Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast: The Evolutionary Origins of Belief by Lewis Wolpert

Excellent Exposition

A unique, scientific look into why we are all believers.

In Lewis Carrolls Through the Looking-Glass, the White Queen tells Alice that to believe in a wildly improbable fact she simply needs to draw a long breath and shut [her] eyes. Alice finds this advice ridiculous. But dont almost all of us, at some time or another, engage in magical thinking? Seventy percent of Americans believe in angels; 13 percent of British scientists touch wood; 40 percent of Americans believe that astrology is scientific. And that is only the beginning. In Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast, Lewis Wolpert tackles one of the most important causes on the horizon of public debate: the nature of belief. Looking at beliefs psychological basis and its possible evolutionary origins in physical cause and effect, Wolpert expertly investigates what science can tell us about those concepts we are so sure of, covering everything from everyday beliefs that give coherence to our experiences, to religious beliefs, to paranormal beliefs for which there is no evidence.

My Personal Review:
It seems quirky, claiming to imagine six impossible things as Alices White Queen did. Before breakfast or at any time. Wolpert shows, however, that most of us are firmly convinced of many things that arent so: gods, unlikely events, strange medical practices - the list seems almost endless. The lack of tangible evidence supporting or even evidence countering, those things we have faith in seems to have little impact on our credulity. In a dozen illuminating chapters, this award-winning biologist examines this almost inexplicable facet of our lives. Written with precision and deep insight, Wolpert demonstrates his command of how belief is a fundamental aspect of our society. Why do we believe the things we do?
As a biologist, Wolpert naturally turns to our evolutionary roots for clues to the origins of belief. That which sets us apart from the other animals - our oversized brain, our use of tools, and our ability to use language - as the indicators. The brain's capacity to store, retrieve and assemble information is tied to our abilities in technology and language. For Wolpert, the prime element is the making of tools. Making tools means envisioning the final product, and devising how to bring it about. Put more simply, understanding cause and effect - something even other primates have trouble with. From this beginning, he argues, come social relationships and a sense of values. Along the way, we also developed the idea of agency which we assigned to events or circumstances that were out of ordinary, everyday experience. If the process of flaking stone went wrong, why did that happen. The best-laid plans, etc.

From this beginning, Wolpert shows how the panoply of modern beliefs has come into our lives. The onset of conceiving an agency either began or enhanced the mind's belief engine. The belief engine demands an identifiable cause for circumstances. When that's not readily apparent, we extend our belief to things we must imagine. These explanations can, and are, passed around the community, establishing both a bond among its members and reinforcing the interpretation. Once the idea gains prominence, it resists challenge and is difficult to overturn. Religion, of course, is the ultimate organised form of belief, often touted as society's best glue. Wolpert accepts this situation without rancour, even admitting his disturbed son's conversion to a fundamentalist Christian sect has improved the boy's behaviour. That given, Wolpert cannot excuse rigid adherence to dogmas that have no basis in reality. Science has disproven so many religious and other belief systems that he insists the wider society examine their beliefs more critically. There are other facets than family relations to consider.

Recent claims that religious folk, or even those with faith in such things as homeopathy or crystal healing, actually feel or live better may have statistical substance. Wolpert wants these claims investigated fully, since the early results have little validity. Part of how these practices seem effective lies within the brain's dealings with the body. It is this aspect that suggests paths of study, since it's clear the objects or methods have no curative power in themselves. Many of the methods are accompanied by common-sense recommendations regarding diet and abandonment of harmful habits such as smoking or lack of exercise. Although Wolpert is even-handed in his approach to the many common delusions of our times, he clearly wishes their validity be openly investigated and the results aired.

Such an investigation, Wolpert concedes, will be [and has been] difficult to launch and sustain. Clearly, our minds, however powerful in certain talents, have a tendency to seek immediate answers. The validity of the cause need not be certain if an acceptable origin can be declared. We are willing to believe in ghosts or other paranormal phenomena simply because
somebody forcefully declares them to be true. Similar views are firmly held about medical practices. As with other views of agency, we are uncomfortable with illness that we cannot understand. Any explanation, forcefully given with a promise of relief, finds easy acceptance. Hence, alternative, or in Wolpert’s Britain complementary, healing methods are widespread. Whether they are a form of placebo medicine, which appears to cure remains to be determined.

Wolpert’s book comes at a time when examining our beliefs seems more crucial than ever. We maintain ideas about ourselves, but it becomes too easy to project them to others. When more reasonable ideas are put forward, we must not be too ready to reject them. This book should provide a basis for people willing to apply reason and science to accepted dogmas. [Stephen A. Haines - Ottawa, Canada]

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