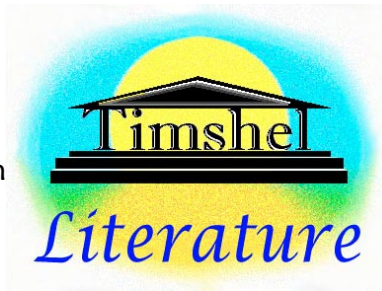


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Frankenphilosophy

by Justin Katz

Giving the impression that Al Franken's sociopolitical ideas are to be taken seriously would be to belittle serious thinkers of every ideological tint. However, Franken is primarily a humorist, and humor by its nature consolidates the beliefs on which it is based, even if those beliefs are, themselves, laughable. In this sense, such personages as Franken unwittingly provide windows into the flaws of the philosophies that they espouse.

In its intellectual incoherence, "The Gospel of Supply Side Jesus," a cartoon from the book *Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them: A Fair and Balanced Look at the Right*, lets slip the incorrect view that Franken takes of conservatism and indicates the corresponding error in the liberalism that he claims to represent. The pinch of truth that inadvertently makes its way into the murky stew of Franken's worldview is that supply-side economics does not constitute an all-purpose methodology for life. The probable reason that those on the Left mistake it as such is that they consider economics to be merely the financial department of a socialized government.

The first quarter of the cartoon presents economic points that shouldn't be objectionable; it is only the fact that Franken puts the money-centered dialogue in the mouth of Supply Side Jesus (SSJ), an ostensible religious figure, that makes them so. It is a self-evident positive that those with

money pour it back into the economy through commerce. In the words of the cartoon, “Because of this robe, ten craftsmen were able to feed their families.”

The only rational objection to this point would arise if those craftsmen’s families would starve were it not for the “generosity” of the wealthy. The first thing that this objection would ignore, however, is that the robe is merely a representation for industry in its entirety, which includes the spectrum of goods, from business-to-business essentials to personal indulgences. More substantively, the objection ignores the reality that society requires a strategy for distributing wealth, and distribution linked to productivity becomes more valuable than just the financial sum, both in social benefit and personal growth.

The problem is that Franken’s putting these words in SSJ’s mouth is not incidental. Rather, it represents a failure to understand that the conservative strategy is to separate the various functions of society. When the financial messiah passes some lepers, he explains that he will not feed them because it would “make them lazy” nor heal them because it would remove the “incentive to avoid leprosy.” This rhetoric transforms SSJ from the consumer whom he represented in the previous scene into a governmental figure, because supply-siders only use such arguments to constrain the public sphere (whose funding is compulsory). Even so, there is certainly room in a free-market government to accommodate extreme cases. Furthermore, supply-siders would tend to be those calling for representative government, meaning that the cartoon apostles would have a say in determining the leper policy.

In the next scene, Franken’s conservative messiah becomes, allegorically, a religious figure, attributing worldly success or failure to the judgment of God. To be sure, capitalists who take their economic theories this far are way out of their appropriate bounds, but Franken is indicting the economic theory, not specific applications of it. For this reason, the humorist can’t help but allow his caricature to contradict himself in a way that seems to reflect the author more than the idea

being mocked. The veneration of personal responsibility, motivation, and self reliance that has characterized SSJ's rhetoric thus far is utterly undermined by the assertion that success is a matter of God's will.

Franken might reply that this is the point, citing as evidence that the crowd turns on the cartoon's protagonist because he proves to be a con man. If this is the intention, however, the strip does nothing to criticize supply-side ideas, attacking instead perversion of them. Disconnected from an explicit person or group, the parody fails to such an extent that its message works out to be the opposite of what its author believes it to be.

By seeing economic comfort as the full measure of a person's value, SSJ denies the significance of other approaches to fulfillment. This is exactly the underlying belief — though likely a subconscious one — of those who would seek mandatory redistribution of wealth. Only if money is seen as the sole measure of happiness is it of absolute importance that it be distributed in exact proportion.

Holding SSJ to a single representation — taking him to be a personification of government — his stated policies much more closely resemble those of liberals than of conservatives. The *Democrats'* idea of economic stimulus is to give people money to spend on goods. The *liberal* solution to unemployment is for the government to expand both its purchases and its workforce, with socialism being the fullest extent. The Left may not believe that risky behavior ought to be criticized in such a way as to offer incentive to avoid disease, but to the extent that the Left acknowledges the value of prevention, it believes it to be the government's responsibility. In fact, the only public policy put forth by Franken's creation to which the typical liberal should completely object involves his aversion to handouts.

In contrast, the correlation is almost explicit when SSJ declares that “the only way to gain entrance into God's kingdom of abundance is to show your faith by giving to him through his only

son.” What is this but a tax? And who are the “Supply Side Jesus Pioneers” to whom the preacher offers additional access in exchange for larger contributions but the Democrats’ portfolio of special interests?

Of course, this isn’t Franken’s intention, so this reading loses its consistency as he piles on various catch phrases that are loosely linked by the fact that they have some rhetorical resemblance to conservative principles. But even with these, the reader is apt to find himself blinking at the statements that Franken mocks. Does he not believe beautician to be a more desirable occupation than prostitute? Does he object to a “marketplace of ideas” whereby people can choose from among an unlimited range of arguments? Does he really believe it a capital offense to encourage people to “stand on [their] own two feet”?

What Franken has done is to pick and choose qualities that are objectionable in any political philosophy — greed, dishonesty, dissembling, selfishness — and attribute them to conservatives by way of a superficial reading of an economic strategy. Unsurprisingly, this partisan hack job is most apparent when Franken contrasts SSJ with Jesus Christ, who “preaches a gospel of compassion, generosity, and good works.” There is nothing within these ideals that dictates or contradicts a strategy that allocates different social systems to different realms of society. On the other hand, mandating “good works” through the inefficient machinations of the government erases the requirement and minimizes the possibility for personal compassion and generosity.