

A Theory of Multiple Stupidities

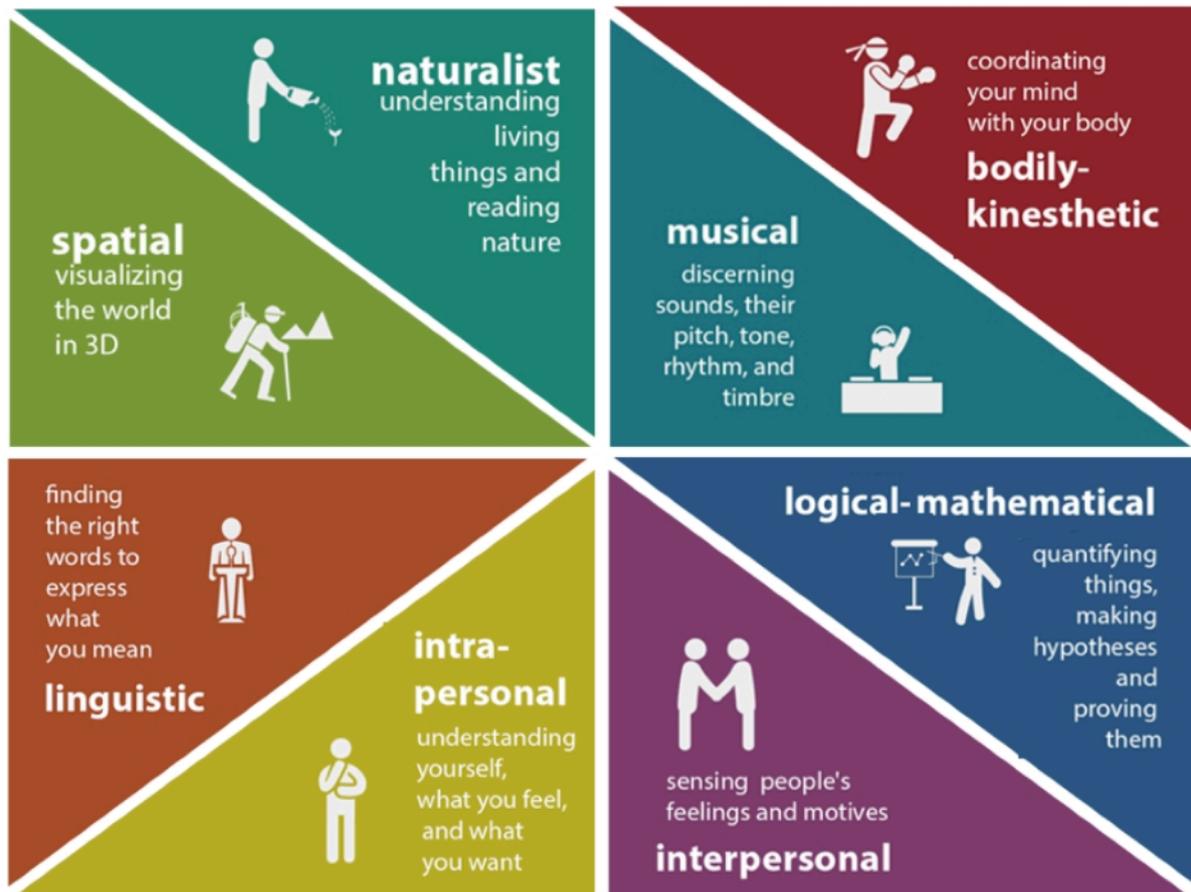


Illustration of Gardner's Multiple Intelligences, from Marenus (2020).

When the Harvard developmental psychologist Howard Gardner published the first edition of his *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* in 1983, he rocked the psychological and educational worlds with his radical proposal that there is not a single type of intelligence. Rather than associating intelligence solely with cognitive functioning, Gardner instead proposed that there are eight separate modes of intelligence: Linguistic, Logical/Mathematical, Spatial, Bodily-Kinesthetic, Musical, Interpersonal, Intra-personal, and Naturalist.

Gardner's Multiple Intelligences hit a cord with an academic crowd that had become disillusioned with SAT and other standardized college-entry test scores which seem to serve more as a reflection of a student's socio-economic status than as a predictor of success in college. The concept of Multiple Intelligences had a particularly strong impact on educational pedagogy, which Gardner argued was "heavily biased towards linguistic modes of intersection and assessment and, to a somewhat lesser

degree, toward logical quantities modes as well.” Although Gardner himself resisted categorizing students by their individual intelligences and crafting individual teaching styles to cater to those intelligences, his theory of Multiple Intelligences nonetheless revolutionized how we teach children; standard lesson plans now include a variety of pedagogical approaches designed to teach a given subject and to assess learning in multiple ways, taking into account that some students thrive within a traditional linguistic or logical-mathematical teaching style while others do better with lessons that incorporate movement or place-based learning.

[Gardner’s Multiple Intelligence has had little impact on how classes are conducted at the collegiate level. But almost all secondary school teachers have had to sit through more than one mind-numbing teacher workshop where a watered-down version of Gardner’s theory is drummed into their heads for hours at end!]

Gardner’s controversial theory has, of course, been criticized on many grounds. Some pedants (myself included!) complain that Gardner is merely substituting “intelligent” for what is commonly known as “ability” or “aptitude”—presumably in order to make stupid people feel better about themselves. Cognitive neuroscientists have argued that there is a lack of empirical evidence to support Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences. They point out that the type of general intelligence measured in IQ tests (Gardner’s Linguistic and Logical/Mathematical intelligences) shows a high correlation with academic success, but that there is no equivalent way of measuring Spatial, Bodily-Kinesthetic, Musical, Interpersonal, Intra-personal, or Naturalist intelligences. It is tautological to say, for instance, that having a high musical intelligence means being good at music while at the same time arguing that being good at music is to be explained by having high musical intelligence.



But what about intelligence’s opposite, stupidity?

In our modern world, with misinformation and “alternate facts” being promulgated on social media platforms and conservative television networks, it is not surprising that there has been a recent rash of books on the subject of stupidity.

On the back cover of his 2015 self-published book, *The Little Book of Stupidity: How We Lie to Ourselves and Don't Believe Others*, Sia Mohajer lays out his argument that cognitive biases are responsible for stupidity:

As human beings we are great story tellers. We tell stories about who we are, what we are doing and why we are doing it. The problem is sometimes those stories are fictions; created by our own blindness to reality.

In his introductory essay, “Stupidity: A Warning,” Jean-Francois Marmion, the editor of the 2018 *Psychologie de la connerie* (translated into English as *The Psychology of Stupidity* in 2020), wrote:

The other great characteristic of our age is that, even if we admit that stupidity has not yet reached its pinnacle, we know that it has never before been so visible, so unabashed, so outspoken, so peremptory.

Marmion sees stupidity as a dangerous thing:

. . . Morons will condemn you instantly, with no appeal possible and no extenuating circumstances admitted, on the sole basis of the appearances they glimpse through their narrow blinkers. They know how to rouse their sympathizers, to goad them to lynching in the name of virtue, custom, respect. . . .

Not content with making you miserable, the irksome idiot is delighted with himself. Unshakably. He is immunized against self-doubt and convinced of his rights. The happy imbecile tramples your rights without a second thought. The fool takes his beliefs for truths graven in marble, whereas all true knowledge is built on sand. Uncertainty makes you crazy, certainty makes you stupid; you've got to choose your camp. The asshole thinks he knows better than you—not only does he know what you should think, feel, and do with your ten fingers, he knows how you should vote. He knows who you are and what's good for you better than you do. If you disagree with him, he will despise you, insult you, and assault you, literally and figuratively, for your own good. And if he can do that in the name of some higher ideal, he won't hesitate to attack the scum that your existence represents for him, with utter impunity.

[It is hard to think that Marmion didn't have Donald Trump in mind when he wrote that passage!]

But Marmion is not totally unsympathetic towards run-of-the-mill stupidity:

Everyone sees bullshit, listens to it, and reads it, every single day. At the same time, each of us is guilty of generating it, thinking it, mulling it, and speaking it aloud. We are all morons from time to time, spouting nonsense as we go about our lives, without any real consequences. The crucial thing is to be aware of it and to feel sorry about it; to err is human, and admitting your faults is halfway to having them forgiven.

In the humorous conclusion to his essay, which he signed “Your Devoted Dumbass,” Marmion noted:

... Needless to say, if you truly believe yourself to be smarter and more admirable than the average joe, the fateful diagnosis is near at hand: you yourself are most likely an unwitting carrier of stupidity.

Given the immensity of the catastrophe, the project of this book, which is to attempt to investigate stupidity, can hardly be anything but another act of folly. To tackle such a subject is to reveal yourself to be presumptuous, touchingly naïve, or at the very least, exceedingly foolish.

In his 2021 *The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity*, Carlo Cipolla similarly takes a playful tone as he enumerates the basic characteristics of stupidity:

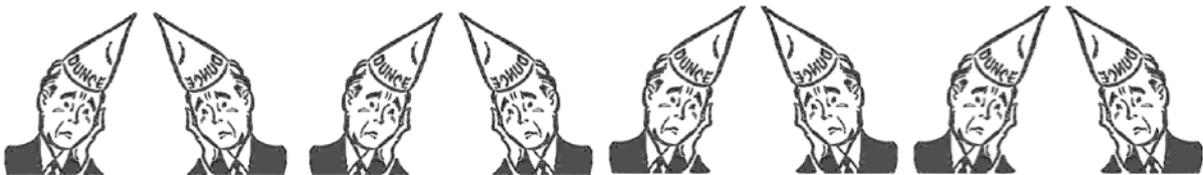
The First Basic Law: Always and inevitably, everyone underestimates to number of stupid individuals in circulation.

The Second Basic Law: The probability that a certain person is stupid is independent of any other characteristic of that person.

The Third (and Golden) Basic Law: A stupid person is a person who causes losses to another person or to a group of persons while deriving no gain and even possibly incurring losses.

The Fourth Basic Law: Non-stupid people always underestimate the damaging power of stupid individuals.

The Fifth Basic Law: A stupid person is the most dangerous type of person.



One thing that the recent books by Mohajer, Marmion, and Cipolla have in common is that they rather uncritically assume that stupidity is a single, easily recognized, thing. To be fair, a false story told by a moron is usually self-evident—except to other idiots, imbeciles, or assholes.

But, taking a cue from Gardner, mightn't it be possible to tease out some nuances in what we mean by the opposite of intelligence?

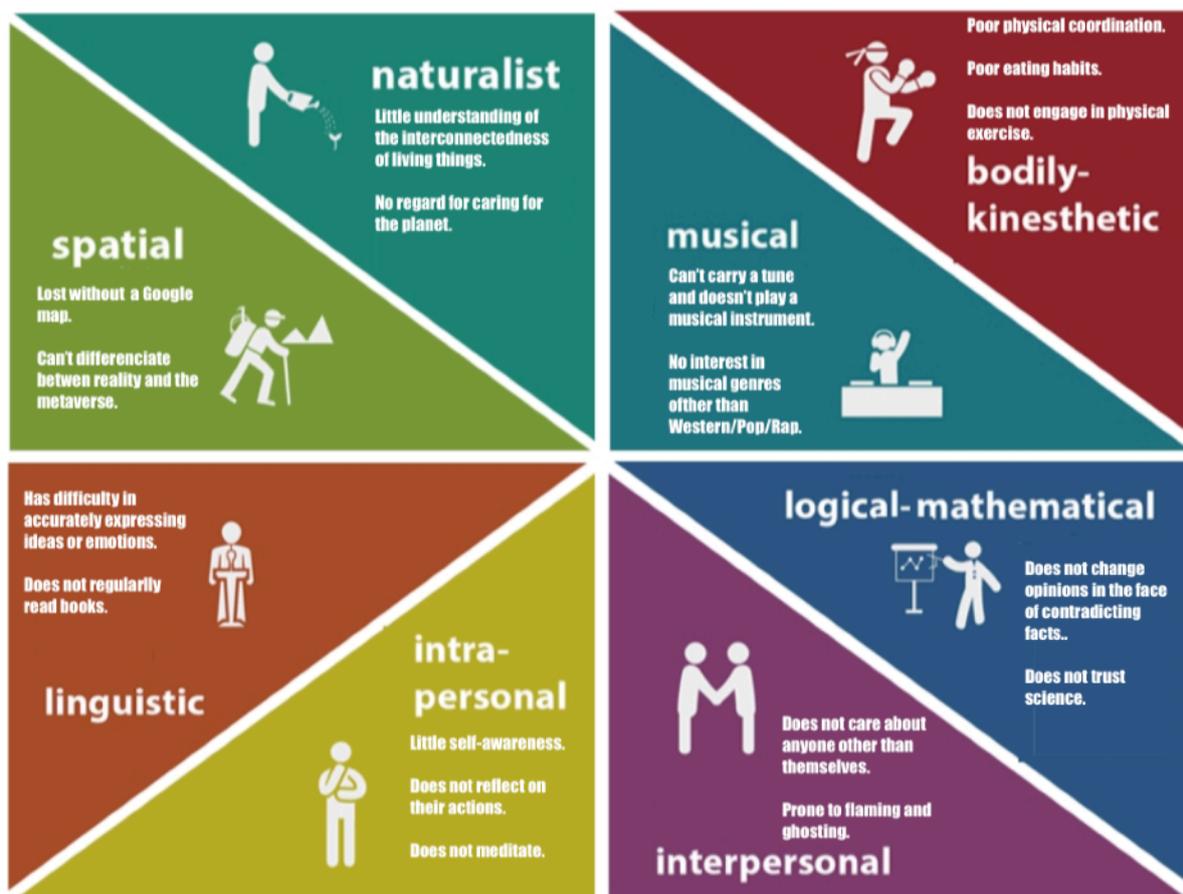


Illustration of Multiple Stupidities [after Marenus (2020)].

So here are eight modes of Multiple Stupidities:

The most obvious category, and the one most commonly associated with stupidity, is **logical-mathematical stupidity**. Logical-mathematical stupid people do not change their beliefs or opinions even when confronted with facts that contradict their positions. These are the people who say “I don’t trust science” without understanding how science functions. These are the flat-earthers.

A related mode is **linguistic stupidity**. Linguistically stupid people are always at a loss for words, never quite at ease at how to express what they are feeling or thinking. The linguistically stupid often resort to inserting “fuck” or “you know what I mean” into almost every sentence. There are very few, if any, books in the homes of the linguistically stupid.

And the linguistic stupidity mode is itself related to **intra-personal stupidity**. Intra-personal stupid people lack self-awareness and thus are not really in touch with how they are feeling or what they are thinking. For the intra-personal moron, nothing could be more frightening than being forced to go to a meditation class or being stuck at home all day without access to a tv or cell phone.

Interpersonal stupidity, on the other hand, encompasses those assholes who are only concerned with themselves and who have no regard for how their actions affect others. The extreme form of interpersonal stupidity is pathological narcissism. [I *am* thinking of Donald Trump here!]

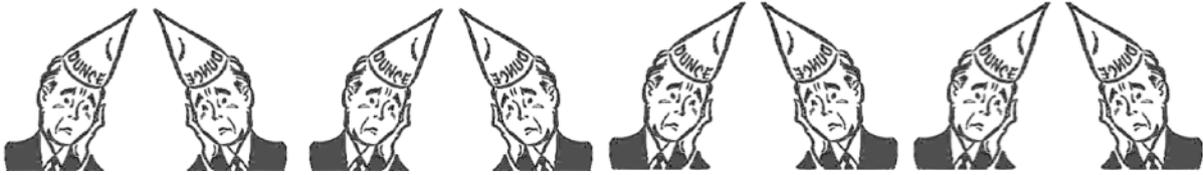
Interpersonal stupidity can take the form of **naturalist stupidity**. The naturalist numbskull is one who cares not a whit for Gaia or the interconnected web of life. These are the litterers and the climate deniers.

And then there are the simple klutzes—the **bodily-kinesthetic stupid**, the people who need Siri to tell them how to get home from work—the **spatially stupid**, and the jerks who only listen to Western/Pop/Rap music and would never think of going to a Beethoven concert—the **musically stupid**.



Unlike Gardner’s vision of Multiple Intelligences, which he maintained only have weak correlations among the different modes, it should be clear that the modes of my Multiple Stupidities are highly correlated. As Forest Gump said, “stupid is as stupid does.” And as Marmion pointed out, even the wisest among us sometimes does stupid things. But, as Aristotle is reputed to have said, the ignorant man affirms, the scientist doubts, the wise man reflects.

And if any reader of this tongue-in-cheek Theory of Multiple Stupidities is tempted to translate it into a boring teacher workshop, please don’t—that would be stupid!



References:

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