

The capricious gods counterattack: on what the empirical method and the rational gods model miss.

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Introduction

The cosmos, as described by Greek poetic tradition, develops following the desires of capricious gods. Out of the blue, Poseidon can send wind and change the course of the Trojan war. The Presocratics, however, through the postulation of physical explanations, started to change this worldview. Instead of gods, material stuff – even if sometimes divinely conceived – explains what happens in the world. The new approach marks the first, if tumbling, steps towards a scientific method in the Western tradition.

In the following, I argue that regularity provides a more illuminating criterion to confront these views. The main reason is that rational gods, just like material explanations, suit regular events. Nevertheless, both approaches fail to account for events that fall outside what is normal by a large margin. Based on this insufficiency, I defend a more positive assessment of the capricious gods worldview.

Heavy vs regular

Epic poetry earned the adjective didactic also because it describes events that supposedly had a long-lasting impact on the way the world is, at least, as experienced by its audiences.¹

¹I am using didactic loosely to include Homer, in line with how the Presocratics saw him. See Xenophanes B10 and Heraclitus B57. Sider (2014) provides a deeper investigation of didactic poetry strictly defined as poetry in which there is a clear intention to teach something.

The Trojan war constituted the societal organization of the Greek world and the Titanomachy, the cosmic arrangement. These events are extraordinary in type. They are not part of the quotidian.² Moreover, the selected tokens among extraordinary events are extreme in size. The Trojan war was no average conflict.

The practices of the Milesians, the first generation of Presocratic philosophers, focus on a whole different type of event. A relevant part of their approach depended on making meteorological observations, notations and measurements to identify regularities.³ Their attention is on what happens frequently and without much variation. Thales, for instance, through his anecdotal habit of observing the sky was able to propose a more accurate calendar of solstices in Greece.⁴

Both approaches end up providing a causal explanation for a current state of the world, but to do so, each one relies on a different type of event.⁵ The extreme and extraordinary events picked up by poetry convey a turning-point out of which a current state of affairs arose while the regular and average events observed by the Milesians are themselves the constituents of a recurring state of affairs. To put it more clearly,

- Heavy events: History bending occurrences which are odd in comparison to the quotidian and huge in comparison to other occurrences of the same type.
- Regular events: Ordinary occurrences without much variation between tokens which constitute most of the everyday experience.

Sources

In poetry, capricious gods feature as the origin of heavy events. The god category is vaguely grounded on that of person.⁶ A god shares some of the usual but imprecise defining properties of a person. Moreover, the grounding occurs through hyperbolic analogy.⁷ Whatever

²Even if wars were frequent in Ancient Greece, they were not part of the normal state of affairs.

³Gorgias (*Encomium of Helen* B11.13) calls them *Metheorologicoi* while Aristotle prefers *physiologikoi*. Also, he famously claimed that they conflated thinking with perceiving (*Metaphysics* 1009b14-5.).

⁴See White (2008) for a more detailed discussion on the Milesians and horizontal astronomy.

⁵The Greeks should not be taken to be pioneers in either realm. The divine narratives underlying the epic cycle repeat patterns of older neighbouring traditions (Burkert, 1992). Concerning astronomy, the influence of Babylonian and Egyptian cultures is testified since the Ancient commentators and widely accepted (Guthrie, 1996). The following investigation has a general aim and the Ancient Greeks qualify as a particularly revealing case study.

⁶Mourelatos (2008) identifies the use of personification of most items in the cosmos as a sign of the earlier stage of reflecting about what type of things play a fundamental role in the world.

⁷For a deeper study of analogical reasoning see Lloyd (2017).

the chosen properties are, when applied to gods, they occur in a degree extreme enough to render them inaccessible to humans.

Centuries of philosophical investigation failed to produce a standard set of the defining properties of a person. For us, a loose identification of the kind of property characterizing the capriciousness of the gods suffices. Humans intervene in the world by acting. Each person has introspective access to what compels them to act, most prominently, a plethora of motivational states including wills, desires, and emotions. Once the hyperbolic qualification is added to these motivational states and to the power to intervene in the world, a paradigm for capricious gods arises. These will-motivated hyper humans are ready to provide a causal explanation for the heavy events punctuating the history of the world in epic poetry.⁸

The Milesians rely on the category of thing to posit their staple explanans for what happens in the world. They arrive at a constitutive model of the world in which the material constitution explains the causal chain of events that we regularly experience. Their approach provides a natural explanation for why there is so much repetition in the world. Because the constitution provides the causal explanation, whenever the same constitution occurs the same causal chain follows.⁹ More generally, we have a regularity-centred approach consisting of prediction models based on observational data about regularities which are then explained by the material constitution.¹⁰

Application

The practical strength of a regularity-centred approach lies in increasing the scope of what is seen as regular. Honours are not reserved for those predicting that the sun will rise tomorrow. Accordingly, Thales became famous for predicting rarer events such as eclipses.¹¹ Both the precision and consequences of his predictions are exaggerated, however, the general accom-

⁸A wink in his nostrils, and Zeus can change the destiny of the world. There are several examples in poetry. As Blickman (1987) points out, the wrath of Apollo causing the Plague in the *Illiad* (*Menis* in 1.75) reminds the reader of the wrath of Achilles (1.1).

⁹According to Moravcsik (1991), in this model the behaviour of an entity is explained by its constitution. The constituents can be seen as parts, stuff or ingredients. These distinctions are not defined, what is important is that the same behaviour implies, to some extent, having the same ingredient.

¹⁰Most of the literature on the Milesians consists of attempts to have a more determinate understanding of the material constituent. Here, I take the other path and focus on the observational method.

¹¹And for the practical results of these predictions, such as leading to a victory in war (Herodotus 1.74, A5).

plishment of the new trend should not be diminished.¹² Observation, measurements, and a coordinated effort between different generations and cultures sharing a common approach allowed them to reveal regularity on what appeared to be random. An optimistic attitude follows. The revelation of further hidden regularities is just a matter of making more observations.¹³

Despite its explanatory power and practical success, a regularity-centred approach fails to provide a suitable explanation for events that deviate from the norm by a large margin. Observing seasonal cycles may ascertain a regular increase in the number of insects during the spring, but it fails to explain a plague. In these cases, capricious gods – powerful in their actions and unpredictable in their motives – still provide a more suiting hypothesis.¹⁴

An assessment of the practical value of a model based on capricious agents depends on the attitudes it prompts. Since the heavy events, their size, and consequences are, by definition, unexpected, joint efforts should not be spent in seeking hidden patterns.¹⁵ Instead of optimism, traditional poetry stresses human helplessness in regard to the caprices of the gods. Uncertainty fosters prudence. Humans can never know what might provoke heavy reactions of a capricious god. Accordingly, piety emerges as the practical behaviour associated with this worldview. A proper understanding of piety requires a comparison with another type of god.

Rational gods

The Milesian approach became hugely influential in the generations to come. However, despite their preference for material explanations, the postulation of gods as causal explanans does not vanish.¹⁶ Many philosophers found a way to conceive divinities in order to fit a

¹²Of course, regular events feature in didactic poetry as well. After all, the poets dealt with agriculture. Hesiod sang about the measure of the solstices. However, concerning regularities, the traditional knowledge was no competitor for the new approach.

¹³See Long (2021). For him, by bringing events such as earthquakes to the scope of empirical intelligibility, the Presocratics were able to control them both intellectually and emotionally.

¹⁴Moravcsik (1991) notes that the constituent model does not work with vast forces of nature or human prowess. However, he does not point out that it is the capriciousness, rather than personification, that provides a suitable explanation for heavy events. See the comparison with the rational gods model below.

¹⁵There were, of course, the soothsayers who claimed to be a trustworthy source of knowledge about the capricious gods. Theirs seems to be a knowledge-how characterized by the acquaintance with the will of particular gods. However, as we shall see, since the desires may abruptly change, even if they had infallible access to the information it would not suffice to cease the uncertainty about the future. This is in line with Euripides famous lines in *Helen* 744: ‘the good prophet is one skilled in conjecture’.

¹⁶In the Milesians there are references to divinities. Nevertheless, they are closely linked with a materialist approach since the divine usually stands for the capacity of a constituent to work as an inextinguishable and self-

regularity-centred worldview. They took advantage of the vagueness concerning the defining properties of a person. Besides emotions, humans also make rational decisions. The same reasoning leads to the same decision. In human experience, there is room for variability. Ours is a fallible rationality, after all. Nevertheless, the hyperbolic analogy comes to the rescue. Gods are hyper-persons, therefore – once rationality is chosen as the defining property – they should have perfect rationality.¹⁷ Thus, a rational god provides a divinity-based source for the regularity of the cosmos. Again, perceived irregularities are not a fact of the world, but only a collective epistemic failure due to human rationality falling short of the divine one.

Objective moralization

The rational god hypothesis sets the basis for further consequences. Theoretically, divine reason becomes the perfect arbitrator for what is good. On the practical side, gratification and punishment wait for those who follow or not the divine normativity.¹⁸ Thus, the appearance that the gods play with human destinies is explained away by an epistemic failure of grasping the perfect reason and acting accordingly. An objective moralization of religion follows.¹⁹ Tragedies are explained as a disruptive culmination of the mounting sum of wrongs committed by a corrupted society. In the *Timaeus* 22d, Plato characterizes floods as divine purgations. The attitude that follows is

- Objective-list piety: a perfect reason holds the real values grounding the norms of behaviour. Rewards and punishment follow the success or failure to act accordingly.

In objective-list piety, there is a clear set of values to be observed. As such, piety can be reducible to prudence since moral failure comes from defying what is advisable. The scenario where there are capricious gods entices a whole different attitude.

propelling source of regular movement.

¹⁷Plato offers the strongest example of a rational god view among the ancient Greek philosophers. It is interesting to notice, however, that even in Xenophanes – a harsh critic of the human tendency to anthropomorphize gods – the concept of a perfect divine reason is derived, even if unconsciously (see B23), by hyperbolic analogy to human reason (see B24 and B25).

¹⁸Gratification and punishment may come after death. The extrapolation is a necessary, and rather convenient, way to counter the evidence that several immoral individuals appear to live successful lives.

¹⁹See Anscombe (1958) who claims that in the moral context ‘should’ acquires the sense of ‘is bound’ and ‘is lawfully obliged’. To do so, she thinks that we need the figure of god as a lawgiver, as in the Christian tradition in contrast with Greek religion. However, the hypothesis of a god whose perfect reason grounds the normativity for human action suffices for such a conception, as the portrayal of after-death judgments in Platonic myths make clear (see *Gorgias* 524a).

- Helpless piety: Even if humans had direct access to the gods, they should stay humble. Because desires are not constant, every situation might change unexpectedly.

Since tragedies might befall even the most prudent agents, helpless piety provides a unique description of piety. Uncertainty is humbling. The pious agent shall become over-zealous towards the capricious god, expect no gratification, accept what comes, and, at best, tentatively try to correct a given situation.

A new division

The previous reflection recommends using regularity as a criterion of division instead of a distinction between matter-based versus person-based models. After all, matter-based and rational gods models share the intuition that events occur in regular chains and that the perceived irregularities arise from epistemic fallibility. In opposition to that, a model with capricious gods accepts and explains the occurrence of random events heavy enough to constitute turning points in the history of the cosmos. The new division calls for a fairer appreciation of the capricious gods. If the events in the world are not reducible to short-term and long-term regularities, abandoning a capriciousness prone approach leads to an insufficient understanding of reality.²⁰

The two approaches in the new division do not necessarily exclude each other. There may well have two non-overlapping types of events in the world requiring different explanatory tools.²¹ However, in practice, regularity-centred models tend to become all-encompassing. Since it concerns what is ordinary, the focus on regularity will suit most perceived events. Moreover, it allows for unveiling unnoticed regularities. After some successes, the temptation to generalize sets in. Aristotle, for instance, assumed that seas become dry land and vice versa in regular cycles.²² Random events cease to be part of the furniture of the world.

The same tendency occurs in rational gods models. In principle, one could have both constant and capricious gods providing distinct causes for distinct types of events. Nevertheless, given the objective moralization of religion, the proponents of rational gods present harsh

²⁰Of course, the field is open to alternative models that may be based on physical items or laws. Lucretius (*De Rerum Natura*, 2.218-9) famously suggested the swerve of the atoms to justify some level of cosmic indeterminacy. Nevertheless, the postulation has the feeling of a *deus ex machina*.

²¹For instance, in polytheistic religions, it is common to have divinities with different personalities, some are more constant and reliable while others are pranksters.

²²See *Meteorologica* I.14. Fossilized fishes found inland provided the evidence for an aquatic previous state. However, the regularity was certainly an assumption.

criticisms on any attribution of capriciousness to the gods.²³ The lack of caprice creates a blind spot to what falls outside the norm.

Conclusion

Instead of wrapping up the results of a short piece, these last lines offer a tentative suggestion. According to the big gods hypothesis, moralizing deities who punish ethical transgressions play a key role in reinforcing human cooperation. Hence, a religion with a big god is instrumental in the development of complex societies.²⁴ This hypothesis has been questioned recently.²⁵ Evidence suggests that big moralizing gods emerge after and not before the complexification.²⁶ Factors such as wars and accessibility of resources seem to bear a closer connection with rising and falling complex societies.

Wars and drastic resource depletion follow heavy-tailed distributions, that is, a body of events in which rare outliers are big enough to distort the mean of the whole.²⁷ The distortion invalidates the use of the most popular statistical tools to deal with random events.²⁸ For instance, if one gathers all the occurrences of wars in the history of humanity and find the mean number of deaths, that number will offer a misleading estimate of the fatality rate of a war to come. The mean was influenced by the outliers. Since these are rare, it is unlikely that the next occurrence will compare to them. Since these are heavy, if the next occurrence is an outlier, the consequences will be much more serious than the distorted average.

Regularity-centred models will not work to make predictions or estimates.²⁹ The advised way to deal with a potential catastrophic event is a zero-risk attitude. However, it is not easy

²³The earlier critiques appear in Xenophanes (B11, B12), but, the most developed ones occur in Plato (Republic, 381bd).

²⁴The punishment of philosophers who disrespected traditional religion, such as Socrates and Anaxagoras, might convey some awareness of the social role of religious belief. Interesting enough, attributing capricious behaviours to the gods was not seen as impious.

²⁵For the big god hypothesis see Norenzayan (2015). For the recent critiques see the works from the Seshat project such as Turchin et al. (2019) and Whitehouse et al. (2019).

²⁶In Greece, the cult of Zeus begins as a pastoral rite but, as Laky (2021) argues, adaptations occur as the structure of the society changes. Evidence can be seen in the use of epithets such as *agorai* Zeus, which the organization of the *polis*.

²⁷The way in which heavy events occur follows the so-called catastrophe principle.

²⁸For instance, the law of large numbers according to which increasing the sample increases the power of predictability of the model. See Taleb (2014).

²⁹For something really bad to happen in normal distributions, that is, a body of events whose occurrences do not deviate that much from the mean, you need a sum of a lot of occurrences that are above average. In the case of heavy events, however, one disruptive occurrence suffices to cause disruption. It will, of course, seem to come out of nowhere.

to advocate for it. Heavy events are rare, so people are expected to adopt self-constraining behaviour based on unavailable observed evidence. To make the perils more vivid, older generations who experienced heavy events might want to find a way to convey this information for the generations to come. Storytelling might work.³⁰ Again, because of the rarity, no foreseeable gratification for the self-constraining behaviour is available. If so, piety, that is, prudence plus a humbling recognition of uncertainty might reinforce the right attitude. According to the previous discussion, capricious gods – and not a big or moralizing one – are better for motivating piety.³¹ Thus, capriciousness might be a side of religiosity playing a non-negligible role in the avoidance of catastrophes by long-lasting societies.³² Time has come to add another footnote to Plato, who was among the strongest defenders of rational gods, and notice that “yet, they are capricious...”

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³⁰We have seen the case of epic poems, but it might be just gathering around the fire to tell stories and perform dancing narratives.

³¹According to Watts et al. (2015), in Austronesia there were no high gods preceding the evolution of political complexity, however, he identifies the presence of broad supernatural punishment. The proposal here goes one step further in abandoning also the notion of punishment. Societies must watch out for unseen catastrophes that may come out of a divine source without the requirement of a moral justification.

³²Of course, this is just one among an incommensurable amount of effects. There is no hope in reducing the social complexity of religion to one adaptive reason.

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