

DJ Spinoza

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I used to have arguments with some economists about how one would model people of limited rationality. The economists in question assumed that because you can't work out what somebody smarter than you is thinking (otherwise you'd be that smart), your mental model of other people's minds must be that they're either as smart as you or less so. If I can think forward three moves in Chess, I must assume that everybody else thinks ahead three or fewer moves. But this is often not the case: Kasparov can play against Deep Blue, and he knows that Deep Blue is looking further ahead.

But the question of what Kasparov is thinking remains. He is not just assuming that Deep Blue is exactly as smart as he is, but has to take some sort of action knowing that he doesn't know enough. If I were Kasparov, and I'm guessing that you're with me on this to some extent, I'd just put Deep Blue out of my head and try to play the best darn Chess game I can. Anyway, there's no point guessing what Deep Blue is thinking because a computer doesn't really think in any human sense of the term.

On to Theology My premise for all theological questions is this: we are dumb.

Our senses are crappy, our brains are in some ways impressive but easily screw up when adding a column of numbers, and as a collective we can barely get bond referenda passed. And with these string-and-duct-tape tools, we're supposed to develop an understanding of the motivations and underlying machinery of our existence and our surroundings.

Premise D (we are dumb) takes seriously the standard claim that the average theologian gives about how " is infinite and incomprehensible. To some extent, this is axiomatic—no, wait, it isn't. Baruch Spinoza derived it from other axioms over several steps in his *Ethics*. The most famous snippet from the *Ethics* is a proof that, for appropriate definitions of *God* and *Nature*, God and Nature are identical.

Baruch basically cut to the chase on the Socratic approach. Socrates was famous for asking people to motivate their motivations. E.g., "You're a baker? Why? You like giving people good food, why? Why do you like to see other people happy?" The other party would eventually break down into confessing that he or she has no idea what their underlying motivations are, and the whole thing was eventually resolved by putting Socrates to death. Spinoza's

treatise skipped the endless questions and posited that there is something that is the fundamental cause of all things, which itself has no prior cause. Let this fundamental cause be represented by the term *God*.

The trouble with infinite and incomprehensible So if this *God* substance is infinite and incomprehensible, and by Spinoza's definition can not be explained via other elements, then it's basically impossible for losers like us to understand His/Her/Its internal motivations.

The easy course is to posit that there's some Guy who has created us all, whom we look like, and who is generally like we are, but generally wiser. The same people who say that their deity is incomprehensible and infinite are happy to put a face and a beard and simple human motivations on the guy. Taking a line from Spinoza's *Ethics*, "[...] those who confuse the two natures, divine and human, readily attribute human passions to the deity [...]"

The White Beard story is an attempt to get around the premise that we have cognitive abilities on a too-piddling scale to get any of this. By positing a deity who is just like we are but cooler, we can apply all of our quotidian reasoning. We can take the standard story (bad person does bad things, good person does good things, events happen, and in the end bad person is punished and good person rewarded) and apply it on the cosmic scale to grand questions of the human condition and such. It's really easy, but it throws out infinite and incomprehensible, and flies in the face of Premise D.

The basis of the White Beard story is Genesis 1:27, about how man was made in His image, which by the most literal interpretation possible means that the eternal creator of the universe has arms, legs, lungs that breathe sea-level air, et cetera. Maimonides takes this non-literally to mean that Man has an intellect that can conceive of things and then build them; others similarly take verse 27 to indicate that there are divine characteristics that Man has that dirt and trees don't have.[Spinoza, for his part, will have none of it: "For intellect and will, which should constitute the essence of God, ... would have nothing in common with [the human intellect and will] but the name; there would be about as much correspondence between the two as there is between the Dog, the heavenly constellation, and a dog, an animal that barks."]

Frankly, HP Lovecraft probably did a better job of picturing the infinite and incomprehensible than the the best of the White Beard storytellers. Lovecraft's monsters were gigantic, barely describable in human terms, had absolutely no motivation that the narrators could work out, and made the trees sway without wind.

Atheism? Also ignores Premise D, but in a different way, saying 'I can't imagine anything on a theological scale beyond the White Beard stories, so I'll assume away the problem by stating with confidence that there's nothing there.' It's like Kasparov insisting that, since he can't prove anything about his opponent, the pieces must be moving of their own accord.

No, Premise D does not imply Nihilism, nor does it imply Agnosticism. Nihilism would say 'I know there is nothing beyond what I see', which I take as

overconfident; Agnosticism would say ‘I don’t know’, which I take as underconfident. Here, I am saying ‘I am absolutely certain that I have no clue’.

My position raises the hard questions that Nihilism, Atheism, and company all raise: if there’s no Guy With White Beard telling you what to do, how do you develop your ethics? How do I draw a chain from the substance that has no predecessor and motivates all else to what I should have for lunch?

Nobody takes the approach of having no ethics at all. Even Objectivists have certain principles of what is Good. Some take a minimal-regret approach—Pascal’s wager, presuming that you may as well behave as if the White Beard story is true, because there’s some chance that it really is. Nobody takes this to its logical extreme, which would be to simultaneously subscribe to multiple, contradictory religions, just in case it’s not Jehovah, but Oshun or Vishnu that wins you the jackpot. My own approach has been more along the intersection of the various religions of the world, which all have a few principles of trying to be nice to each other, and leaving it at that. This is frankly as much a cop-out as any other approach.

Politics We find failures of Premise D among many of the world’s leaders, for millennia. It is almost requisite. Any leader has to convince his/her/its followers that the leader knows more, is wiser, or is otherwise more capable than the followers—and no better way to do that than to claim that you’ve got a hot-line to the Heavens. This is nothing new to you, and you are well-aware that all of human history including the present is filled with people who claimed to have found a loophole in Premise D who then beat up on other people who made the same claim.

As you are no doubt aware, Spinoza’s writings produced all sorts of annoyance among the powers-that-be, and led to Spinoza’s excommunication. [See Wikipedia.] But hey, he did better than Socrates did when he called people out on their ignorance and the arbitrary nature of their social and private existence. The lesson from these lives is that the harshest possible critique is not ‘you are wrong’ but ‘there is no right answer.’