

Slide 1 — Title

“Reason & the Philosophy of Stupidity — When our brains trip over their own shoelaces.”

Today I want to connect two things philosophers care about: **reason**—often treated as our proudest human faculty—and **stupidity**, understood not as an insult but as a particular way reasoning goes wrong. The aim is practical: by the end you should be able to spot when a concept you’re using is actually **undermining your own goal**, and what to do about it.

Slide 2 — Reason & Stupidity

Plato and **Aristotle** famously put reason on a pedestal—Plato thought reason aims at timeless truths (the Forms);

For Plato, reason isn’t just good thinking—it’s our route to stable truth beyond appearances. That’s why the rational soul should rule the others.”

Where: *Republic* (esp. Book VI/VII, the Forms & Cave), *Phaedo*.

Aristotle split reason into theoretical (what to believe/what is true) and practical (what to do, guided by *phronesis*, practical wisdom - the art of applying general insight to messy particulars).

ie. **application** is where failure often happens—key for stupidity later.

Where: *Nicomachean Ethics* VI; *Posterior Analytics* (for the theoretical side).

Hume warned—reason typically is used to explain or tidy up what we already *want*. So our ‘rational’ justifications may be post-hoc. It doesn’t supply motives by itself.

Explains why high IQ doesn’t immunize us from skewed conclusions.

Where: *Treatise* 2.3.3; *Enquiry* sections on passions.

Kant distinguished understanding (having concepts) from judgement (applying them well)—again it’s in that application that many failures happen.

Those contrasts: they motivate why philosophers take *stupidity* seriously.

Philosophers may have differing conceptions of stupidity in this connection.

Golob 2019: A New Theory of Stupidity - a distinctive form of cognitive failing - a conceptual self-hampering, characterised by a specific aetiology and with a range of deleterious effects

Slide 3 — Roadmap

Here's the plan. First, a 30,000-ft overview of what philosophers mean by *reason*—just enough so we're on the same page. Second, a tour of philosophical approaches to stupidity: why major thinkers bothered with it at all. Third, what stupidity is not—it's not mere dumbness, not a simple mistake, and not just weakness of will. Fourth, **Golob's new account**—stupidity as *self-hampering concepts*. Finally, practical diagnostics and a toolkit for avoiding the most common traps.

Slide 4 Why Discuss Reason and Stupidity?

Raise the questions from the powerpoint slide

Reason

- What is it? (Its not just for the smug to sound intellectual)
- Have we ever truly “had” pure reason, or is it a unicorn?
- Even if we do reason, is it enough to save us from embarrassing moments
- Accidentally copying a confidential email to 24,000 employees
- The 10 second joke that cost £500m overnight - Gerald Ratner - we sell ‘total crap’

Why Bring in “Stupidity”?

- Is it David Lammy's Mastermind & other moments – ie. men can “grow their own” cervices, Henry VII succeeded Henry VIII, Marie Antoinette won a Nobel prize
- It's when our own brains trip us up (Golob 2019).
- If reason is a superhero, stupidity is its nemesis—it doesn't wear a cape; it just unplugs the hero's power cord.

Slide 5 — Reason: the 30,000-ft view

Philosophers use “reason” in two ways:

- As a faculty: forming, checking and revising beliefs and plans.

Your brain's “Turbo” mode — switches on logic, spots contradictions, wins at Scrabble.

- As a practice: norms – evidence, coherence, revisability, reasons-giving.

The unwritten rulebook—“always cite your sources,” “don’t believe everything on Twitter,” “check your emotions.”

- Two uses: theoretical (what to believe) and practical (what to do).
- Guiding thought: ‘What are my reasons – and do they actually fit the case?’

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- Reason - it’s not just “common sense”
- Its like a SatNav - great when its not directing you into a bog
- We can all become stupid in surprisingly relatable ways

Slide 6 — Reason: More Than “Thinking Hard”

Theoretical vs. Practical Reason:

- **Theoretical:** Is a belief unicorns wear top hats defensible philosophically?
- **Practical:** Should I buy groceries or a lifetime’s supply of novelty socks?

Why It Matters:

- When you ask “What’s the evidence?” or “Does that even make sense?” you’re exercising your reason
- But sometimes exercise can be dangerous

Slide 7 — A (very) Short History & Why “stupidity” belongs in philosophy

Why give “stupidity” a place in serious thought? The tradition is wider than one author. Philosophers care because these aren’t just silly moments—they’re **structural** ways thinking derails.

- **Kant** ties a kind of “stupidity” to **lack of judgement**—you can know rules and still misapply them. the “physician, judge, or statesman” with “many fine rules” can still lack the knack of applying them to cases—*that’s* stupidity, not low ability.
- **Flaubert** railed against *la bêtise*—cultural clichés we parrot without thinking. the mindless recycling of stock phrases

- **Robert Musil** coined “**higher stupidity**”: The dangerous kind isn’t low IQ; it’s culturally prestigious **misuse** of intelligence. Not the absence of intelligence, but intelligence misfiring. Culturally approved/prestigious ways for intelligence to fail.
- Contemporary psychology (e.g., **Sternberg**) confirms: smart people can be **spectacularly wrong** in systematic ways. A failure to use optimally one’s abilities or cognitive capacity. Mathematician John Allen Paulos’s notorious stock-market losses: high ability, poor prudence—an instance Golob quotes via Stanovich to separate **foolishness** from dumbness.
- **Adorno & Horkheimer** Institutions and power shape what we fail to see.. A&H showed how culture and power create acquired **blind spots** in relation to all capacities that intelligent people inherit. Institutions and media reward bad conceptual habits
- **Engel/Mulligan** (epistemic vice/virtue): some failures stem from entrenched vices (closed-mindedness).
- **F. Schlegel**: Distinguish **folly** from deeper conceptual failings. Much ‘stupidity’ is really **Narrheit** (folly). Keep the categories apart.

Golob: give it a crisp analysis so we can diagnose and remedy it.

Slide 8 — Non-Stupidity Examples - What stupidity is not

A few closely similar concepts:

- Not dim-witted
- Nor dumbness (low processing power : a brute inability to process complex ideas). A novice misreads a complex graph because it’s too hard—capacity issue, not a concept systematically derailing a goal. Golob stresses the difference. You can be brilliant and “stupid” at the same time; processing power \neq good conceptual fit.
- Not **mere error**: People misread a chart or mistype a number all the time; that’s a slip, not a structural problem. Stupidity explains **recurrent** self-hampering due to the wrong framework being applied.
- Not **foolishness** (prudential rashness): you can take a silly risk without any conceptual mistake. Paulos’s string of bad bets (Stanovich’s case): imprudent risk-taking by a highly able person. It’s a prudential failure more than a conceptual misfit—so not stupidity in Golob’s sense.
- Not **akrasia** (weak will): you might know the right concept and still fail to act on it—that’s motivational, not conceptual. Aristotle’s akratic person who knows “I shouldn’t eat the cake” yet eats it. The concept is correct; the **motivation** fails. That’s moral psychology, not a conceptual toolbox problem. (Good as a clean contrast with Kant/Golob.)

The target today is a **conceptual** failure: using an idea or frame that reliably **sabotages your own aim**.

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- On “America’s golden age of stupidity”, stupidity is “the wilful disregard of knowledge – regardless of motive” - David Rothkopf
- Foolishness as a domain-specific failure to act prudently – Sir Isaac Newton’s losses on investments in the South Sea Bubble
- BUT the Shakespearian fool is an intelligent character granted licence by the trappings of the idiot: Golob.
- “much seeming stupidity [*Dummheit*] is really folly [*Narrheit*]” -Schlegel

Slide 9 — Golob’s account: “conceptual self-hampering”

Stephen Golob (2019) offers a crisp test:

You’re *stupid with respect to a goal G* when

- (1) the concept *C* you’re using undermines your pursuit of *G*, and
- (2) you **lack—or can’t readily access—a better concept** that would serve *G*.

Classic illustration: Field Marshal Douglas Haig approached trench warfare with a cavalry concept—famously, “mobile operations at the halt.” If your goal is *effective command in trench conditions*, that concept misfits the case and keeps producing failure. Notice two parts: the effect (self-hampering) and the aetiology (poverty/inaccessibility of alternatives). This matters because it tells us the remedy: don’t just try harder—change the concept.

Slide 10 - When Reason Goes on Holiday (Golob 2019)

Self-Hampering Effect:

- You pick a concept (C) that undermines your goal (G).
- Baking a soufflé in a kiln because “more heat = faster rise.”

Conceptual Aetiology:

- You don't have a better C for G.
- Implementing economic Austerity to reduce the budget deficit without knowing historically Austerity always does the opposite.

Not Just “Being Dumb”:

- Foolishness is momentary; stupidity is a structural concept gap.
- Summary:

Stupidity is using the wrong tool for the job—to a man with only a hammer, every problem is a nail.

It tells us the fix: **change the concept**, don't just try harder.” That's the pivot to your toolkit.

Slide 11 — Why stupidity is attractive (and contagious)

If stupidity is so counter-productive, why does it spread?

- **Identity & tradition:** Concepts feel like “who we are,” so we cling to them.

A profession clings to its inherited frame because “it's who we are.” (Link to Musil's ‘higher stupidity’: prestige + belonging keep the bad frame alive).

- **Institutions** reward familiar toolkits; new entrants inherit them.

Training pipelines that valorize the standard model (Haig again); newcomers inherit yesterday's frames as “best practice.” Golob argues reservoirs of maladaptive concepts exist at **tradition level**, not just in persons.

- **Media & politics** amplify **simple frames** that fit headlines, even if they misfit reality.

A catchy label—“dangerous politics”—without criteria travels better than a careful definition; once a frame spreads, counter-evidence looks like heresy. (Fits Golob’s ‘population-level/public health’ analogy. ‘Smash the gangs’. ‘Stop the Boats’, ‘Stop the War’, ‘Stop The Far Right’, ‘Refugees are Welcome Here’, ‘Stand Up to Racism’, ‘From the River to the Sea’

That’s Musil’s “**higher stupidity**” in action: **intelligence harnessed to a bad framework.**

Golob encourages a **public-health** mindset: treat concept failure as something that spreads socially—so prevention and inoculation matter.

Slide 12 — Diagnosis: How to spot self-hampering in the wild

Here’s how to spot self-hampering as it happens:

1. **Goal check:** What **exactly** am I trying to achieve? Would a critic accept that description? Case: “I want ‘transparency’ from a ministry.” Define: Is the **goal** to learn about *incitement to violence*? to detect *policy bias*? Until the goal is explicit, any concept you choose may mis-aim.
2. **Concept audit:** What concepts am I leaning on? Are **nearby alternatives** available? Case: Hospital quality measured by “wait times.” Are there **nearby alternatives** (e.g., severity-adjusted outcomes)? If not considered, you may force improvements that **worsen** real care.
3. **Blind-spot probe:** What would count as **disconfirming evidence**—really? (If “nothing,” you’ve found a problem.) Case: “My intervention works.” Ask: “What result would make me **give it up**?” If the honest answer is “nothing,” your frame is unfalsifiable—classic trap.
4. **Translation test:** Can I restate my claim in my **opponent’s vocabulary** without losing the point? (e.g., move from “harmful rhetoric” to **specific actionable criteria**) If not, I may be trapped in my frame.

These are quick, plain-English ways to catch a bad conceptual fit before it hardens into a stance.

Slide 13 - When reason fails: concept gaps at work

A few neutral, vivid examples:

- **“One metric to rule them all”**: mistaking a **proxy** for the **goal** (think Goodhart’s Law). The metric soon distorts the behaviour it was meant to track.

Goodhart’s Law (explain it in one line).

“When a **measure** becomes a **target**, it stops being a good measure.”

Examples to use:

- **Soviet nails**: reward by total weight → factories produce useless heavy nails.
- **Call-center average handle time**: chasing a low AHT encourages premature hang-ups, not better service.
- **School ‘teaching to the test’**: scores rise while real learning stalls.

Tie-back: The concept “one metric = the goal” **self-hampers** the real goal.

- **Undefined labels** like “dangerous politics”: without a definition, the concept invites noise, misses the real risk, and makes oversight impossible.
- **“Evidence-based” as a slogan: if you skip base rates, controls, effect sizes, the label hides lack of method—a conceptual gap dressed up as rigor.**
- **Information ecosystems**: governmental, political, corporate, and social-media mis- and dis-information exploit our simplest frames; once those frames take root, counter-evidence looks like heresy. Current Example: DEI has gone off the rails in the Civil Service and elsewhere.

Case line: “Governmental, political, corporate, and social-media frames exploit **simple labels**; once internalized, disconfirming facts feel like an attack on identity.” That’s the **contagion** point again—public-health framing.

Boeing quality control problems thought might be a consequence of DEI hires.

Each case shows the same pattern: the **framework** is the failure point.

Slide 14 — Diagnosis to Repair - A “de-stupidity” toolkit

Four moves you can start using immediately:

1. **Expand the repertoire:** Deliberately read outside your lane—different disciplines, dissenting views. (Aristotle’s *phronesis* grows with **experience of particulars**.)

Example: Read one solid critic of your position each week; list **one** concept they use that you don’t. This is building *phronesis*: better application needs exposure to particulars.

2. **Make it social:** Try **adversarial collaboration**—invite a smart critic to co-design a test of your idea. (Hume would approve of exposing your reasons to other people’s passions.)

Example: Do a small **adversarial collaboration**: you and a critic agree on a test that could prove either of you wrong. Let passions clash productively, but the **joint test** decides.

3. **Name the risk:** Say out loud which concept you suspect might be **sabotaging the goal**. Naming it often loosens its grip.

Example: Say out loud, “My pet concept is X; here is how X could be sabotaging G.” Naming the suspect concept reduces its “invisible” status and invites alternatives.

4. **Practise humility:** Scale the goal to your current concepts, then **update the toolbox**. (Kant’s lesson: having rules is not enough; learn **judgement**.)

Example: Scale your claim to what your concepts can currently **track**; promise an update after testing a rival frame. The win is better **judgement**, not louder assertion.

Slide 15 Key points & questions

To close:

- **Reason is powerful**, but concept choice can quietly trip it up.
- In the strict sense we’ve used, stupidity = self-hampering concepts + no accessible alternative.
- So the remedy is not to “think harder,” but to swap the frame and grow the repertoire.

That’s how the lofty ideal of philosophical reason meets the messy reality of everyday irrationality. We won’t become perfectly rational angels—but we can become less self-sabotaging humans.

Quick reference lines

- **Kant:** “Lack of judgement is properly called stupidity... the learned man may still fail to apply rules to cases.” (paraphrase of A133/B172)
- **Flaubert:** “Stupidity as cliché—*bêtise*—stock phrases on autopilot.”
- **Adorno/Horkheimer:** “Acquired blind spots—institutions/industry shape what we don’t see.”
- **Sternberg/Stanovich case:** “Smart people failing: Paulos’s risky bets—foolishness ≠ dumbness.”
- **Golob (your keynote concept):** “Stupidity = self-hampering concepts + no accessible alternative—fix the frame, not just the effort.”