

The Cipolla-Jonas Diagram: Humorous Stupidity, Dutiful Responsibility, and Fifteen Twists of Irony

Giorgio Baruchello¹

Abstract: The *humorous* diagram about *stupidity* concocted by the noted economic historian Carlo Cipolla is explained and applied here to the issue of *responsibility*, which is understood along the lines of the ethics devised in the 20th century by Hans Jonas, who is still considered by today's moral philosophers a pivotal thinker on this issue. A disciple of Heidegger, Jonas brought responsibility and, relatedly, *duty*, back to the center of our understanding of *morality*, at a time when consequentialism, in the guise of a variety of forms of utilitarianism, was very much the focus of everybody's attention. Cipolla's diagram, a witty piece of methodological and theoretical criticism in the social sciences, can be combined with Jonas' life-grounded conception of responsibility in order to foster reflection on this issue, applicable to concrete social contexts, such as many supposedly beneficial standard economic activities and, *ironically*, the concomitant depletion of Earth's life support systems.

Keywords: Ecology, economics, ethics, invisible hand

1. Introduction

The humorous diagram about stupidity devised in the 20th century by Carlo Cipolla (1922–2000) is explained and applied hereby to the ethical issue of responsibility *vis-à-vis* the ongoing climate crisis denounced at the highest levels of scientific and political representation (see, e.g., UNESCO's *Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems*, instantiated and exemplified in the present essay by McMurtry 2010). In turn, responsibility is understood along the lines of the neo- (or post-) Kantian ethics developed in the same century by Jonas (1903–1993), who is still considered a pivotal thinker on this issue at all levels of academic research (see, e.g., Coyne 2018, Gordon & Burckhart 2017). A rebellious disciple of Heidegger, Jonas brought the issue of responsibility and, relatedly, that of duty, back to the center of our understanding of morality, at a time when consequentialism, under various forms of utilitarianism, was the predominant focus of scholarly attention. In particular, Jonas is credited with doing so in the then-burgeoning philosophical sub-fields of bioethics and environmentalism (see, e.g., Morris 2013 and Vogel 2006).

¹ University of Akureyri, Iceland; giorgio@unak.is

Cipolla's humorous diagram is a witty piece of methodological and theoretical criticism in the social sciences that, combined here with Jonas' life-grounded conception of responsibility, allows for fostering much serious reflection on the latter. For one, it is easily applicable to concrete social contexts, such as the standard economic activities on today's global markets (e.g., the extraction, refinement, transportation, sale, purchase, consumption and disposal of natural gas) and the concomitant depletion of Earth's life support systems (see McMurtry 2010, offering also a thorough account of life-value onto-axiology, the life ground, and the standard use of "life support systems" in contemporary environmental studies under UNESCO's aegis).

The resulting Cipolla-Jonas diagram, however humorous in its concoction, is therefore akin to a *general topic* in the traditional and stately rhetorical sense of this notion, i.e., "a network of forms, of a quasi-cybernetic process to which we subject the material we want to transform into a persuasive discourse" (Barthes 1988, par. B.1.20). In the process, fifteen twists of irony are encountered and duly highlighted by referring overtly to this term in its nominal or adverbial formulations (i.e., "irony," "ironies" and "ironically").

2. Carlo Cipolla

To put it simply and somewhat splendidly, Cipolla was "a leading economic historian of his generation" (Jan de Vries as cited in Maclay 2000, 3rd par.). His studies on demography (e.g., Cipolla 1962), literacy (e.g., Cipolla 1969), health (e.g., Cipolla 1992a), technology (e.g., Cipolla 1965), and the monetary and commercial vicissitudes of mediaeval as well as early-modern societies (e.g., Cipolla 1952) are still classics in his field of inquiry, used regularly in university courses, translated into many languages, and reprinted several times (e.g., Cipolla 2017). (Cipolla himself authored books in three languages.)

Interestingly, Cipolla is also remembered as a talented *humorist* in economic studies, combining scholarship and hilarity in order to develop persuasive arguments and multi-level reflections, which would often address a substantive issue in an explicit way and, concomitantly, introduce methodological considerations in an implicit one (Maclay 2000, par. 6). Under this respect, Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929), Stephen Leacock (1869–1944), John Kenneth ("Ken") Galbraith (1908–2006) and Deirdre McCloskey (b. 1942) are the only other noted economists who, in all likelihood, could be said to belong to the same fold as Cipolla's. Significantly, Leacock and Galbraith are still remembered as major humorists in the Anglophone literary canon (see, e.g., Baer 1984).

2.1 Humor

The reason why there may have been so few economists of this ilk is not too difficult to explain. Not only is economics the notoriously named “dismal science” that aims at teaching us about the losses that all gains imply but, also and above all, humor itself is a very fine art, which only few gifted writers can master to a peer-reviewed, publishable level. Besides, humor may not even consist primarily in poking fun, however cleverly done, at intellectual opponents and/or discredited theories, but in pursuing something much subtler than satire, mockery, or irony. At least, this is what Cipolla (1988, 7; my translation) himself believed:

Humor is different from irony. When one is being ironic, s/he laughs *at* others. When one is being humorous, s/he laughs *with* the others. Irony produces tensions and conflicts. Humor, when it is utilized in the right measure and at the right moment... is the best remedy to dissipate tensions, resolve situations that could easily become painful, and facilitate the mending of human relations.

Cipolla (1988, 5–6) was also aware of the fact that “the comical is difficult to define, and not everyone is able to grasp and appreciate it. Humor consists precisely in the ability to understand, appreciate and express the comical,” which can occur in “vulgar, facile, offensive and prefabricated (= jokes) ways” that a broad public may then easily respond to. Yet, such uncouth forms of comicality are, in Cipolla’s (1988, 5) view, “a travesty of humor.”

As a scholar and a self-declared humorist, Cipolla (1988, 6) aimed in his writings at something that, in his understanding, should prove much more sophisticated than common, coarse comicality, i.e., a game of wits capable of stimulating “a subtle and firmly joyful mental disposition of the human mind that is based upon a psychological foundation embracing both balance and well-being.” Writing in this way, Cipolla (1988) believed that a reader could be both enlightened and entertained at the same time—if not even forced to think against his/her will by means of an apt, witty sleight of hand, which would overcome, smilingly and sympathetically, the target’s prejudices and preconceptions.

The humorous strategies and their subtlety can certainly vary, some of them being almost imperceptible. For example, after beginning to teach at Berkley in the 1950s, Cipolla started signing his works *qua* “Carlo M. Cipolla,” even if he had never had a middle name. Cipolla never explained the reasons for this choice. Eventually, his favoring “M.” led to all kinds of speculations about him, his background, life, ends and works, in a plethora of ingenious attempts aimed at revealing the mystery lying behind the elected initial. Perhaps, “M.” stands for “Maria,” hence hinting at Cipolla’s

Catholic upbringing (Lodi 2019, par. 4). Or, as Massarenti (2011, par. 1) argues, “it stands for nothing,” and merely wishes to tease the reader, lure him/her into playful elucubrations, and/or establish—most indirectly—an atmosphere of argute humor. Conceivably, I must add, “M.” might signal a marked preference for Fritz Lang’s cinema. (The perplexed reader may want to look into which movie by the great Austrian director launched Peter Lorre’s career.)

In stressing the refined character of humor, not least his own, Cipolla can be said to be part of a small elite of European intellectuals who distinguished expressly between “true” and “false” humor, e.g., Joseph Addison (1672–1719), Carl Julius Weber (1767–1832), Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), Luigi Pirandello (1867–1936), Stephen Leacock and, to a lesser extent, Simon Critchley (b. 1960) (see Baruchello & Arnarson 2021). Like all of them but the ever-contrarian Schopenhauer, Cipolla (1988, 6) admitted that “providing a definition of “humor” is difficult, if not impossible,” and that if “the interlocutor fails to perceive a humorous situation as being humorous, it is effectively pointless, if not even counterproductive, to try to explain to him why it is so.” Besides, even if well-meaning, only some people have “the instinctive grasp of when and where humor can be voiced,” or the “deep and often forgiving human sympathy” that “humor” requires, within the confines, moreover, of one’s own “language” or “cultural milieu,” for “humor” can be “totally incomprehensible when moving into a different cultural milieu” (Cipolla 1988, 6–7).

Nevertheless, Cipolla (1988, 7) was also genuinely driven by “the deep conviction that, whenever the opportunity for being humorous presents itself, it is a social duty to prevent such an opportunity from being wasted.” If possible, then, humor had to be risked. In this connection, Cipolla’s 1976 essay entitled “On the Basic Laws of Human Stupidity” is generally considered to be a real gem in its little-practiced yet editorially successful literary genre, which mixes serious socio-economic reflection and subtle humor, as historically attested by a large number of translations and continuing republications (see, e.g., Cipolla 2012b). Originally written in English and printed privately in about a hundred copies for his closest friends and associates, this essay was later translated into Cipolla’s native Italian and combined into a book with another humorous piece of his, dealing this time with the historical importance of the transnational trade in pepper. The volume’s title was *Allegro ma non troppo* (1988), i.e., a clear reference to the world of music, yet equally a suggestion about the semi-serious tone of the two essays: *merry, but not too much*.

Thirteen years later, Cipolla (2011) was issued on its own in the English original, by which time many bootleg editions had been circulating in print as well as electronically. Ironically, it had proven much easier to publish and circulate translated versions of his 1976 essay than to get the Anglophone original released conventionally by an established imprint. (Here and in the following

fourteen instances, we understand “irony” in prosaic terms of surprising and/or amusing discrepancy or contradiction, rather than in Cipolla’s ones, which contrast it sharply with “humor” proper.)

2.2. Stupidity

Cipolla (2011, 16) presents what he argued to be the fundamental regularities of “one of the most powerful, dark forces which hinder the growth of human welfare and happiness,” i.e., “stupidity,” plus some of their “corollaries,” which are accompanied by most entertaining exemplifications derived, primarily, from Cipolla’s daily life and observations about himself or other people, not least fellow academics. In the process, which I can resume here only partially, Cipolla devised a clever and clear-cut Cartesian diagram (fig. 1) whereby humankind can be amusingly yet insightfully divided into four groups, i.e., on the basis of their acting in ways that are either beneficial or detrimental to the agent her/himself and/or to the people affected by the agent’s actions.

Placing benefits and detriments (i.e., negative benefits) of the agent on the X axis and those of the affected people on the Y axis, humankind can be said to comprise:

- (1) *intelligent* individuals (top right quadrant “I”), whose actions are typically beneficial to the agent and the affected people;
- (2) *helpless* individuals (top left quadrant “H”), whose actions are typically detrimental to the agent but beneficial to the affected people;
- (3) *bandits* (bottom right quadrant “B”), whose actions are typically beneficial to the agent but detrimental to the affected people; and
- (4) outright *stupid* individuals (bottom left quadrant “S”), whose actions are tragically detrimental to the agent as well as the affected people.

As the *third*, “[g]olden” basic law of stupidity asserts: “A stupid person is a person who causes losses to another person or to a group of persons while himself deriving no gain and even possibly incurring losses” (Cipolla 2011, 36). (The reader must not worry: the remaining laws will be duly mentioned too.) While *prima facie* laughable and funny, widespread stupidity can be the weightiest issue and, historically, it is said to have been able to condemn entire civilizations to “decline,” which Cipolla (2011, 63) dubs also as “go[ing] to Hell” purely and simply.

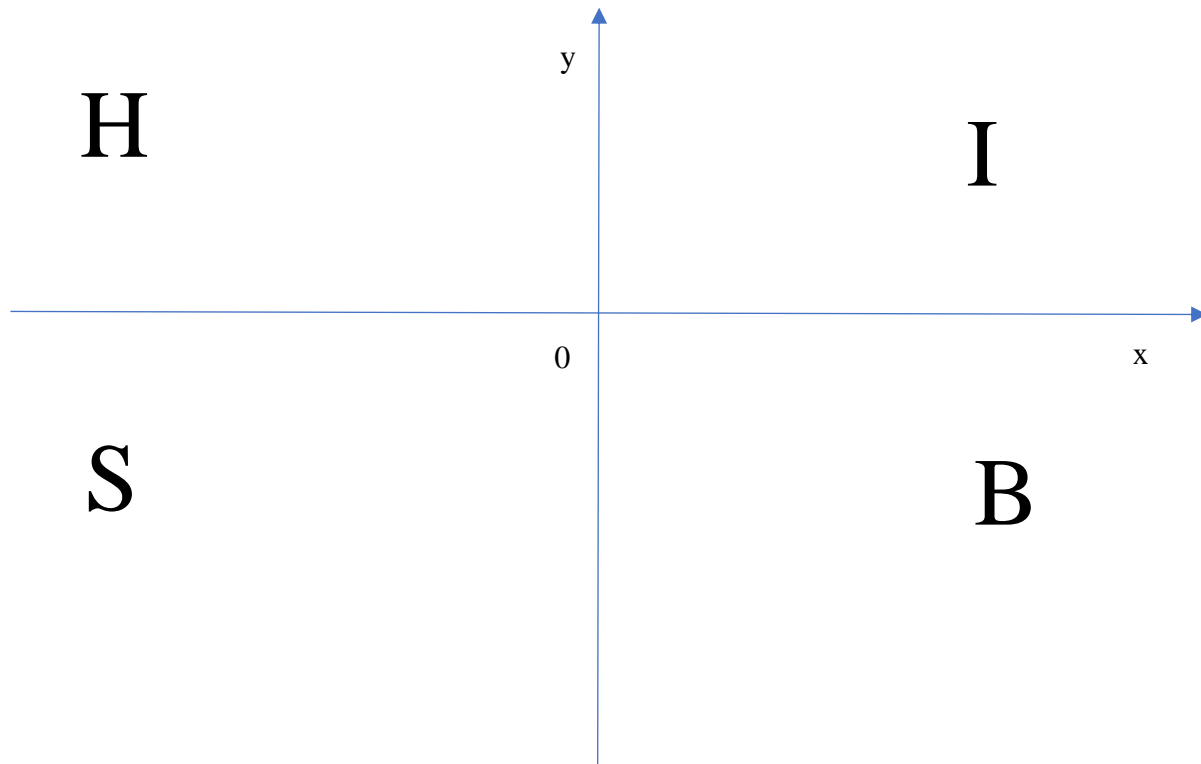


Fig.1 Cipolla's diagram

This tongue-in-cheek anthropological tetrad wishes to taunt, and spur reflection upon, tacit attitudes and presuppositions that had been widespread among Cipolla's colleagues in the human and social sciences—economists *in primis*—and that were affecting his day's economic historians too. Indeed, and quite ironically, the same tacit attitudes and presuppositions might have grown even more widespread over the past thirty years. At least, such is the recent critical claim made by one of Cipolla's most successful students, Francesco Boldizzoni (b. 1979) (2011). Assessing the validity Boldizzoni's claim, however, exceeds the limits of the present essay.

2.3. Providence

Cipolla (2011, 25) argues that there are stupid persons in all societies and at all social levels, including "Nobel-laureates." Thus, the "*First Basic Law of Human Stupidity*" recites: "Always and inevitably everyone underestimates the number of stupid individuals in circulation" (Cipolla 2011, 19; emphasis added). At the same time, the "*Second Basic Law*" adds: "The probability that a certain person be stupid is independent of any other characteristic of that person" (Cipolla 2011, 24; emphasis added).

These statements sound quite funny, *per se*, but they hint at a rather worrying scenario. Underestimated, unseen and isolated, stupid individuals constitute the greatest destructive social power that has ever existed. As Cipolla (2011, 15–16) phrases the matter at hand: "it is an unorganized unchartered group which has no chief, no president, no by-laws and yet manages to operate in perfect

unison, as if guided by an invisible hand, in such a way that the activity of each member powerfully contributes to strengthen and amplify the effectiveness of the activity of all other members.”

Concisely, shrewdly, self-reflexively, and implicitly informed with the extensive study of economic history, Cipolla (2011) tells in this way an indirect, humorous, yet cautionary tale about the “invisible hand,” i.e., the longstanding assumption of positive social spill-overs from self-interested individual behavior, such that collectively organized external intervention (e.g., by public authorities) is judged *a priori* to be an intrusive and inefficient “interference” requiring exceptional justification (see, e.g., Parkin, Powell & Matthews 2008, and Spencer 1960). In other words, Cipolla (2011) blows a wry punch at the trite metaphor at hand, which I expect all of my readers to have come across at some point in their lives.

Very succinctly, it can be stated that this influential linguistic expression was coined in English by Adam Smith (1723–1790) during the 18th century, in order to refer to Divine Providence—most patently in his 1759 *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. (I write “linguistic expression” and “in English” because, as Thornton 2009 argued, the paternity of the economic concept itself belongs to the Irish-French banker Cantillon.) Successively, “the invisible hand” was endorsed enthusiastically by all 19th-century “classic” liberals, on both sides of the “Pond., i.e., in Europe as well as in the Americas. Finally, in the 20th century, “the invisible hand” was turned into one of orthodox economics’ central and unquestionable presuppositions, or veritable dogmas, primarily by the Nobel-laureate Milton Friedman (1912–2006) (1962), who (1980) also popularized it on US TV.

However, the “invisible hand” of divine “Providence” is no friend of human communities and institutions, according to Cipolla (2011, 23), whether it is openly endorsed on a cosmic scale—as Smith (1759) did—or implicitly presumed *qua* inherent logic of allegedly existing free markets—as *per* Friedman’s oeuvre and an even larger plethora of secondary sources (see, e.g., Bishop 1995, Hodgson 2004, and Oslington 2011). As Cipolla (2011, 23) jokingly counters, it is in fact “an act of Providence” that determines that “a stupid man is born a stupid man,” *pace* the “egalitarian approach” pervading the work of many scholars and scientists, especially “[g]eneticists and sociologists.” Ironically, the “hand” that is worshipped by most economists as the guarantor of the extant economic order’s beneficence is also the one that throws, unpredictably yet inexorably, a sabot into the same order’s machinery, causing all kinds of troubles (e.g., economic recessions, bankruptcies and mass unemployment). Perhaps—as Biblical wisdom teaches, after all—there are circumstances in which the left hand doesn’t know what the right hand is doing (Matt. 6:3).

The providentially and ominously endowed stupid man, or woman, may even aim willfully and consciously at being a living paradigm of the orthodox economists’ *homo economicus* (Cipolla 2011, 25). S/he may do so against her/his moral instincts and instructions, which would make her/him

selfless, cooperative, generous and cordial (see, e.g., Vitoria 1917, and Calvo 2018). And s/he may be remarkably successful at it, for a while. The fall, fatefully, awaits her/him and everyone else around. Eventually, this stupid person will make everyone lose by her/his actions, her/himself included. Individual investors and institutions poisoning themselves and their competitors, customers and clients by trading toxic products, whether edible or merely tradable, come immediately to mind, especially after the 2008 crash and the ensuing Great Recession. So do pundits and politicians facilitate this mass poisoning by relaxing and/or removing whatever protective regulations there had been in place because of previous poisonings—and all of this in the glorious name of liberty, enterprise and prosperity (see, e.g., Galbraith 1999 & 2004).

Stupidity, according to Cipolla (2011), is always *ex post*. Before its tragic manifestation, stupidity can even be saluted as genius and stupid people, for their part, be celebrated as the best and brightest, while much-decried regulatory “red tape” is proven far-too-late to be a much-needed salutary red light. As also the great Canadian-born heterodox economist Ken Galbraith (1999, 20) commented: “In the world of finance, genius is a rising market.” Eventually, prior glorifications notwithstanding, stupidity pays out its dreadful dividends, according to Cipolla (2011). The cruel irony of the whole affair being that, in the end, the joke is on all of us, not just on the stupid people themselves, whom far more intelligent individuals had mistaken for extraordinary business leaders, creative disruptors, enterprising innovators, roaring “tigers” or new “marauding Vikings.” (The term *útrásvíkingar*, applied to a young cohort of local yuppies, enjoyed much popularity in Iceland during the early 2000s, until it did no longer.)

2.4. Precision

Cipolla (2011) claims that sensible arguments can be developed even if one cannot measure with exactitude the phenomena that the arguments are about. There exist “intangibles” in human affairs that “are very difficult to measure according to objective standards,” if not impossible (Cipolla 2011, 32). Furthermore, “a margin of imprecision is bound to affect the measurement” of all studied phenomena, “but it does not affect the essence of the argument” in ways that make the argument *per se* either aimless or unimportant (Cipolla 2011, 32).

Emblematically, Cipolla’s (2011, 20) amusing first basic law of stupidity states that, when trying to gauge the number of stupid individuals within any group, “any estimate would turn out to be an under-estimate.” On the one hand, stupid people fail to recognize themselves as such. On the other hand, non-stupid people find it hard to comprehend and therefore identify stupid people, whom the former often believe to be merely helpless.

As a trained economic historian, Cipolla knew very well how certain phenomena could and should be approached in quantitative terms: births, marriages, deaths, barrels of salted herring, shipments of wool and the like are, or should be, the daily repast of the experts in his field. However, Cipolla (1992b) knew as well that quantity can be needlessly deified by the same researchers, particularly when impressively formalized into mathematical language. Indeed, the transformation of studied empirical matters into algebraic expressions can even cause the researchers to move away from painstaking factual inquiry and into top-down, breath-taking, deductive theories or hypothetical models. This is a well-known risk in economics, as old as the so-called “Ricardian vice,” which is especially pronounced whenever the same researchers are eager and/or required to prove their mathematical skill, as though formal wizardry were the exclusive mark of scientific relevance or professional competence in economic studies (see, e.g., Cipolla 1988, 27).

Yet, neither all that matters can be counted, nor all that can be counted truly matters (see, e.g., Polanyi 1962). Analogously, not all that can be formally demonstrated is of relevance, and neither can all that is relevant be formally demonstrable. The truth is quite the opposite. Stupidity, as corrosively selected and scrutinized by Cipolla (2011), is just one among many important phenomena that are capable of determining human affairs to a decisive extent and that, alas, cannot be measured or counted with exactitude, nor treated satisfactorily in wondrous *a priori* theorems and/or models. Perhaps, only humorous ones, such as Cipolla’s own Cartesian diagram, will do.

Funnily enough, Cipolla (2011) reminds us of how stupidity can mock our intelligence and escape our will to enumerate, formalize and systematize—not to mention our penchant for planning and predicting the future. Back in the 19th century, the great Russian novelist Fyodor M. Dostoevsky (1821–1881) (1983) had made an analogous remark about human capriciousness which, in his view, can defy all logical expectations and reasonable explanations concerning human behavior. In the 20th century, after seventy years of research in economics, Galbraith (2004) made the same point about an equally decisive social and economic phenomenon. Galbraith (2004) was writing, this time, about the polymorphous and shifty instrument that we call “power,” which is at play in all kinds of socio-scientific studies and can neither be measured with exactitude nor defined univocally and universally.

2.5. Pepper

When combined with a humorous essay on pepper, it becomes clear that Cipolla (2011) was also launching a warning call about the plausibility of top-down, deductive demonstrations of encompassing historical theses (see also Cipolla 1992b and Boldizzoni 2011). *Contra* all such tempting theoretical simplifications, Cipolla (2011) emphasized the many unknown and unknowable factors that cannot be accounted for—the human beings’ knack for self-destruction included, which

Dostoevsky (1983) and Galbraith (2004) also acknowledged. In particular, Cipolla (2012a) shows humorously how historical data can be cherry-picked, selectively correlated and convincingly underscored in order to demonstrate perplexing yet persuasive encompassing claims, e.g., that all major socio-political changes in medieval and early-modern Europe can be attributed to the growing trade and consumption of the highly stimulating spice known as “pepper” (see also Cipolla 1992b).

Cipolla’s main critical target was the in/famous case of the US-based colleague S.C. Gilfillan (1965), who had claimed that the fall of the Roman Empire was due to widespread lead poisoning in the largest Roman cities—i.e., as though one such simple and largely hypothetical medical phenomenon could be used to make sense of a long and complex process, the explanation of which had been keeping historians busy for centuries. However, the warning signal that Cipolla (2012a) had launched was broader and deeper, for one-size-fits-all, silver-bullet solutions can be tempting also with regard to other historical matters and socio-scientific inquiries (see Boldizzoni 2011).

Ironically, today’s economic history seems to have ignored Cipolla’s signal and critique, as amply shown by the affirmation of the US-born, deductive, economically orthodox discipline of cliometrics in the rest of the Americas, most of Europe, and much of Asia (Boldizzoni 2011; *concisely*, cliometrics applies deductive formal economic models and econometric analyses to historical trends and events, as though past societies were obviously and unquestionably market societies like ours today). Somehow, the will to enumerate, formalize and systematize is just too strong, at least among academicians, especially if the resulting depictions of our past are consonant with the dominant economic dogmas, which truly inductive studies could actually challenge (Boldizzoni 2011). Careers and convictions can thus be moved forward and buttressed, even if they make a mockery of the sort of historically cautious, critically self-aware and candidly empirical inquiry that Cipolla advocated and that, above all, he himself exemplified most tangibly in his copious scholarly output (Boldizzoni 2011).²

3. Hans Jonas

The 1970s also witnessed the publication of a much more solemn book, which was bound to have an immense and lasting echo: Jonas’ *Das Prinzip Verantwortung. Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation* (1979). This book was translated into English by Jonas himself and

² See also Galbraith 2004, chapter one, on the glaring disconnection between actual economic history and the standard orthodox depictions of economic life by well-established academics. Back in his day, the Italian economist and philosopher Piero V. Mini (1974, 12 n11) had already observed: “Recently some economic historians have succumbed to the Cartesian method and turned economic history into an “econometric” science.” In 2021, Bowes (2021) laments the largely deductive and even fictive character of cliometrics with regard to Roman history, echoing Boldizzoni’s (2011) harsh dismissal of the discipline. If these authors are correct, then scores of academics have basically spent nearly half a century producing over-intelligent garbage.

published as *The Imperative of Responsibility. In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (1984). Its German version is often said to have spearheaded environmentalism in Central Europe (see, e.g., Tirosh-Samuelson & Wiese 2008).

Jonas operated initially within the German-speaking academic milieu and then expanded his horizons to the Anglophone one. In the former, he inherited the critical qualms about modern science-technology characterizing the oeuvre of his mentor, Martin Heidegger (1889–1976). Discerning no other goal within this binomial but a blind drive to perpetual growth, the theoretically endless “dynamism” of science-technology was deemed by Jonas (1984, 140) to be essentially and dangerously self-referential, i.e., devoid of any higher directing axiological criteria, hence bound to pursue ever more of the same, oblivious to the costs paid by life at many levels: “[T]he danger of disaster attending the Baconian ideal of power over nature through scientific technology arises not so much from any shortcomings of its performance as from the magnitude of its success.”

Ironically, the more successful humankind has been in developing its technoscience, the more severe has been the resulting destruction of the life support systems allowing for our own species’ continued existence, e.g., the local and planet-wide water- and Nitrogen cycles, the protective Ozone layer of our atmosphere, and the Carbon-dioxide-capturing and Oxygen-releasing forests and phytoplankton across the Earth (see, e.g., McMurtry 2010).

Heidegger (1977) had often spoken of “science-technology” as a modern “destiny” or “fate.” Jonas (1984) began considering it a modern doom, which only a higher degree of personal self-awareness and moral commitment could counter. Jonas’ path towards this higher degree of self-awareness and moral commitment being, essentially, a naturalized version of Kantian practical reason (see especially Kant 1997).

3.1. Duties

In its most general—indeed universal—formulation, which is itself a naturalized version of Immanuel Kant’s (1724–1804) categorical imperative *qua* novel “imperative of responsibility,” Jonas (1984, title & 11) stated that each and every morally capable person ought to be *responsible*, i.e., s/he ought to behave in accordance with the following maxims:

- (1) “Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life”; and, *via negativa*,
- (2) “[a]ct so that the effects of your action are not destructive of the future possibility of such life.”

Jonas (1984), *in nuce*, argued that we can retrieve in the human spirit a shared, fundamental root of morality, i.e., a duty to care for life and the willingness to act upon it. According to Jonas (1984, 130), there exists in fact a “timeless archetype of all responsibility, the parental for the child,” which cuts across ages, communities and complex social mammals, and tells us what we ought to do in spite of practical divergencies and historical exceptions (e.g., infanticide). In terms of contemporary life-value onto-axiology, which is the philosophical theory of value still endorsed by UNESCO with regard to sustainable development, being responsible *à la* Jonas translates into being as coherently and as compossibly life-enabling in one’s own actions as we can be (McMurtry 2010).

In other words, Jonas recognized a naturally emerging, defining and self-evident duty of the living to care for the living and, implicitly, for the preconditions of their living, present as well as future. Duty-based morality is a traditional Kantian notion, but Jonas (1984) did not follow Kant (1997) into a rationalistic deontology. Rather, his archetype of parental care can be said to be experienced in instinct, thus recalling the much older Thomist notion of the divine Natural Law being perceptible already in our pre-rational inclinations (see, e.g., Utz 1994 and Vogel 2006). Adopting Heidegger’s terminology, Jonas (1984, 130) wrote that his archetype is “an ontic paradigm in which the plain factual “is” evidently coincides with an “ought”—which does not, therefore, admit for itself the concept of a “mere is” at all.”

Albeit grounded in our animal and vital instincts, one cannot separate the inherent moral pull of the parent-child relationship from the rationally articulable imperative of responsibility. “Being” and “ought” coincide in this ethically decisive event: “We can point at the most familiar sight: the newborn, whose mere breathing uncontradictably addresses an ought to the world around, namely to take care of him” (Jonas 1984, 131). Jonas (1984, 131) went even as far as to claim that “here the plain being of a *de facto* existent immanently and evidently contains an ought for others, and would so even if nature would not succor this ought with powerful instincts or assume its job alone.”

Moreover, as *the* archetype of responsibility, the parent’s example applies to all sorts of social relationship and dimensions involving “responsibility,” including “the statesman” *vis-à-vis* “the state,” to which the overall organization of the economy and the steering of science-technology are entrusted *qua* supreme mandate (Jonas 1984, 100–101; see also Utz 1994 and Bernstein & Sekera 2018). Ironically, there may be some undiscovered and untapped moral wisdom in our currently outmoded speaking of political leaders *qua* “mothers” or “fathers” of the world’s nations.

3.2. Divergencies

Jonas’ stance might sound reasonable to many readers of the present essay. However, in his day and age, Jonas’ universal grounding of responsibility in the life requirements of our fellows, our species,

and our planet, was a daring *foundationalist* assertion. Some ‘trendier’ colleagues scoffed at it as a ridiculous blast from the past (see Vogel 2006 and Nielsen-Sikora 2017). In the century of economic ordinalism and philosophical postmodernism, it was in fact far more commonplace to conclude that the ever-possible differences in value preferences among people would make moral universalism untenable (see, e.g., Pareto 1935 and Rorty 1989). And in the 21st century, “[s]kepticism” about “morality,” whether “external” or “internal,” still abounds, in jurisprudence as well as in the human and social sciences at large. At least, such is the case according to one of the most famous thinkers of our age, Ronald Dworkin (1931–2013) (2011).

Under these skeptical premises, whenever denying the existence of a shared fundamental human nature (e.g., an immortal soul) or ability (e.g., reason, sympathy or empathy) whence to derive universal moral principles, it is hoped that ethical minimalism (i.e., whatever moral norms all societies share) or democratic agreement (e.g., international human rights legislation) can usher, *at best*, broad consensus. Nevertheless, the former cannot exclude conspicuous differences in life-and-death cases (e.g., whether to execute rapists and drug dealers or not) and the latter may engender governing majorities that are utterly and lethally deaf to future generations’ ecological needs or keen on oppressing certain groups, if not on exterminating them outright (e.g., targeting homosexuals or Israeli citizens for physical elimination).

At worst, whenever denying the existence of a shared fundamental human nature or ability whence to derive universal moral principles, the thorough relativization of morality to culture, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation or individual preference is the end-result. This explosion of moral stances can then be dealt with by way of more or less peaceful and constructive confrontations in many possible social settings (e.g., parliaments, meetings, markets), where people’s awareness, clout and purchasing power can however range anywhere from humongous to naught, given the extant conditions of extreme socio-economic inequality (see, e.g., Scanlon 2018). Once again, utterly and lethally dismal consequences ensue, e.g., malnourishment and avoidable early deaths in prosperous countries spending trillions in armaments and, at the same time, reducing health- and social care investments (see, e.g., McMurtry 2013).

In a cruel twist of irony, Jonas’ 20th century was rife with sorrowful confrontations among dissenting axiologies, some of which touched him personally. A devout German Jew, he was forced to abandon his native country because of Nazi persecution (which he attacked violently himself by joining the Jewish Brigade of the British Army), serving later as a volunteer in the army of newly-born Israel, and spending the rest of his career combating utilitarian, reductionist and instrumentalist approaches to human life, especially in the medical and pharmaceutical for-profit sectors (see especially Jonas 2008; see also Nielsen-Sikora 2017).

3.3. Diagrams

Returning to Cipolla’s humorous diagram, we can then place life-enabling responsibilities towards oneself—i.e., Kant’s (1993, Ak4:421) “internal duties” (e.g., not committing suicide)—on the X axis; and life-enabling responsibilities towards others—i.e., Kant’s (1993, Ak4:421) “external duties” (e.g., helping people in distress)—on the Y axis (negative life-enablement being life-disablement on both axes). The result is what I call “the Cipolla-Jonas diagram” (fig. 2), which is meant to facilitate reflections on very serious matters whilst echoing Cipolla’s humorous approach. As the ancient Romans would have described it, it is an attempt at *miscere utile dulci* [mixing the agreeable with the useful].

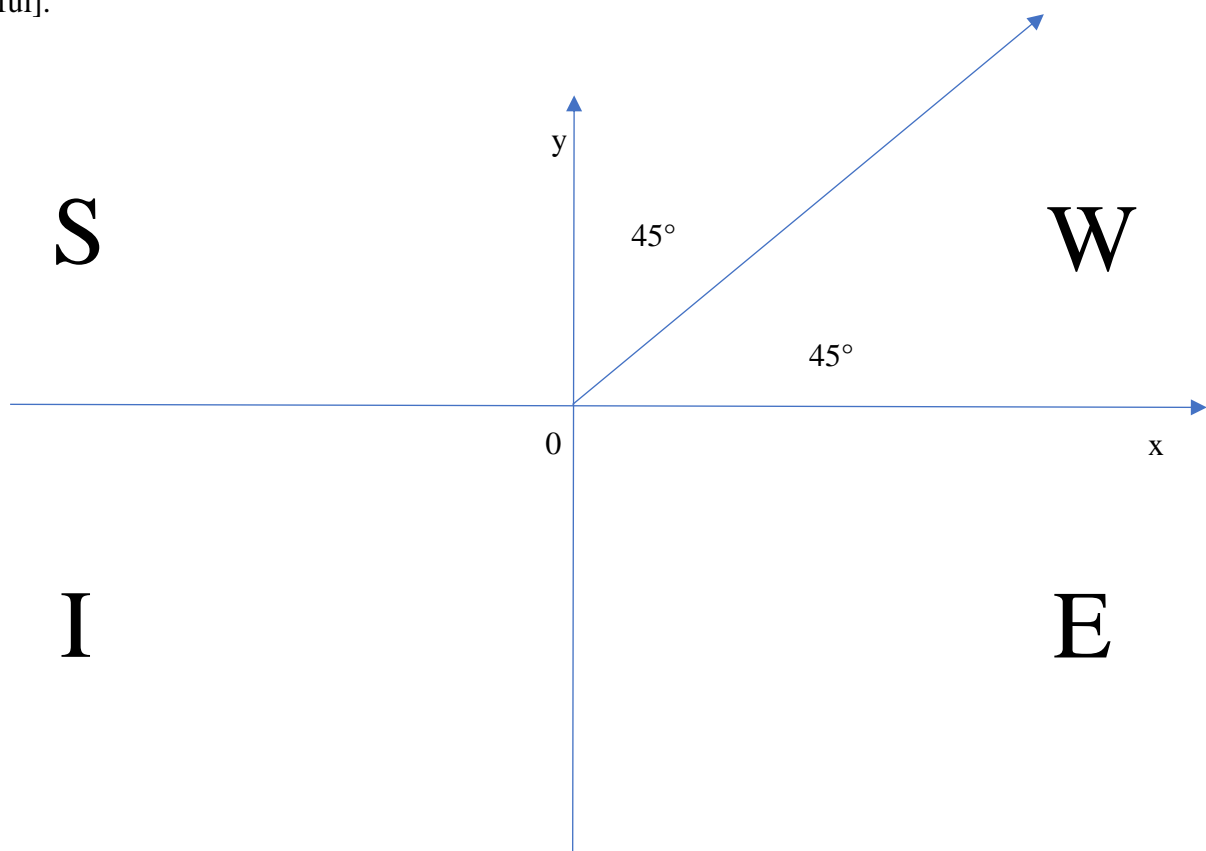


Fig. 2 The Cipolla-Jonas diagram

This intentionally simplified picture of humankind can help us identify four groups:

- (1) *Wise people (W)*, who typically fulfil responsibilities to both oneself and others. Among them are the persons operating on the line cutting that quadrant at 45°, i.e., individuals accomplishing the Biblical injunction of loving one’s neighbor as oneself, following the golden rule common to both Eastern and Western moral instruction (Wattles 1966), or instantiating the second formulation of Kant’s (1993) categorical imperative: “Act

in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end.”

(2) *Recklessly selfless people (S), who focus so much on other persons as to neglect themselves.* Overzealous guardians and eager soldiers are tokens of this attitude. In popular culture, the comically imbalanced parents of Walt Disney’s 1964 musical *Mary Poppins* embody such a case. Both the politically overactive mother, a suffragette, and the professionally overactive father, a bank manager, neglect their own family, making their children and themselves unhealthy and unhappy. Their met responsibilities may be life-enabling in the broader social context, but the smaller contexts of their family and personal psyche are being sacrificed unwisely. (Curiously enough, the famous musical ends with the mother giving up her political activism altogether and the father going back to his grueling drudgery.)

(3) *Ego-centric people (E), who understand what they ought to do with regard to themselves, but are not nearly as good with regard to others.* Albeit not necessarily “bandits, they can be healthy, self-satisfied and forward-looking, but also lethally oblivious to their neighbors’ life requirements” (Cipolla 2011, 42). Sitting comfortably inside their air-conditioned mansions, offices and gas-guzzling SUVs, these people roam around the streets of their beloved cities, going to work smilingly and cheerfully minding their own business, but also poisoning their fellow citizens. Building on individualistic premises, standard orthodox economics endorses *ab ovo* such behaviors and casts aside their life-disabling outcomes as ‘externalities’, unaware of the inherent and deadly irony of this practice (see, e.g., Sen 1985 and Sloman 2006).

(4) *The irresponsible ones (I), who fail regularly in seeing to their responsibilities to others as well as to themselves.* Erratic drug addicts, whether operating in dark alleys or in the brightly lit skyscrapers of major financial centers, are sad exemplars of this group of people, who cause life-disablement to their fellows as well as to themselves (see Williams 2013). Under this perspective, they can be deemed “stupid” in Cipolla’s (2011, 36) “golden” sense, should human inanity ever deserve an association with the noblest metal.

Some responsibilities call for restraint. They are fulfilled by acting *not* and can therefore be fully and clearly over, i.e., Kant’s (1993, Ak4:421) “perfect duties,” whether “internal” or “external.” For instance, if masturbation, as Kant believed, means being irresponsible to oneself, then one’s dutiful responsibility would be fully met by abstaining from it whenever the urge for it occurs. It may

be hard, but it is not unthinkable. (For a full discussion of Kant's extremely harsh condemnation of sexual self-pleasuring, see Kielkopf 1997.)

Some responsibilities, on the other hand, call for *positive* engagement, whether pleasurable or not. They are fulfilled by acting and can therefore be open to potentially endless variations reflecting the specific circumstances under which they arise, i.e., Kant's (1993, Ak4:421) "imperfect duties." If, as Kant also believed, being a responsible parent requires giving one's own children an adequate education, that may mean, depending on the society in which one happens to be a father or a mother, taking children to hunting expeditions, making them work on the fields alongside their older relatives, sending them to primary school, teaching them to make jokes, teaching them not to make jokes, allowing them to laugh in public, allowing them to laugh only in private, etc.

3.4. Deductions

A simple thought-experiment can help us ponder upon some additional implications of the humorous Cipolla-Jonas diagram *vis-à-vis* Jonas' (1984) main concerns. Assuming, as Jonas (1984) effectively did, that responsible behavior means *comprehensive and compossible life-enablement* (see McMurtry 2010), which ordinary actions of ours do actually fit the bill, and which do not?

We wake up, we take care of our personal hygiene and, if we have any, our children's; we eat organic and/or industrially processed food; we go from one place to another—on foot, bicycle, by public transport, by private transport—; we contribute to some collective goal with our work—manufacturing certain objects, designing others, increasing the shareholders' wealth, educating other persons, curing them from pathologies, etc.—; we interact with other persons formally and informally—we cheer them up, humiliate them, pay them heed, barely notice them, etc.—; we consume a variety of goods and services—ink, paper, fuel, information, time, etc. —; we support politicians on different grounds—paying fewer taxes, regulating industry, etc. The more responsible we are, the more actions of ours will be life-enabling; and the more life-enabling they are, the better our actions will be (McMurtry 2010).

If our actions are life-disabling, though, then they will signal irresponsibility. How do we score? Where do we stand on the Cipolla-Jonas diagram?

Each reader is bound to grasp, *grosso modo*, whether s/he should be pigeonholed under "W," "S," "E" or "I." I do not know enough about my readers to pass any judgment on an individual level. Collectively, though, I can venture to say that, unfortunately, "E" and "I" are prevalent today. Let me explain why, however briefly.

We do live in societies that, officially, are committed to sustainability and environmental awareness. Life-protective and life-enabling policies are being implemented and promoted in many

ways. ‘Hard’ law as well as ‘soft’ regulation and voluntary programs have been launched in many a country towards ‘greener’, life-enabling results. Businesspeople have themselves contributed to these efforts, e.g., the United Nations’ *Global Compact* and many Fair-Trade initiatives. Tangible occurrences of local progress keep revealing that life-enabling alternatives are concretely possible and not just ideally desirable. As it happens, they can have effect at any given level of ordinary business practice and attendant processes: extraction (e.g., national and international certifications), transformation (e.g., the United Nations Environment Program), transportation (e.g., the EU’s zero-kilometer initiatives), consumption (e.g., growing demand for organic products), and disposal (e.g., the Zero Waste International Alliance).

Nevertheless, on an aggregate, global and systemic level, all these changes have been, so far, painfully *inadequate*. The degree of their insufficiency is not difficult to gauge, for they have neither stopped nor reversed the planet-wide life-depletions that, in some cases, have been piling up since the dawn of the industrial revolution: the chemical pollution of the air we breathe; the loss of arable topsoil by desertification and the impoverishment of the topsoil bacterial flora; the exhaustion and pollution of the water we drink, of boreal and tropical forests, and of fish stocks in the seas and oceans; the fast-paced and vast contraction of bio-diversity, including pivotal pollinator species; the upsurge in the grossly imbalanced distribution of income; the relentless manufacturing, advertising, sale and consumption of addictive sugar- and/or fat-laden pathogenic foodstuff; the rise of non-contagious pathologies *qua* chief cause of mortality; the drop in investments supporting life-enabling public-sector institutions such as healthcare, work-and-safety inspectorates, and independent monitoring bodies (for massive and time-honored corroborating evidence see, e.g., Cecchetti, Mohanty & Zampolli 2011, IPCC 2014 & 2018, HC 2013, HL 2013, IFS 2013, ILO 2013, OECD 2013, TFAH 2011, UN 2012, WHO 2017).

The cruel irony of the whole situation should be glaring. Going ‘green’ has been, by and large, a global *joke*. The results of countless scientific studies say so, quite unmercifully. Whatever set of green policies may have been pursued, in fact, the planet is still “going to Hell,” as Cipolla (2011) would state, with more than a pinch of pungent humor. Unless so-called “economic development” swings unmistakably towards the opposite end of the spectrum and expedites the actual restoration of the Earth’s and societies’ life-support systems, instead of their dilapidation, ordinary business and consumption praxes cannot but remain *unsustainable*. Moreover, insofar as responsible business actors and consumers may wish to be life-enabling rather than life-disabling, they also cause these people to be, paradoxically, irresponsible in spite of themselves (Mackenzie 2006).

3.5. Dick and Tom

Jonas' (1984) neo- or post-Kantian path is an arduous one to follow. Being responsible means having a duty, knowing that one has a duty, knowing which it is, knowing when it applies, knowing to whom or what it applies, knowing how to fulfil it—at least to the extent required to attempt its fulfilment—and being willing and capable to fulfil it—at least to the extent required to attempt its fulfilment. At each and every one of these steps there lies the possibility of being irresponsible, or at least of being deemed such by others, and especially by those to whom the duty is owed or who claim that it is owed to them.

Who determines that a certain duty is the case, and therefore that a certain person or set of persons should be responsible for it, is not a straightforward matter. When Cipolla (2011, 32) outlined his humorous diagram on stupidity, he assumed explicitly that the benefits and costs of an action to be counted should be those claimed by the people affected by the action at issue, not just its initiator:

When considering Tom's action one makes use of Tom's values but one has to rely on Dick's values and not on Tom's values to determine Dick's gains (whether positive or negative). All too often this rule of fairness is forgotten and many troubles originate from failure to apply this essentially urbane point of view. Let me resort once again to a banal example. Tom hits Dick on Dick's head and he derives satisfaction from his action. He may pretend that Dick was delighted to be hit on the head. Dick, however, may not share Tom's view. In fact he may regard the blow on his head as an unpleasant event. Whether the blow on Dick's head was a gain or a loss to Dick is up to Dick to decide and not to Tom.

If we consider dutiful responsibilities, then, the viewpoints can differ considerably, and the person's claim stating that a certain responsibility towards him/her exists and ought to be fulfilled should be taken *cum grano salis*. A person might not realize, identify and/or acknowledge some or all of the responsibilities attributed to them by all or most other mentally competent members of their community. Ironically, we may be commonly thought responsible for things that we do not grasp, whether intellectually or intuitively, as falling under the purview of our own duties.

This occurrence might be odd and infrequent. Nonetheless, under such circumstances, it is not clear that there is any culpability on that person's part. Ignorance or lack of imagination can be enough as *explanans* (see, e.g., Goethe 2002). Also, the isolated, apparently irresponsible person might actually be right and his/her fellow citizens wrong. Funnily enough, the majority may be quite mistaken at times. Similarly, another person might well claim as his/hers, responsibilities that no one else, or few other people, would think of as theirs. As bizarre as such an occurrence may sound, the

majority could be, once again, wrong. A tiny lick of reflection may actually help the reader to make sense of a such a seemingly ludicrous notion.

Some people, for instance, may have valid reasons to doubt that they ought to enable the life of certain persons and/or institutions claiming routinely, and often successfully, other people's assistance. Bailing out wealthy shareholders of ruinous banks and subsidizing the oil- and carbon industries with tax money are, in a life-grounded opinion, examples of precisely such trends in contemporary market economies (see, e.g., McMurtry 2013). If there exists an objective, universal moral order or grounding principle thereof, as Jonas (1984) asserted, then the individuals comprising the majority in the cases above could be truly in error, whether because they are individually deficient in some way, or because they live in a society in which morally absurd or dreadful beliefs are the norm. In positive law it may be true that *nullum crimen sine lege*, but that may not be so in the moral sphere (Dworkin 2011).

As ridiculous as also this notion may seem at first sight, it could be the case that some, most or all of our established institutions are a travesty, a farce, a mockery of the good and the right. Reformers and utopians of all sorts and stripes, for that matter, have repeatedly argued as much in the greatest variety of settings and times. Yet this funny idea can be stretched and explained even further in connection with Jonas' ethical concerns. Let us see how, succinctly.

In all societies, socially established universal criteria apply to their members, whether the latter like the former or not. The mutual relationship between such members and the criteria at issue can vary considerably. There can be identification. There can be patient, submissive acceptance or cunning, calculated approval. There can be rebellion, which itself can vary much, e.g., from making barricades against, to making jokes about, the chosen enemy.

In today's affluent consumer societies, a young man may decide to defy the individualistic hedonism that most citizens take for granted and base their daily existence upon, e.g., he may reject flatly the secular rite of Sunday shopping and/or the cultural norm of 'keeping up with the Joneses' (or the Kardashians, if anyone can afford it). Furthermore, he can do so by becoming, say, a Greek-orthodox monk; hence opting for an austere lifestyle that is respectful of the environment (monastic orders tend to be fairly Spartan and leave a low carbon footprint) and that commits him to acknowledge and fulfil responsibilities towards others (e.g., his brethren and neighbors—the Christian equivalent of “the Other” in modern philosophy—as well as the Saints and God) and towards oneself, often in demanding ways (e.g., fasting weekly and performing an examination of conscience twice a day).

Socially established criteria, in short, may well be an obvious *datum* of human life, but they are *per se* no guarantee of the correctness of the existing attributions of dutiful responsibilities across

extant societies and individuals. Dick and Tom, as Cipolla (2011, 32) wittily acknowledged, can be in mutual disagreement.

4. Concluding Remarks

If we consider the life-depletion that consumer societies still cause across the planet, then it is likely that drastically different socially established criteria ought to be established (see, e.g., McMurtry 2010 & 2013). Elsewhere, I have explored at length and in depth what sort of different criteria should actually be pursued, both as regards individual agency and as regards collective decision-making (Baruchello 2017a&b, 2018a&b, 2019). Additionally, under UNESCO's aegis, I have assessed the whole history of Western philosophy with regard to its in/ability to ascertain and promote such life-enabling criteria (Allen & Baruchello 2010, Baruchello 2010).

The present contribution, however, is not meant to rehearse this hefty older literature of mine, to which I must unashamedly refer the reader. What I wish to highlight here is, rather, how Jonas' notion of responsibility leads inevitably back to the issue of *duty-bound life-enablement* on the vastest of scales. My own Cipolla-Jonas diagram is, under this respect, a *heuristic* about the ecological responsibility of each and every person capable of moral deliberation. Albeit blatantly steeped in Cipolla's original humor, it points towards matters of grave import.

4.1. Religion

The imperative of responsibility was understood by Jonas (1984) *qua* moral pivot for the technological age and its ecological conundrums. The globally severe and species-threatening depletion of the Earth's life support systems is one of them, whose adequate terms of comparison Jonas (1993, 48–49; my translation) retrieved in the somber mystical lexicon of the Judeo-Christian tradition:

In the old days religion told us that we were all sinners because of the original sin. Today it is our planet's ecology that accuses all of us of being sinners because of the overexploitation of human ingenuity. Back in the old days, religion terrified us with the Last Judgment at the end of times. Today our tortured planet predicts the coming of that day without any divine intervention. The final revelation... is the silent scream emerging from things themselves, those things that we must endeavor to resolve to rein in our powers over the world, or we shall die on this desolate earth which used to be the creation.³

³ "Il razzismo" was a talk delivered by Jonas in Percoto, Italy, on 30 January 1993, and published in Italian as an appendix to the Italian translation of Jonas' 1987 book *Der Gottesbegriff nach Auschwitz. Eine jüdische Stimme*.

Today, Biblical warnings are largely ineffective and, for the most part, rather *démodé*, especially among academics. In one of history's many cruel ironies, modern techno-scientific human beings have become as almightily powerful as they are powerfully disenchanting about God Almighty. As Jonas (1984, 22) himself noted: "the very same movement which put us in possession of the powers that have now to be regulated by norms—the movement of modern knowledge called science—has by a necessary complementarity eroded the foundations from which norms could be derived." The fragility-born and morally decisive "sacrosanctity" that our ancestors had perceived in nature is no longer present among most people (Jonas 1984, 32; see also Rogan 2017), *pace* creative attempts at re-enchantment such as deep ecology and neo-paganism (see, e.g., Glasser 2005 and Myers 2017), which have been recurrently derided as nothing but a misguided joke, even among religious groups and individuals (see, e.g., ChristianChat 2015).

Since no decisive spiritual bound is acknowledged widely any more with a guiding heavenly Father or Mother Nature, our behavior should embrace, at least, responsible self-legislation. In the absence of heteronomous determination of correct conduct, whether individual or social, autonomous responsibility becomes *vitally* important. If humankind has outgrown its parents, then it should better start behaving like a responsible adult.

This is no joke. Thus far, according to Jonas (1969, 230; see also Jonas 1993), we have performed poorly, for "[w]e have sinned" much already by damaging "at full blast" our planet, which is the true "inheritance" of future generations. To a species capable of rational and moral deliberation, failing in the adoption of life-enabling autonomous responsibility is both *blatantly* immoral (see, e.g., Utz 1994) and laughably *stupid*, particularly if we follow the humorous lead of Cipolla (2011) on what makes someone 'technically' and 'officially' a "stupid" person, if not even 'auriferously' so.

4.2. Rhetoric

Born out of humor, the Cipolla-Jonas diagram functions here as a rather stately *general topic* in the classical rhetorical sense, i.e., a conceptual 'place' where researchers can find insights and ideas—myself included and, hopefully, my readers above all. Whether my proposed heuristic is truly useful and productive in this perspective, only posterity is in the position to ascertain it. The future, though, is open and unknown, no matter what well-paid financial forecasters may wish their customers to believe—as repeatedly and caustically remarked by Ken Galbraith (2004). And this is only one of the many ironies affecting our societies. As Cipolla (2011) wryly observed, in fact, stupidity can destroy, at *any* moment, *any* good thing whatsoever.

Virtuousness, usefulness, cleverness, beauty and life-enablement are no protection from human failings and from stupidity in particular. Even the advanced societies' most precious civil commons can be sacrificed to myopic or evil selfishness (e.g., public banking, as argued in McMurtry 2013) and, as regrettably yet far more unpredictably, to sheer stupidity. As Cipolla's (2011, 56; emphasis added) "*Fourth Basic Law*" sardonically asserts on this point: "Non-stupid people always underestimate the damaging power of stupid individuals. In particular non-stupid people constantly forget that at all times and places and under any circumstances to deal and/or associate with stupid people infallibly turns out to be a costly mistake."

In other terms, Jonas' (1993) religiously worded concerns reveal that our own survival could be the price to be paid to overwhelming stupidity. Given the astounding and threatening damages occurred to the Earth's life support systems, it is in fact hard not to deem stupid the empirically relentless and theoretically non-satiable pursuit of pecuniary gain on an already-scarred and manifestly finite planet (see Block 2017, Calvi 2018 and McMurtry 2013). At the very least, this blind chasing after a non-living *quid* at the expense of that which makes life possible must be yet another blatant irony arising from the very silly world in which we happen to live. And as Cipolla's (2011, 59) *fifth* law dryly states: "A stupid person is the most dangerous type of person," i.e., more dangerous than outright "bandits" themselves.

4.3. Reprimands

Not to recall Cipolla's (2011) second law. Were it true *vis-à-vis* my own person and the present humorous heuristic, then I myself would be unable to realize how stupid I can be—while my readers would probably enjoy an opportunity for laughing at me. At the same time, operating on an eerily similar potential level of self-critical blindness, orthodox teaching in economics and standard business practices still presume today a surreptitious invisible hand transforming individual self-interest into the common good, in spite of all contrary evidence (see, e.g., Sloman 2006). Therefore, the biggest irony of our age is probably this one: necessary socio-economic goodness is ascribed to the very socio-economic system that is leading our species towards extinction. Perhaps some leading economists and business leaders should have a frank conversation with dinosaurs, or the dodo...

Aware of how commonplace such a senseless orthodox stance had been among his fellow economists and social scientists, Cipolla's lifelong study of economic history led him often to take issue with this notion, including *via* humorous denouement, as *per* his 1976 study about the basic laws of human stupidity that has been openly tackled and discussed in the present essay. As important as self-interest, trade and economic productivity can be, without the *visible* hand of competent State authorities, concerned civil society and humane public mores imposing life-enabling standards upon

for-profit agency, economic history would enumerate even more rapine, murder, slavery, child labor, illiteracy, pollution, deadly lack of hygiene and sanitation, and other fatal ‘externalities’ (see, e.g., Cipolla 1992a; see also Castoriadis 2005 and Summers 1991).

For his part, Jonas (1984, 154) was inimical to “Baconianism” in *all* of its forms. The melioristic “utopia” of the now-defunct techno-scientific Soviet “Marxism” was thus criticized by him (1984, 151–154), who attacked it for emulating most idiotically the inherent logic of Western “capitalism,” about which he noted: “the maximization motive” whereby “profit” must be pursued by “ruthless exploitation of the natural resources and economic potentials” turns techno-scientific humankind into “ravagers of the earth,” i.e., the destroyers of the one and only place in the universe where our species can lead the “genuine human life” that the “imperative of responsibility” commands us to enable.

Almost half a century later, not even the worsening global ecological collapse of our planet and the recurring financial crises induced by decades of deregulation seem able to snuff, once and for all, the widespread superstition of the invisible hand, whence deep distrust *vis-à-vis* constructive external direction of economic agency ensues, *inter alia*. In the face of the ongoing climate crisis (see, e.g., IPCC 2018), this obstinacy does strike me as irresponsible, ludicrous, absurd, paradoxical and, technically speaking, nothing short of plainly stupid. A joke in bad taste, perhaps. Yet also a joke on all of us, and on our children in particular, as a sad matter of fact.

References

- Allen, R.T. & Baruchello, G. (2010). Life Responsibility versus Mechanical Reductionism: Western World-views of nature from pantheism to positivism. In J. McMurtry (ed.), *Philosophy and World Problems*, vol. III, 80–105. Paris & Oxford: Encyclopedia of life support systems.
- Baruchello, G. (2010). Western Philosophy and the Life-ground. In J. McMurtry (ed.), *Philosophy and World Problems*, vol. III, 1–79. Paris & Oxford: Encyclopedia of life support systems.
- Baruchello, G. (2017a). *Mortals, Money, and Masters of Thought. Collected philosophical essays*. Gatineau, Québec: Northwest Passage Books.
- Baruchello, G. (2017b). *Philosophy of Cruelty. Collected philosophical essays*. Gatineau, Québec: Northwest Passage Books.
- Baruchello, G. (2018a). *The Business of Life and Death, Volume I: Values and Economies. Collected philosophical essays*. Gatineau, Québec: Northwest Passage Books.
- Baruchello, G. (2018b). *The Business of Life and Death, Volume II: Politics, Law, and Society. Collected philosophical essays*. Gatineau, Québec: Northwest Passage Books.

- Baruchello, G. (2019). *Thinking and Talking. Collected philosophical essays*. Gatineau, Québec: Northwest Passage Books.
- Baruchello, G. & Arnarsson A.M. (2021). Sophistication and Superiority: An Appraisal of “True Humour.” *Appraisal* 13(1–2), 13–21.
- Baer, J.W. (1984). The Great Depression Humor of Galbraith, Leacock, and Mencken. *Studies in American Humor* series 2 3(2–3): 220–227.
- Barthes, R. (1988). The Old Rhetoric: An aide-mémoire. In R. Barthes, *The Semiotic Challenge*, 11–94. New York: Hill & Wang.
- Bernstein, M. & Sekera, J. (eds) (2018) *Real-world Economics Review* 84: Special issue on the public economy and a new public economics.
<http://www.paecon.net/PAERreview/issue84/whole84.pdf> [11.08.2022].
- Bishop, J.D. (1995). Adam Smith’s Invisible Hand Argument. *Journal of Business Studies* 14(3): 165–180.
- Block, F.L. (2017). *Capitalism: The future of an illusion*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Boldizzoni, F. (2011). *The Poverty of Clio: Resurrecting economic history*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Bowles, K. (2021). When Kuznets Went to Rome: Roman Economic Well-Being and the Reframing of Roman History. *Capitalism: A Journal of History and Economics* 2(1): 7–40.
- Calvo, P. (2018). *The Cordial Economy – Ethics, recognition and reciprocity*. Cham: Springer.
- Castoriadis, C. (2005). The “Rationality” of Capitalism. In C. Castoriadis, *Figures of the Thinkable*, 81–122. <http://www.notbored.org/FTPK.pdf> [11.08.2022].
- Cecchetti, S.G., Mohanty, M.S. & Zampolli, F. (2011). The Real Effects of Debt, BIS working papers, no. 352. <http://www.bis.org/publ/work352.htm> [11.08.2022].
- ChristianChat (2015). Iceland builds first temple to Norse gods since Viking age.
<https://christianchat.com/christian-news-forum/iceland-to-build-first-temple-to-norse-gods-since-viking-age.107396/#post-1888626> [11.08.2022].
- Cipolla, C. (1952). *Mouvements monétaires dans l’Etat de Milan: 1580–1700*. Paris: Colin.
- Cipolla, C. (1962). *The Economic History of World Populations*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Cipolla, C. (1965). *Guns, Sails and Empires: Technological innovation and the early phases of European expansion 1400–1700*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Cipolla, C. (1969). *Literacy and Development in the West*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Cipolla, C. (1988). *Allegro ma non troppo*. Bologna: Il mulino.
- Cipolla, C. (1992a). *Miasmas and Disease: Public health and the environment in the pre-industrial age*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

- Cipolla, C. (1992b). *Between Two Cultures: An introduction to economic history*. New York: Norton.
- Cipolla, C. (2011). *The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity*. Bologna: Il mulino.
- Cipolla, C. (2012a). *Pepper, Wine (and Wool): As the Dynamic Factors of the Social and Economic Development of the Middle Ages*. Bologna: Il mulino.
- Cipolla, C. (2012b). *Les lois fondamentales de la stupidité humaine*. Paris: PUF.
- Cipolla, C. (2017). *Las máquinas del tiempo y de la guerra. Estudios sobre la génesis del capitalismo*. Barcelona: Editorial crítica, Libros de historia.
- Coyne, L.D. (2018). A Defence of Hans Jonas' Critique of Modernity and Ethic of Responsibility. PhD. University of Exeter. <http://hdl.handle.net/10871/32483> [11.08.2022].
- Dostoevsky, F.M. (1983). *Notes from the Underground*. New York: Bantam.
- Dworkin, R. (2011). *Justice for Hedgehogs*. Cambridge & London: Belknap.
- Friedman, M. (1962). *Capitalism and Freedom*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Friedman, M. & R. (1980). *Free to Choose. A personal statement*. New York & PBS TV broadcasting, episodes 1–10.
- Galbraith, J.K. (1999). The Commitment to Innocent Fraud. *Challenge* 42(5): 16–20.
- Galbraith, J.K. (2004). *The Economics of Innocent Fraud. Truth for our time*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Gilfillan, S.C. (1965). Lead Poisoning and the Fall of Rome. *Journal of Occupational Medicine* 7(2): 53–60.
- Glasser, H. (ed.) (2005). *The Selected Works of Arne Næss*, volumes 1–10. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Goethe, J.W. von (2002). *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Mineola: Dover.
- Gordon, J.S. & Burckhart, H. (2017). *Global Ethics and Moral Responsibility. Hans Jonas and his critics*. London: Routledge.
- Heidegger, M. (1977). *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. New York: Harper.
- Hodgson, B. (ed.) (2004). *The Invisible Hand and the Common Good*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- House of Commons' Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee (HC) (2013). Food contamination, vol. 1 (fifth report of session 2013–2014, incorporating HC 1035-i-ii, session 2012-2013). London: The Stationery Office.
- House of Lords' Select Committee on Economic Affairs (HL) (2013). Tackling corporate tax avoidance in a global economy: Is a new approach needed? (first report of Session 2013–2014). London: The Stationery Office.
- Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) (2013). Food expenditure and nutritional quality over the Great Recession (IFS briefing note BN143). <http://www.ifs.org.uk/bns/bn143.pdf> [11.08.2022].

- International Labour Organization (ILO) (2013). *Public Sector Shock: The impact of policy retrenchment in Europe*. Geneva: ILO.
- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (2014). *Climate Change 2014*, Synthesis report. Contribution of working groups I, II and III to the fifth assessment report of the intergovernmental panel on climate change. Geneva: IPCC.
- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (2018). Global Warming of 1.5°C. <http://www.ipcc.ch/report/sr15/> [11.08.2022].
- Jonas, H. (1969). Philosophical Reflections on Experimenting with Human Subjects. *Daedalus* 98(2): 219–247.
- Jonas, H. (1984). *The Imperative of Responsibility. In search of an ethics for the technological age*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Jonas, H. (1993). Il razzismo. In H. Jonas, *Il concetto di Dio dopo Auschwitz. Una voce ebraica*. Genoa: Il melangolo.
- Jonas, H. (2008). *Memoirs*. Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press.
- Kant, I. (1993). *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Kant, I. (1997). *Critique of Practical Reason*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Kielkopf, C. (1997). Masturbation: A Kantian condemnation. *Philosophia* 25: 223–246.
- Lodi, D. (2019). Le rivelazioni di Carlo M. Cipolla. *Homolaicus*. <https://www.homolaicus.com/letteratura/cipolla.htm> [11.08.2022].
- Mackenzie, S. (2006). Situationally Edited Empathy: An effect of socio-economic structure on individual choice. *Critical Criminology* 14(4): 365–385.
- Massarenti, A. (2011). Irresistibile spirito di Cipolla. *Il Sole 24 Ore*. https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/cultura/2011-10-21/irresistibile-spirito-cipolla-182530.shtml?refresh_ce=1 [11.08.2022].
- Maclay, K. (2000). UC Berkeley Professor Emeritus and noted economic historian Carlo Cipolla dies in Italy following long illness. *Campus News – Media Relations*. https://www.berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2000/09/13_cipolla.html [11.08.2022].
- McMurtry, J. (2010). What is Good? What is Bad? The value of all values through time, place and theories. In J. McMurtry (ed.), *Philosophy and World Problems*, vols. I–II. Paris & Oxford: Encyclopedia of life support systems.
- McMurtry, J. (2013). *The Cancer Stage of Capitalism. From crisis to cure*. London: Pluto.
- Mini, P.V. (1974). *Philosophy and Economics. The Origins and Development of Economic Theory*. Gainesville: The University Presses of Florida.

- Morris, T. (2013). *Hans Jonas' Ethic of Responsibility. From ontology to ecology*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Myers, B. (2017). *Reclaiming Civilization. A case for optimism for the future of humanity. A study of the sacred: Part Three*. Gatineau, Québec: Northwest Passage Books.
- Nielsen-Sikora, J. (2017). *Hans Jonas. Für Freiheit und Verantwortung*. Darmstadt: WBG.
- Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2013). Crisis squeezes income and puts pressure on inequality and poverty. <http://www.oecd.org/els/soc/OECD2013-Inequality-and-Poverty-8p.pdf> [11.08.2022].
- Oslington, P. (2011). *Adam Smith as Theologian*. London: Routledge.
- Pareto, V. (1935). *The Mind and Society*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Parkin, M., Powell, M. & Matthews, K. (2008). *Economics*. 7th ed. Harlow: Addison-Wesley.
- Polanyi, M. (1962). *Personal Knowledge. Towards a post-critical philosophy*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Rogan, T. (2017). *The Moral Economists: R.H. Tawney, Karl Polanyi, E.P. Thompson, and the critique of capitalism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Rorty, R. (1989). *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press.
- Scanlon, T.M. (2018). *Why Does Inequality Matter?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sen, A. (1985). *Commodities and Capabilities*. Amsterdam: North-Holland.
- Sloman, J. (2006). *Economics*. 6th ed. Harlow: Prentice Hall.
- Smith, A. (1982). *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Vol. I of the Glasgow edition of the works and correspondence of Adam Smith. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.
- Spencer, H. (1960). *The Man versus the State*. Caldwell: The Caxton Press.
- Summers, L.H. (1991). The Memo. <http://www.whirledbank.org/ourwords/summers.html> [11.08.2022].
- Thornton, M. (2009). Cantillon and the Invisible Hand. *Quarterly Journal of Austrian Economics*. 12(2): 27–46.
- Tirosh-Samuels, H. & Wiese, C. (2008). *The Legacy of Hans Jonas: Judaism and the phenomenon of life*. Leiden: Brill.
- Trust for America's Health (TFAH) (2011). F as in fat. How obesity threatens America's future. <http://healthyamericans.org/reports/obesity2011/Obesity2011Report.pdf> [11.08.2022].
- United Nations (UN) (2012). Political declaration of the high-level meeting of the General Assembly on the prevention and control of non-communicable diseases (adopted 24 Jan. 2012, G.A. Res. 66/2, U.N. GAOR, 66th Sess., Agenda item 117, U.N. Doc. A/RES/66/2).

- Utz, A.F. (1994). *Wirtschaftsethik*. Bonn: Scientia Humana Institut.
- Vitoria, F. de (1917). *De indis et de iure bellis reflectiones*. Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution of Washington.
- Vogel, L. (2006). Natural Law Judaism? The genesis of bioethics in Hans Jonas, Leo Strauss, and Leon Kass. *Hastings Center Report* 36(3): 32–44.
- Wattles, J. (1966). *The Golden Rule*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Williams, R. (2013) Financial meltdown was caused by too many bankers taking cocaine, says former drugs tsar Prof David Nutt. *The Independent*.
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/financial-meltdown-was-caused-by-too-many-bankers-taking-cocaine-says-former-government-drugs-tsar-prof-davidnutt-8572948.html> [11.08.2022].
- World Health Organization (WHO) (2017). Noncommunicable diseases progress monitor. Country profiles 2017. <http://www.who.int/nmh/publications/ncd-progress-monitor-2017/en/> [11.08.2022].