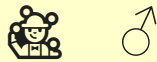


## 1 Reason & The Philosophy of Stupidity



When our  trip over their own shoelaces

Members' Weekend – Oxford Philosophical Society • Sat 4 Oct 2025 • 14:50–15:35

Cliff Miller (former commercial lawyer & university teacher; journal published on complex, scientific, technical and medical evidence)

## 2 Reason & Stupidity

Plato (c. 400 BCE): Reason = Direct line to the Forms (perfect, unchanging ideas).

Aristotle (c. 350 BCE): Reason organizes sense data into coherent concepts (“All men are mortal; I am a man; therefore I am going to buy fresh vegetables”).

How even the sharpest minds can be spectacularly stupid. Lack of “practical wisdom” (phronesis)? You might solve world hunger on paper, then order pizza.

Golob: 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

## 3 Roadmap



- Reason at 30,000-ft (very brief – others go deep today).
- Stupidity in philosophy: the main approaches and why it matters.
- What stupidity is NOT (dumbness, mere error, simple foolishness).
- Golob's new 'self-hampering' account and why it's useful.
- A pocket toolkit to 'de-stupidify' our reasoning .

*If you think you're immune to stupidity, you're already fully qualified.*

## 4 Why Discuss Reason and Stupidity?

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” cervixes, 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.



## 5 Reason: the 30,000-ft view

Reason in one slide

- 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

## 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

## 7 Stupidity - A (very) short history

Why ‘stupidity’ belongs in philosophy



- Kant: ‘stupidity’ = lack of judgement – inability to apply rules to cases (A133/B172).
- Flaubert & la bêtise - cultural clichés we parrot without thinking;
- Musil: ‘higher’ (attractive) stupidity – a failure of intelligence, not its absence.
- Sternberg: Contemporary psychology: smart people can be spectacularly wrong. A failure to use optimally one's abilities or cognitive capacity.
- Adorno and Horkheimer: An acquired “blind spot” in relation to all capacities, “practical and mental” shaped by power and culture

Engel/Mulligan (epistemic vice/virtue): some failures stem from entrenched vices (closed-mindedness).

F. Schlegel: Distinguish **folly** from deeper conceptual failings.

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

## 8 Non-Stupidity Examples

What stupidity is NOT

- Not dim-witted
- Nor dumbness (low processing power : a brute inability to process complex ideas). You can be brilliant and stupid at once.
- Not mere error (we err for many non-conceptual reasons).
- Not (just) foolishness: prudential mistakes ≠ conceptual misfit.
- Not simple akrasia (weak will): that's motivational, not conceptual.

- 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

## 9 Golob's 'self-hampering' theory (2019)



Golob: stupidity as 'conceptual self-hampering'

Definition (plain English):

- You use a concept that undermines your own goal, AND
- You lack (or can't access) a better concept that would serve the goal.

Illustration: Douglas Haig viewed trench warfare via cavalry concepts ('mobile operations at the halt') – a mismatch.

Why it matters: targets the right fix (conceptual repertoire), not just 'work harder'.

## 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.

## 11 Attraction & diffusion



Why 'stupidity' can be attractive (and contagious)

- Identity & tradition: concepts feel loyal, prestigious, 'who we are'.
- Institutions reward the old toolbox; novices inherit it.
- Media/politics amplify simple but misfitting frames.
- Result: 'higher' stupidity thrives where intelligence abounds.

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



Quick diagnostics (for live reasoning)

- Goal check: What exactly is G? Would my opponent accept that statement of G?
- Concept audit: Which key concepts am I using? What nearby alternatives exist?
- Blind-spot probe: What would count as disconfirming evidence—really?
- Translation test: Can I restate my claim in my critic's vocabulary without loss?

## 13 When reason fails: concept gaps at work



Mini-cases (concepts that backfire)

- 'One metric to rule them all': mistaking a proxy for the goal (Goodhart's law).
- 'Dangerous politics' with no definition: invites noise; misses the real risk.
- 'Evidence-based' as slogan: missing methods (base rates, controls, effect sizes).
- Info-ecosystem failures: governmental, political, corporate, and social-media mis-/dis-information.

## 14 From diagnosis to repair



A 'de-stupidity' toolkit

- Expand the repertoire: read outside your lane; map rival frameworks.
- Make it social: adversarial collaboration; red-team your favourite idea.
- Name the risk: say out loud which concept could be sabotaging G.
- Practise humility: scale goals to current concepts; then update the toolbox.

## 15 Key points & questions



Take-aways

- Reason is powerful—but concept choice can quietly trip it up.
- 'Stupidity' (in the strict sense) = self-hampering concepts + poor alternatives.
- Fix the toolbox, not just the effort.

Q&A

No question is too silly—or at least we promise not to laugh.

Ask away and let's see who has truly grasped the art of Stupidity?

## 16 What Can You Remember?

PART A

Plato: Reason aims at what? [ref: Republic: The Forms & the Cave.]

Aristotle: how did he split up reason and what was the guiding concept?

Hume: what did he warn about how reason can be misused?

Kant: what aspects of reason did he distinguish and which part leads to failures [stupidity]

Golob: how does he categorise stupidity and what are the two main characteristics

Philosophers use reason as a faculty and as a practice – what does this mean?

## 17 What Can You Remember?

### PART B

What is **Flaubert's** *la bêtise*?

Roberg Musil's 'higher stupidity'?

Institutional Stupidity?

What is not Stupidity for these purposes?

What can you recall of Golob's two step approach of concepts and goals?

Can you recall any of the ways Stupidity can become entrenched?

What can you recall of four suggestions for how can we avoid Stupidity?