When Belief Becomes a Deep Connection

The evolutionary context of religion, economics, and love.

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“The repetition of affirmations leads to belief,” Muhammed Ali, America’s most philosophical heavyweight boxing champion, once declared: “And once that belief becomes a deep connection, things begin to happen.”

Agustín Fuentes, a professor of anthropology at the University of Notre Dame, agrees. In *Why We Believe*, Fuentes defines belief as “a commitment, a devotion to possibilities, that need not be rooted in daily material reality,” draws on cognitive resources, experiences, and imagination, and becomes a “prominent, promising and dangerous” human capacity. Using evidence from anthropology and neurobiology, Fuentes examines the evolutionary context of belief – and provides informative case studies of religion, economics and love.

*Cognition* and behavior in *genus Homo*, Fuentes indicates, were shaped by “feedback processes” in toolmaking, foraging, and child rearing. Increasing connections between populations “enabled
shared beliefs, and eventually belief systems, to emerge” in a cultural niche featuring a social, economic and political infrastructure built on the perceptions, experiences, and institutions of people past and present.

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These developments altered the contours of sensation and perception. Inner perceptions could be expressed through external objects. Dead bodies were buried 200,000-400,000 years ago, a reflection, perhaps, of transcendent experiences. Representational art, dating back 40,000 years, has been discovered. 10,000-20,000 years later, meaning-making humans were everywhere. Our ancestors soon began participating in religious institutions not all that different from those in existence today.

Fuentes is skeptical of structural and functional explanations of the origins of religion. Undue emphasis on the role of large-scale civil societies or the co-opting for religion of practical tasks, like tool-making, that had a ritual aspect, he argues, ignores what the experience was like for believers. Instead, Fuentes gives primacy to the expansion of the capacity of the imagination to stretch across “the real and the unreal, the possible and the impossible,” that allowed human beings to “see’ and feel and know that their world contains more than the material at hand.”

Echoing Karl Marx, Fuentes reminds us that economics is a human creation, not a natural law, with precepts that are historical and transitory. Our cash-based, market-driven economic system is, at most, 7,000 years old. It was preceded by “egalitarian” societies that, to be sure, maintained hierarchies based on age, gender, kinship, and skill. It did not replace barter; they co-evolved. The institutionalization of economic inequality as “typical” followed the domestication of plants and animals, sedentism (commitment to a specific place), the storage of (surplus) goods, substantial exchanges of those goods, recorded accounts of these exchanges, and the creation of distribution networks. Economics, alas, also ushered in large-scale conflict between groups.

Although human beings cannot agree on a definition of love, the vast majority of them believe in it. Love, Fuentes notes, can reside in the material, the practical, or the transcendent; it can involve passionate desire (eros), an all-encompassing devotion that is not necessarily physical (agape), or a deep and affectionate regard (philia). In all these forms, love stems from an “evolutionary baseline” for humanity, grounded in a “commitment to cooperative sociality, our intense tendency to pair bond, our communal caring for our young, and an immense capacity for compassion.” Unfortunately, Fuentes adds, as human communities grew, coalesced, and
developed strong senses of identity, love was increasingly likely to be matched by hatred for members of other groups, and violence became more pervasive in the archeological record.

A self-proclaimed “cautious optimist,” Fuentes nonetheless ends his book with warnings about “the potentially catastrophic consequences” of three misleading beliefs: that human beings own the world and have every right to extract resources at will, despite mounting evidence that doing so puts the planet at risk; that inequality and racial differences are natural and/or inevitable; and that a single mode of seeking knowledge, be it scientific or scriptural, provides the pathway to the truth.

And so, Professor Fuentes can only hope that “we can better direct our shared beliefs and values” to imagine and create a better future.