side-effect of action influence their assessment of whether the side-effect is intentional. I tested this hypothesis using vignettes akin to Knobe's but involving economically or eudaimonistically (wellness-related) negative side-effects. My results show that it is people's sense of what agents deserve, and not the moral status of side-effects, that drives intuition.

## Abstract

People asymmetrically attribute various agential features such as intentionality, knowledge, or causal impact to other agents when something of normative significance is at stake. I will argue that three questions are of primary interest in the debate about this effect. A methodological question about how to explain it at all; a substantive question about how to explain it correctly: and a normative question about whether to explain it in terms of an error or a legitimate judgmental pattern. The problem, I argue, is that these three questions are difficult to disentangle. I propose a solution to this problem, and show how it accounts for the most recent data regarding the effect.

## Notes

1. The exact wording of all the vignettes I refer to in this paper can be found in the footnotes.
2. Although there is no consensus on this issue, I see no reason to think that cases which do not involve side effects but, say, means to an end should not be considered instances of the same effect.
3. It should be noted that reflective endorsement accounts of the kind proposed here cannot solve all remaining problems. Take Nichols and Knobe’s ([2007](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13164-014-0189-0#ref-CR31)) study on people’s intuitions about responsibility and free will: subjects turn out to have inconsistent intuitions about the compatibility of free will and determinism, depending on whether they are given a scenario describing a concrete action (for example, a case of murder) or whether they consider this question in the abstract. When subjects are shown the results and are given the opportunity to resolve this tension, no consensus is reached. Half of the subjects chose to hold on to their compatibilist judgments, the other half to their incompatibilist intuitions. In such a case, the reflective endorsement account yields no clear verdict.
4. *Free Will*

Imagine a universe (Universe A) in which everything that happens is completely caused by whatever happened before it. This is true from the very beginning of the universe, so what happened in the beginning of the universe caused what happened next, and so on right up until the present. For example : One day John decided to have French Fries at lunch. Like everything else, this decision was completely caused by what happened before it. So, if everything in this universe was exactly the same up until John made his decision, then it had to happen that John would decide to have French Fries.

*Concrete*

In Universe A, a man named Bill has become attracted to his secretary, and he decides that the only way to be with her is to kill his wife and 3 children. He knows that it is impossible to escape from his house in the event of a fire. Before he leaves on a business trip, he sets up a device in his basement that burns down the house and kills his family. Is Bill fully morally responsible for killing his wife and children?

*Abstract*

In Universe A, is it possible for a person to be fully morally responsible for their actions? (Nichols and Knobe [2007](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13164-014-0189-0#ref-CR31), 669f.)

1. *Chairman*

The vice-president of a company went to the chairman of the board and said, ‘We are thinking of starting a new program. It will help us increase profits, but it will also [harm/help] the environment.’

The chairman of the board answered, ‘I don’t care at all about [harming/helping] the environment. I just want to make as much profit as I can. Let’s start the new program.’

They started the new program. Sure enough, the environment was [harmed/helped]. (Knobe [2003](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13164-014-0189-0#ref-CR21))

1. For further empirical challenges to the DSC model, see Cova and Naar ([2012b](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13164-014-0189-0#ref-CR9)) and Rose et al. ([2012](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13164-014-0189-0#ref-CR38)).
2. *Nazi Law*

In Nazi Germany, there was a law called the “racial identification law.” The purpose of the law was to help identify people of certain races so that they could be rounded up and sent to concentration camps. Shortly after this law was passed, the CEO of a small corporation decided to make certain organizational changes. The vice-president of the corporation said: “By making those changes, you’ll definitely be increasing our profits. But you’ll also be violating/fulfilling the requirements of the racial identification law.” The CEO said: “I don’t care one bit about that. All I care about is making as much profit as I can. Let’s make those organizational changes!” As soon as the CEO gave this order, the corporation began making the organizational changes.

1. *Driver*

John was driving over the speed limit (about 40 mph in a 30 mph zone) in order to get home in time to [hide an anniversary present for his parents that he had left out in the open before they could see it/hide a vial of cocaine he had left out in the open before his parents could see it].

As John came to an intersection, he applied his brakes, but was unable to avoid a car that ran through a stop sign without making any attempt to slow down. As a result, John hit the car that was coming from the other direction.

John hit the driver on the driver’s side, causing him multiple lacerations, a broken collar bone, and a fractured arm. John was uninjured in the accident. (Alicke [1992](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13164-014-0189-0#ref-CR2), 369)

1. *Gizmo*

The vice-president of a company in the Gizmo industry went to the chairman of the board and said, “We are thinking of starting a new program. It will help us increase profits, but it will result in our Gizmos being colored black. The convention is to make Gizmos colored darker than blue, so we would be complying with the convention.” [The convention is to make Gizmos colored lighter than blue, so we would be violating the convention.]

The chairman of the board answered, “I don’t care at all about the color of the Gizmos. I just want to make as much profit as I can. Let’s start the new program.” They started the program. As it happened, the Gizmos were black, colored darker than blue. (Uttich and Lombrozo [2010](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13164-014-0189-0#ref-CR44), 90)

1. *Jessica*

Jessica lives in a neighborhood where everyone (including Jessica herself) happens to own a dog. One afternoon, she is planning to go for a walk and decides not to/to take her dog. Her friend Aaron says, “Jessica, if you go out like that, you will/won’t be doing what everyone else is doing.”Jessica responds, “I don’t care at all what everyone else is doing. I just want to go for a walk without/with my dog.” She goes ahead with her plan, and sure enough, she ends up doing what no one/everyone else is doing. (Alfano et al. [2012](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13164-014-0189-0#ref-CR1))

1. *Extra Dollar*

Joe was feeling quite dehydrated, so he stopped by the local smoothie shop to buy the largest sized drink available. Before ordering, the cashier told him that the Mega-Sized Smoothies were now one dollar more than they used to be. Joe replied, ‘I don’t care if I have to pay one dollar more, I just want the biggest smoothie you have.’ Sure enough, Joe received the Mega-Sized Smoothie and paid one dollar more for it. Did Joe intentionally pay one dollar more? (Machery [2008](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13164-014-0189-0#ref-CR28), 179). It should also be noted that this case is considered inadequate by some (Mallon [2008](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13164-014-0189-0#ref-CR29), Phelan and Sarkissian [2009](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13164-014-0189-0#ref-CR34)), as the extra dollar seems to be a means rather than a side effect, thus constituting a different and presumably much less surprising finding.

1. *Carl*

Carl recently inherited $50,000. He is considering whether to invest the money in a Roth IRA, which is a type of retirement savings account, or give it to Oxfam, a charity that helps to alleviate the suffering of poor people all around the world.

*Self Norm* His friend, Diana says, “If you invest the money, you may be able to retire in comfort.”

*Other Norm* His friend, Diana says, “If you give the money to Oxfam, you will help a lot of people.”

*Carl Invests* Carl ends up investing the money.

*Carl Donates* Carl ends up donating the money. (Robinson et al. ([forthcoming](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13164-014-0189-0#ref-CR37)))

1. *Terrorist:*

A terrorist has planted a bomb in a nightclub. There are lots of Americans in the nightclub who will be injured or killed if the bomb goes off. The terrorist says to himself, ‘I did a good thing when I planted that bomb in the nightclub did a good thing. Americans are evil! The world will be a better place when more of them are injured or dead.’

Later, the terrorist discovers that his only son, whom he loves dearly, is in the nightclub as well. If the bomb goes off, his son will certainly be injured or killed. The terrorist then says to himself, ‘The only way I can save my son is to defuse the bomb. But if I defuse the bomb, I’ll be saving those evil Americans as well… What should I do?’

After carefully considering the matter, he thinks to himself, ‘I know it is wrong to save Americans, but I can’t rescue my son without saving those Americans as well. I guess I’ll just have to defuse the bomb.’

Did the terrorist intentionally save the Americans? (cf. Knobe [2004](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13164-014-0189-0#ref-CR22); Cova [2013](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13164-014-0189-0#ref-CR7)).

1. I have a lot of sympathy for this approach, but I already wish to emphasize here that I do not think that ultimately, it can supply an answer to the normative question. Whether or not a judgment task is carried out by automatic or controlled processes has virtually no bearing whatsoever on whether or not its judgmental output is justified or not (see Greene [2008](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13164-014-0189-0#ref-CR15) and Berker [2009](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13164-014-0189-0#ref-CR5) for this; this problem is also reflected in the disagreement between Kahneman [2011](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13164-014-0189-0#ref-CR19) and Gigerenzer [2007](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13164-014-0189-0#ref-CR14) over the quality of automatic intuitions). 5 + 7 can be solved automatically, 565 + 765 takes some effort; yet whether or not your solutions to those math problems are correct or not does not depend on the speed with which you arrived at them, but on their *truth*.