

CILIPS COVID-19 Book Reviews – The Believing Brain

Reviewer name: Scott Main

Book title: The Believing Brain

Author name: Michael Shermer

Genre: Psychology - belief

Overall Rating: Excellent

Brief summary: One thought troubles me greatly. It is entirely possible to be deluded and live your whole life through happily. A clear example is that hundreds of millions of humans believed that the Sun was moving round the Earth daily. They organised their agriculture, society, calendar and religion around this idea. For them it seems to have been a useful fiction. In our time, billions look forward to being re-united with their loved ones in the afterlife. Others fervently believe in UFOs, the Celestine Prophecy, or that a secret dynasty descended from Jesus is ruling the modern world etc, etc. Yet before we get too dismissive about all these flavours of poppycock, we should ask what useful fictions, or falsities, are we bearing? What beliefs of ours will future generations smile at indulgently from their position of superior 'knowledge'. This all takes us straight into the philosophy topics of epistemology (<http://www.iep.utm.edu/epistemo/>) and philosophy of science (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosophy_of_science). A readable contribution for the non specialist has been given by Michael Shermer (<http://www.michaelshermer.com/about-michael/>) in 'The Believing Brain'. This tackles issues in science, psychology and belief.

The author cites a 2009 poll in which more Americans admitted to a belief in angels and devils than in the theory of evolution. Shermer seeks to answer the question of why “so many people believe in what most scientists would consider to be the unbelievable?” While admitting that scientists often believe in unproven hypotheses—e.g., the origin of our universe and what might have preceded the Big Bang—the author holds firmly to the “built-in self-correcting machinery” that is inherent in the scientific method: e.g., double-blind controlled experiments which are replicable, testing results against the null hypothesis, etc. Shermer takes gleeful potshots at conspiracy theorists, including the 9/11-truthers, giving a detailed refutation of their claim that planted explosives brought down the Twin Towers, and the belief in extrasensory perception demonstrated by the apparent abilities of psychics and other mediums, which have been replicated by magicians. Nonetheless, the author fully recognizes the importance of belief in our lives. Jumping to false conclusions is an outgrowth of pattern recognition, an essential function of our brain that evolved to allow birds as well as mammals to anticipate danger and respond to their environment. “An emotional leap of faith beyond reason is often required,” writes the author. I hope this will prove to be a stimulating, if unsettling, read.

What you liked: This book makes one think hard about one's own beliefs. Shermer has a forensic and entertaining style.

Who should read this book?: Anyone interested in psychology and belief

Any additional comments?: 400 pages in Times Books

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