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ANTHROPOMORPHISM IN THE SEARCH FOR EXTRA-TERRESTRIAL INTELLIGENCE

Abstract

The question “Are we alone ?” lingers in the human mind since ancient times. Early human civilisations populated the heavens above with a multitude of Gods endowed with some all too human characteristics – from their outer appearance to their innermost motivations. En passant they created thereby their own cultural founding myths on which they built their understanding of the world and its phenomena and deduced as well rules for the functioning of their own society. Advancing technology has enabled us to conduct this human quest for knowledge with more scientific means: optical and radio-wavelengths are being monitored for messages by an extra-terrestrial intelligence and active messaging attempts have also been undertaken. Scenarios have been developed for a possible detection of extra-terrestrial intelligence and post-detection guidelines and protocols have been elaborated. The human responses to the whole array of questions concerning the potential existence, discovery of and communication/ interaction with an extra-terrestrial intelligence share as one clear thread a profound anthropomorphism, which ascribes classical human behavioural patterns also to an extra-terrestrial intelligence in much the same way as our ancestors attributed comparable conducts to mythological figures. This paper aims at pinpointing this thread in a number of classical reactions to basic questions related to the search for extra-terrestrial intelligence. Many of these reactions are based on human motives such as curiosity and fear, rationalised by experience and historical analogy and modelled in the Science Fiction Culture by literature and movies. Scrutinising the classical hypothetical explanations of the Fermi paradox under the angle of a potentially undue anthropomorphism, this paper intends to assist in understanding our human epistemological limitations in the search for extra-terrestrial intelligence and to give an impetus for attempting to transcend our anthropocentric understanding in order to imagine something so different.