

A brief history of human intelligence

The universal challenge.

After six millennia, the human race aborted its search for extraterrestrial life and declared itself the Galaxy's smartest creature. The celebration that followed would have lasted considerably longer than a year, had it not been spoiled by a careful librarian.

In the margin of a copy of Horvath's *Transitional Matters* once owned by Polyfant, the great eighty-second-century naturalist, was an inscription: *With sufficient observation all systems demonstrate intelligence.*

Fascinating proof!

Never one to walk away from a contest, the human race set to work scouring old data for the impossible — an equal.

The first support of Polyfant's theorem came with the discovery of a music score encoded in five centuries of solar-flare data for Sirius B. In a style not dissimilar to a tarantella, *A Dog Star Howls* unseated Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* as the most recognized piece of music among terrestrial and non-terrestrial adults aged 18–35. Its popularity lasted decades until its overuse in Bollywood dance numbers rendered it quite intolerable.

Later that year, the colony of Udall B noted that the thermal currents of its mercuric lakes bore striking similarities to a toddler's scribbles. Estimates indicated that just before a local Wolf-Rayet went supernova, the metallic pools would be able to print their names or at least draw a decent circle.

Using polar probes and hundreds of kilometres of cable, the conductance variance of Proteus showed Neptune's moon to be quite chatty. The translated recordings

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were collected in the classic *Conversations with a Rock*, which was subsequently removed from many libraries and school

curricula owing to its hydrophobic remarks. Unfortunately, the monologue proved insufficient for conservation status for the satellite, and all communication ceased once mining began.

In a study that shook science to its core, Armagan demonstrated that the difference between observed and predicted β -decay in a sample of uranium-237 contained commentary on such topics as blackjack strategy and tornado formation. Sensitized to the potential of hidden consciousness within aberrant outcomes, this work led to the popular phrase of scientific papers and grant applications: *either our methods were flawed, our hypothesis was wrong, or we discovered a novel probabilistic intelligence.*

Confronted with the ubiquity of the very thing humans had presumed made them unique, the human race approached the precipice of existential despair.

Philosophers and public-relations teamed up to reframe humanity in new ways:

Human beings — the only known mid-sized waterbag with above average cognition.

Let's see Pluto try to write Hamlet!

And, Mankind, we invented golf.

Despite mastery of space travel, terraforming and dispersion across the Milky Way, such efforts proved futile. The human race entered its third Dark Age. People awoke each morning believing their thoughts to be banal and trite compared with the orchestral genius of their crackling rice cereal. The birth rate dropped, antidepressant use soared and euthanasia clinics became a boom industry.

The salvation to this plummeting self-esteem arrived with a corollary to Polyfant's theorem: *intelligence can be found anywhere given sufficient time and a sufficiently intelligent observer.* With that, the search for intelligence was reborn as galactic competition.

The first title of Smartest Human was awarded to Argyx of Crax for his discovery of an unbeatable tick-tack-toe opponent in

a crystal of table salt. He was unseated one week later by Maggie Phillips of Princeton, New Jersey, with her famed *Quintessence of Dust* management manual. The book united the fields of business administration and classical poetry so completely it was a wonder they had ever been separate in the first place.

Month after month, humans outdid themselves, stirring up their cities, countries and planets in frenzied pride.

Diomedes of Gilese spent a lifetime studying the refraction patterns of a particle of sand, discovering on his deathbed in 9772 that for two centuries the grain had been asking to be left alone. Diomedes the Younger subsequently found his own fame on a short-lived situation comedy co-starring his father's nemesis.

In the adjudication of Smartest Human, the Guinness Foundation faced backlash from groups believing that speed of detection was the best test of genius, whereas others felt that smallest sample size was the better metric. Yet another group picketed the foundation to agree that determination of the absence of intelligence in a particular system was the mark of superior intellect, but they were considered mostly morons and quitters.

Conflict reached its height when Carl Jenkins, aged 14, became a sovereign hero of the Scutum-Crux for his science-fair project showing the fantasy baseball aptitude of mould growth on an uneaten piece of pizza over the course of just two weeks. The 'lesser' arm of the Milky Way celebrated the discovery and sent a diplomatic contingent to London to lobby for Carl's supremacy.

In 9775, when the foundation installed the pimply adolescent as the Smartest Human, the Gilesans registered their protest by destroying Earth. This event was the beginning of the First (and last) Galactic War, most notable for the eradication of the human race and the regrettable disappearance of the telenovella art form.

Over the millennia since, heated debate ensued as to whether so-called intelligent life has ever existed at all.

On this, the Universe has no consensus. □

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