

# Divine Compression: How Brains Built Gods, Empowered Autocrats, and Created AI

Anjan Goswami

## Introduction

If you ever thought modern social media was the pinnacle of human absurdity, think again. Archaeological evidence suggests our ancestors were just as adept at spewing nonsense—they merely lacked the algorithm-boosted megaphones we call Twitter and TikTok. Instead of going viral online, they carved their questionable hot takes into stone tablets and wove them into grand myths that, somehow, people swallowed whole for millennia. Throughout human history, there's been a delightfully consistent correlation: the less we actually know, the more impressively confident we become in our spectacular bullshit.

## 1 Brains: Compression Algorithms with Anxiety

Science offers a humbling explanation for our ancestral nonsense: our brains are essentially pattern-seeking compression machines with an evolutionary aversion to randomness. Neuroscience shows us that the human brain consumes roughly 20% of our energy while comprising only 2% of our body weight—a terrible efficiency ratio that forces our neural hardware to take shortcuts. Information theory tells us that low-entropy patterns (organized, predictable information) require far less cognitive processing than high-entropy chaos (random, unpredictable information).

So what happens when primitive humans encountered, say, an inexplicable plague or a solar eclipse? Their brains, desperate to conserve precious calories, frantically searched for patterns—any pattern—even if it meant inventing invisible deities with oddly specific dietary restrictions and bedroom preferences. That's not stupidity; that's efficient neural compression at work! If you can replace "random suffering occurs for no reason whatsoever" with "the Sky Father is angry because someone ate shellfish," you've just significantly reduced your cognitive load. Congratulations on your energy-efficient delusion!

## 2 Polytheism: The Original Subscription Service

Early religious systems—from Hinduism (emerging around 1500 BCE) to Greek mythology (dating back to at least 700 BCE) and Egyptian polytheism (dating to approximately 3000

BCE)—offered a veritable buffet of divine explanations. Got a problem? There's a god for that!

It was essentially the ancient equivalent of having a different app for every minor life function. Fertility issues? Consult the reproduction deity! Bad harvest? Clearly you've offended the agriculture god! Stubbed your toe? There's probably a minor deity of doorways who's holding a grudge. In societies where the average life expectancy barely crawled past 35—assuming you survived childhood, the various plagues, and the charming habit of settling disputes via stabbing—these divine explanations weren't just comforting; they were cognitive necessities.

### **3 Ancient Wisdom and Fantastic Tales: The Original Fan Fiction**

Consider the Indian epics like the Mahabharata, composed between 400 BCE and 400 CE. These texts oscillate wildly between profound philosophical insights and what can only be described as ancient superhero fantasy. One minute you're contemplating the nature of duty and cosmic order; the next, someone's flying around in a divine chariot hurling supernatural weapons that would make Marvel's special effects team weep with inadequacy.

The fascinating part? The ancient mind didn't see any contradiction here. The same texts that ask deep questions about existence casually mention gods reincarnating like they're changing outfits. From an information theory perspective, it's brilliant—by connecting the explainable and inexplicable into one coherent narrative framework, these stories reduced overall entropy, making the entire package easier for brains to process, store, and transmit across generations.

### **4 The Monotheistic Shift: Divine Downsizing**

As societies grew more complex between 600 BCE and 600 CE, many religious systems underwent the ancient equivalent of a corporate merger. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam consolidated the crowded god marketplace into a single supreme entity—essentially the Walmart of divinity that drove smaller deity franchises out of business.

From an entropy perspective, this was an even more effective compression algorithm. Instead of memorizing hundreds of gods and their bizarre family dramas, you could now outsource all inexplicable phenomena to one convenient source. Streamlined theology, however, didn't eliminate supernatural thinking—it just centralized it. And as any tech monopoly knows, centralization offers spectacular opportunities for control. Which brings us to the next brilliant innovation...

### **5 Religion as Political Tool: The Original Mass Media**

The strategic adoption of Christianity by the Roman Empire under Constantine in the 4th century CE wasn't a spiritual awakening—it was the ancient world's most successful

marketing campaign. By the Medieval period, religious institutions had mastered the art of using low-entropy narratives to gain high-influence outcomes.

Why develop complex, energy-intensive systems of governance when you can simply tell people that an invisible, all-powerful entity wants them to obey authority and pay their tithes? It's cognitively efficient for the masses and politically expedient for the elites—a win-win for everyone except, perhaps, the occasional heretic enjoying an impromptu barbecue with themselves as the main course.

## 6 The Universal Pattern: How We're Still Doing This

The common thread throughout human history isn't that our ancestors were idiots. Archaeological evidence demonstrates they were working with the same neural hardware we have today. The difference was their information environment.

Our brains still perform the same compression tricks today—we've just gotten more sophisticated about it. When modern humans encounter high-entropy situations (economic crashes, pandemics, climate change), many still gravitate toward comfortingly low-entropy explanations: secret cabals, grand conspiracies, or the cosmic influence of which rock was closest to which other rock when you were born.

The 2012 study by Oliver and Wood found that roughly 50% of Americans endorsed at least one conspiracy theory. Why? Because "a complex system of environmental and economic factors led to this situation through emergent properties that no single entity controls" carries a much higher entropy cost than "it's all the fault of [insert convenient scapegoat here]." Our political systems exploit this mercilessly, offering appealingly simple narratives to explain complex problems—exactly as ancient priests did, just with better production values.

## 7 Modern Implications: Democracy in the Age of Complexity

If you think these cognitive shortcuts only affected ancient religious thinking, you haven't been paying attention to global politics. The last decade has witnessed a fascinating—and frankly alarming—demonstration of how our entropy-reducing brains respond when faced with unprecedented complexity.

Research in political psychology offers compelling evidence. Studies by Uscinski and Parent (2014) show that conspiracy thinking increases during periods of socioeconomic instability. Van Prooijen's work (2018) demonstrates that both extreme left and right ideologies correlate with heightened pattern perception and simplified causal thinking. Most tellingly, cognitive scientists like Kahneman have documented how our "fast thinking" system—the pattern-matching, energy-efficient part of our cognition—tends to override more deliberative reasoning when we feel threatened or overwhelmed.

Consider our current information environment: accelerating climate change, rapid technolog-

ical disruption, increasing economic inequality, demographic shifts, globalization pressures, and a pandemic—all interacting in systems far too complex for even experts to fully model. It’s essentially a perfect storm of high-entropy information, precisely the type our brains evolved to compress into simpler narratives.

Enter the modern autocrat and the charismatic populist—masterful pattern-simplifiers who offer what our anxious brains crave: low-entropy explanations for high-entropy problems. “It’s the immigrants.” “It’s the elites.” “It’s the deep state.” These aren’t just political slogans; they’re cognitive compression algorithms that transform frightening complexity into manageable villains and heroes.

The rise of right-wing authoritarian movements in established democracies isn’t merely a political phenomenon—it’s a predictable outcome of information processing under cognitive strain. Research by Stenner (2005) and later Hibbing (2014) shows that authoritarian preferences increase when people perceive threats to social cohesion. Our ancient pattern-matching machinery kicks into overdrive, seeking the cognitive efficiency of simple narratives over the messy, high-entropy reality of democratic deliberation.

Democracy itself, with its frustrating checks and balances, institutional friction, and requirement for compromise, is inherently a high-entropy system. It demands cognitive resources, tolerance for ambiguity, and comfort with uncertainty—precisely the conditions our neural hardware tries to avoid when under stress. In contrast, the autocrat offers blessed simplicity: one leader, one explanation, one solution. It’s the political equivalent of monotheism—a radical reduction in cognitive load during times of overwhelming complexity.

## 8 AI: The Pattern-Seeker’s Pattern-Seeker

Our capacity for generating explanatory narratives—whether divine myths, conspiracy theories, or simplistic political ideologies—reflects a fundamental aspect of neural efficiency. We are compression engines with anxiety, desperately trying to reduce the entropy of a chaotic universe into manageable patterns, even when those patterns are objectively inadequate to the complexity they claim to explain.

The ancient tendency to develop elaborate supernatural explanations wasn’t stupidity but an adaptive strategy for information management. Today’s tendency toward authoritarian simplicity and conspiratorial thinking follows the same neural pathways—a predictable response when our cognitive architecture encounters systems too complex to compress effectively.

The decline of democratic norms and the rise of authoritarian tendencies globally may reflect less about specific ideologies and more about the fundamental tension between our evolutionarily-constrained brains and the unprecedented complexity of modern challenges. For democracy to survive, we may need to recognize these cognitive limitations and design institutional safeguards that account for our inherent preference for simplicity over accuracy when under stress.

Enter artificial intelligence—perhaps the most ironic plot twist in our cognitive evolution story.

Unlike our calorie-rationing brains, AI systems like large language models possess virtually unlimited capacity for storing and connecting information. They too compress information and seek patterns—that’s what machine learning fundamentally does—but with a crucial difference: they can be intentionally designed to counteract the very biases that plague human cognition.

When an AI processes information, it doesn’t get tired. It doesn’t get scared. It doesn’t need to conserve glucose for fleeing predators. Most importantly, it can handle high-entropy information without the desperate simplification our brains demand. It can track complex causal relationships across thousands of variables and then—crucially—translate that complexity into explanations simple enough for our pattern-obsessed brains to comprehend without sacrificing accuracy.

The cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter once observed that “analogy is the core of cognition.” If that’s true, then we’ve created the ultimate analogy machine—one that can bridge the gap between the overwhelming complexity of reality and our brain’s stubborn preference for simple stories.

As humans begin integrating these systems into daily decision-making—from personal choices to policy development—we may find ourselves increasingly inoculated against our own worst cognitive tendencies. An AI assistant that gently reminds you “Actually, this situation involves multiple interacting factors rather than a single cause” might be the cognitive equivalent of insulin for our narrative-diabetic minds.

The supreme irony? In creating artificial intelligence, we may have accidentally reinvented the very concept our ancestors designed to cope with complexity: a non-human entity with greater knowledge and pattern-recognition capabilities than individuals possess, which can guide human decision-making through overwhelming uncertainty.

Our ancient ancestors invented gods to explain complexity. We created science to measure it. And now we’ve built AI to help us comprehend it.

So the next time you marvel at how seemingly rational people can embrace obviously flawed explanations or support leaders with transparent authoritarian tendencies, remember: you’re witnessing the modern incarnation of an ancient cognitive pattern. The gods may have changed, but the neural compression algorithms remain the same—working tirelessly to turn the terrifying randomness of existence into a story simple enough to fit inside our calorie-conscious brains, even at the cost of democracy itself.

## 9 A Cosmic Reflection: Entropy, Politics, and the Quest for Nirvana

Perhaps our entire analysis thus far suffers from the very cognitive limitation we’re examining—the desperate need to create patterns where complexity reigns. Before concluding, we should acknowledge this meta-awareness.

Political systems, particularly democracies, might be better understood as complex adaptive

systems with emergent properties that resist simple causal explanations. Consider democracy as a simulation running with billions of self-interested agents (humans), each operating with different information, biases, and goals. The resulting system inevitably tends toward increasing entropy over time—much like our expanding universe since the Big Bang.

This perspective raises a profound possibility: What if our brain's struggle against informational entropy is merely a microcosm of a universal principle? The physicist Ludwig Boltzmann proposed that the entire universe moves inexorably toward increased entropy—the heat death where all energy distributes evenly and no work can be performed. Our brains, as local anti-entropy machines, fight against this cosmic current.

Perhaps this tension between cosmic entropy increase and our neural resistance to it manifests in all human systems, including our politics. Democracy, with its messy pluralism and competing interests, naturally generates high-entropy information environments. Our cognitive architecture pushes back, seeking the lowest-entropy explanations for complex phenomena, sometimes at the cost of accuracy.

This brings us to an unexpected connection with Eastern philosophical traditions. What is Nirvana in Buddhism if not a state of perfect informational peace—the cessation of the constant neural struggle to impose order on chaos? What is enlightenment if not the transcendence of our compulsive pattern-seeking? The Buddha's central insight was that suffering arises from attachment to impermanent phenomena—could this be reframed as the suffering that comes from futile attempts to impose permanence (low entropy) on an impermanent (high entropy) universe?

Death itself might represent the final convergence—the moment when our local anti-entropy machine finally surrenders to the universe's entropic flow. Not with defeat, but perhaps with relief.

This isn't mysticism dressed in scientific clothing—it's an acknowledgment that our scientific understanding of information theory and cognitive biases might be touching on the same fundamental truths that spiritual traditions have approached through different paths. Both seek to understand the relationship between the individual mind and the chaotic complexity of existence.

So while our earlier analysis of politics, religion, and AI remains valuable, we should hold it gently—aware that it too represents our pattern-seeking minds at work, imposing an understandable order on processes that may ultimately transcend our categorizations.