

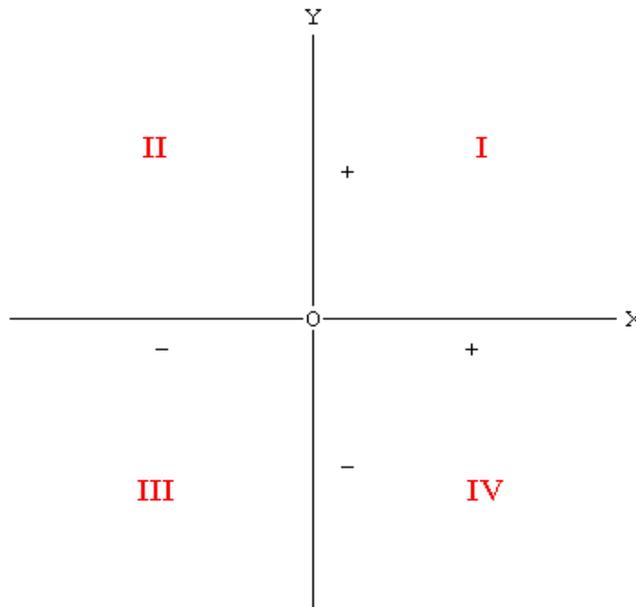
The Power of Stupidity



by Giancarlo Livraghi

Chapter 8 – The Stupidology Graph

When stupidity and intelligence – or other human behaviors – are defined by their practical effects, obviously the estimated data (or hypotheses) can be “charted” quite simply, and effectively, by using the classic (twodimensional) “Cartesian coordinate system.” Of course not all results can be measured as numbers, but a “calculated guess”, if appropriately defined, can be enough to “draw a picture.”



It is “standard procedure” to define four “quadrants” numbered counterclockwise from I to IV.

If we place on the horizontal (“abscissa”) X-axis the advantage (or disadvantage) that someone obtains from his or her own actions, and on the vertical (“ordinate”) Y-axis the effects on other people, anyone of us can find a position, based on the practical consequences of behavior, where a person (or group of people) is to be placed. It’s obvious that behaviors in “quadrant I” (top right) are at various levels of “intelligence”, while in “quadrant III” (bottom left) it’s stupidity. It is also obvious that in the fourth quadrant (bottom right) we can find different levels of “banditism.” But those in the second (top left) can’t be so easily defined.

These people may be “hapless” or “hopeless” if and when they harm themselves and others without being aware of what they are doing. But the same placement in the coordinates could be the result of deliberately generous or “altruistic” behavior. In such cases the analysis could take one of two courses. Consider moral and social benefits – and therefore place those behaviors in the “intelligent” area. Or leave them where they are, on the left of the Y-axis, but use a different definition (more on this subject in chapter 11.)

Without getting into the details, that could be quite complex, of what can be done with this sort of analyses, a key fact is that the evaluation of different behaviors can be done on an individual basis (one-to-one) or on a wider scale, involving “large” systems (nations, international communities or even humanity as a whole) or not-so-wide environments (local situations, companies, associations, organized or informal groups, human communities of any sort, nature or size.)

The system, as a whole, can improve or degrade as the result of a combination of several different behaviors, not all necessarily “altruistic.”

But it’s clear that the greatest improvement is the result of “intelligent” action – and the worst deterioration is caused by stupidity. In other words, if each person or group of people mind too much their own interest, and don’t consider the effect of their actions on everyone else, there is a general decay of society as a whole – and so also those who thought they were being “smart” turn out to be stupid. But it often happens that this is understood when it’s too late. This confirms the basic concept: the most dangerous factor in every human society is stupidity.

Of course there are specific, and often dramatic, consequences when there is an unbalance of cause and effect. As in the case of actions by a few people that have an effect on many. For more on this subject see chapter 10 *The Stupidity of Power*.

* * *

In the use of the coordinates there are some differences between the approach suggested by Carlo Cipolla and the method in my reasoning. They are mainly three.

Observations by Cipolla (as well as Walter Pitkin and nearly everybody considering this subject) are based on an assumption of total separation: some people are intelligent and some are stupid. As we shall see more specifically in the next chapter, I believe that almost nobody is totally stupid, and nobody can hope to be always intelligent. Therefore we need to consider the element of stupidity (and also of other behavior patterns) that exists in all of us.

Analyses based on results can be made by trying to define a person's general behavior pattern or be limited to a particular set of circumstances. This second option is not to be excluded.

It can be quite interesting to find how the same person, in different roles or situations, can behave in ways that lead to different results and definitions. Each one of us can be more often "stupid" in some sorts of circumstances, less so in others. It can be useful to try to understand which environments, or types of activity, are more likely to influence the behavior of a certain person – or our own. And so, as far as possible, to prevent the same problems from happening too often – or, at least, to be better aware of when and how those mistakes are likely to happen.

It isn't less relevant to understand that stupid results can happen quite often outside of any verified or assumed "usual pattern" of personal attitude and behavior.¹ This can help us to remember how and why stupidity can be unpredictable. (Luckily we see, sometimes, unexpected "intelligent" results. It can be useful to understand how and why they occur, but it's better if we don't "count on" them, because they never happen often enough.)

The obvious attitude is to place ourselves in the "X-axis" and someone else in the "Y." But it can be very useful to do it the other way round, tracing the effects of our actions on other people. The difficulty lies in the fact that, of course, the quality of results is to be measured by the point of view of whoever is at the receiving end. But it's always a useful exercise to try to "put ourselves in someone else's shoes" – especially when we are trying to measure our level of stupidity (or intelligence.)

* * *

Of course everyone can, depending on the circumstances, choose the criteria in drawing a "stupidity graph." It's quite easy to do it with a computer graph or a spreadsheet, but it isn't necessary. It's enough to draw two crossing lines on any piece of paper – or use squared paper to mark the numerical indexes. It isn't always possible to have reliable data to "measure" the results of someone's behavior. But precise figures are not indispensable. The use of "perceived values", even if they are hypothetical or vaguely estimated, can have a relevant meaning.

* * *

*Some readers find the use of "cartesian coordinates"
interesting, intriguing and amusing,
while others think it's obscure and boring.
That isn't a problem. All of the reasoning can be understood
without ever reading or drawing a graph.
And this applies also to the five diagrams in chapter 11,
where they are added to "visualize" trends,
but concepts are fully explained in the text.*

A description of the book is online – stupidity.it

¹ Or area of "incompetence" – as explained in chapter 6.