



Fuentes, A. (2019). *Why we believe: Evolution and the human way of being*. Yale University Press. 266 pp. ISBN 9780300243994 (hardback electronic).

A Review of Agustín Fuentes's "Why we believe: Evolution and the human way of being"

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Abstract

This is a review of Agustín Fuentes's book "Why We Believe: Evolution and the Human Way of Being" (Yale University Press, 2019). It outlines Fuentes's idea that the human capacity to believe has roots in our evolutionary history, sociality, and niche, and offers a critique of various aspects of this book.

"Much of the reason we can believe the ways we do today rests in changes in the ways societies were structured, interpreted, remembered, and lived over the last 14,000 years." - Agustín Fuentes

Agustín Fuentes, a professor of anthropology at the Princeton University, in his latest book, *Why We Believe: Evolution and the Human Way of Being* (Fuentes, 2019) puts forward the idea that the human cognitive capacity to believe has its roots in our past evolutionary history, ancestors' sociality, and the niche in which humans have evolved. According to Fuentes, the cognitive capacity to believe that evolved as the requirement for sociality in our ancestors is also a pre-requisite of our cognitive and social resources needed for emergence of belief capacities. Such abilities for cooperation and collaboration, along with the dealing with the diverse challenges in new environments and development of novel approaches to these challenges, resulted in the emergence of the ability for imagination and mental representation of the world beyond the immediate present. Fuentes argues that a reciprocal and mutual influence of human niche and cognitive capacity has reshaped human experience and belief.

As we approach the current era, the human niche becomes more complex. For example, as a result of domestication, a greater intimacy and interaction with animals and plants ensued, and consequently, the likelihood of attributing agency and awareness to other species, and thereby the humans' capacity for anthropomorphism, sentience, and attribution of other kinds of awareness, developed even more. Fuentes similarly explains how the human niche during the Anthropocene has created social, political, and economic relationships—the latter have generated the cognitive and social resources for enhancing mental representations and imaginations necessary for beliefs in property and ownership, inequality and justice, gender roles, religion and belief systems, coordination and cooperation, political structures, and economic systems.

Fuentes allocates three separate chapters to three patterns of belief, namely religion, economies, and love. By arguing that the ability to believe is central and material to the human system, as fingers are part of our arms and hands, he strives to distinguish his proposal for the emergence of the capacity for religious belief from those who advocate for the by-product theory of religion (i.e., the supernatural agency detection hypothesis). However, it appears that these



two arguments are not mutually exclusive and overlap. Nonetheless, he rejects the “Big God” hypothesis of religion emergence as failing to provide an explanation of religious experience. Next, he argues while economic systems are human-made, by-products of society and like religion have been nonexistent until very recently in our evolutionary history, people believe competition for limited resources in the world is a natural law.

While one might find the first half of the book more compelling and interesting, it is an engaging book, written beautifully. Fuentes is a great storyteller, and it is as if you are watching a documentary about human evolution as you read—easy, entertaining, and sometimes mesmerizing! *Why We Believe* is easy to read and suitable for the general reader, however, particularly students of evolutionary sciences, psychology, anthropology and religious studies might find it very interesting.

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