



Nest of Belief: A Dispassionate Look

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There should be no question agreeing that - albeit humans *might become* able to extirpate their particular religious credence, probably with strenuous mental effort, human's inveterate propensity to believe altogether is ineradicable. And why not? We are not new to the supposition – *probably humans are hard-coded to believe!*

The supposition that - probably belief is hardwired into human mind - may put believers into rapture and put skeptics and non-believers into dismay. It appears to hint that, some ingenious creator ingrained such tendency into human mind with some purport. Sometimes, such implication seems plausible. But, history says, annals of human civilization is full of fallacious implications. Presumably, we will not haste to any unwarranted implication and rather move further, disregarding any theological sentiments, at least for the moment, and delve further to know what observations brought such speculation about human mind.

Believing Stronger than Not Believing?

Is belief of an existence a natural tendency of human being? Why is the opposite of it, i.e. believing a non-existence, not more obvious? An experiment by the psychologists Fritz Heider and Marianne Simmel in the 1940s suggests that humans are prone to ascribe incidents to some agents¹. Subjects of the experiments were shown a film of some moving geometrical shapes like triangles and circles. The subjects imputed planning, pursuit and escape in the movements. Humans' presentiment for existence of volitional agent to help themselves interpret events is very strong.

Now, quickly inferring that a divine power has designed our mindset to believe - is a great leap. Certainly, it will be an inference of a believer. A believer might have a complete explanation of almost everything in his religion and he regularly endeavors to link it with his observations. On the other hand, science is purposed to adhere precisely to *scientifically* established theories and facts to explain observations, and not to favor any unsubstantial claim or belief. Presumably, this discussion follows the latter pattern. And an established fact of science that may help us explicate the observation at hand, i.e. humans' propensity to believe, is the theory of evolution.

The Role of Evolution

Before going into the evolutionary explanation, one thing is indispensable to say. Nowadays evolution is thought to be one of the prime offenses to religion. Contemporary religious leaders often try to disprove its reality. Understandably, theory of evolution makes much of their tales dubious. But, is it really reprehensible for being sacrilegious? Evolution simply acknowledges the change of inherited traits of species from generation to generation, most prominently due to adaptation to environmental conditions. This effort of adaptation leads organisms, more fit to survive, having more offspring and hence pass more copies of their inherited

traits to next generation. The essence is that we adapt and it ushers our traits.

This does not really justify much of being the foremost rival of religions. Evolution only explains some earthly facts. It neither upholds nor eradicates any theological conjecture as Lawrence Krauss, famous Physicist at Case Western Reserve University, also believes the same². It cannot even hint that evolution itself is never a divine will (and nor the opposite, too). At least, room to conciliate them is not closed.

Now, premonition of an attack from a predator by a caveman following a movement of rock at the cave-opening was essential for early humans. Believing an existence of agent was necessary to take proper measures. Disregarding that would have been fatal. And adaptation to such mindset is substantive to explain the hard-coding of belief into human mind.

Humans' ability of causal reasoning leads it to endeavor explaining incidents. Guessing existence of *something* as soon as hearing some suspicious noise nearby, frequently saved their lives, whereas not guessing an existence of *something* was never beneficial, at worst – a deadly mistake. Probably evolution has accommodated a space for imputing agency in our brain. Believing in God is probably a generalization of such functionality. Tendency to impute existence led us to believe a God and made the explanation of creation easier. This is why the earth is not a place where people asking about creation and creator do not often say that – *as we do not have evidence, we do not assume a God (similar neither its non-existence)*. Almost everyone has a God.

And how this generalization occurred is discussed with two alternative views, one of adaptationist, another of byproduct theorists. To the adaptationists, believing in God is itself essential for primitive humans, to adjust their mental

instabilities in the face of distress, misfortune and horror. It provided imbuing solace.

But, to the byproduct theorists, inferring existence of God is a secondary result of the evolved believing-capability of human mind. Believing was competitively necessary for early humans, but believing particularly in God did not directly serve them for becoming fitter to survive in the context of environmental conditions. To them, it is merely an instance of the application of their believing capacity and did not evolve as a primary necessity. Much like a V-shaped spandrel formed between two rounded arches, as coined by Stephen Jay Gould, former evolutionary biologist at Harvard³. Arches are the necessity, are made for purpose, whereas spandrels, formed in between are byproduct of the design, are not made for purpose. But, as they are formed, they contain enough room to be filled with humans' arts and imaginations, as we can see in the title picture above. An elaborate, literary discussion of the ideas can be found in the New York Times article *Darwin's God* by Robin Marantz Henig³.

The relationship of religion and belief has an analogy with that of language and ability to speak. Evolution has also facilitated humans' speaking ability. Human babies are born with ability to learn speaking. It is the language that changes from place to place. In the same way, humans have different religions and a follower of one religion adheres to it as fervently as a follower of other. People even get converted. But, it is the nest of belief in our mind that never vanishes.

A Dispassionate Conclusion

And, it might appear anticlimactic to believers by now and a bit relieving to non-believer. But, to be precise, it yet implies nothing more except the speculation that humans are probably hardwired to believe and there is evolutionary explanation to that. Such speculations might be hard to

conceive even for a non-believer. Might be as hard as it is to a pacifist to believe that violence is also hardwired to human mind and theory of evolution again can explain it.

Yet, as freethinkers, we will probably accept it. The world is too intricate to fit in a prejudiced mind!

(Picture of the spandrel is an edited version of a photo taken by Einar Einarsson Kvaran, licensed under GNU Free Documentation.)

References:

1. <http://members.westnet.com.au/emmas/2p/thesis/1.htm>
2. http://www.economist.com/world/displaystory.cfm?story_id=9036706
3. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spandrel_\(biology\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spandrel_(biology))