



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

The Gifford Lectures

Why we believe:

evolution, making meaning,
and the development of
human natures

A series of six lectures by

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**26 February–8 March 2018
at 5.30pm**

The Playfair Library Hall
Old College, South Bridge
Edinburgh EH8 9YL

Why we believe: evolution, making meaning, and the development of human natures

Agustín Fuentes, University of Notre Dame

Humans can see the world around them, imagine how it might be different, and translate those imaginings into reality...or at least try to. Humans believe. Meaning, imagination, and hope are as central to the human story as are bones, genes, and ecologies. Neither selfish aggression nor peaceful altruism dominates human behavior as a whole. We are a species distinguished by our extraordinary capacity for creative cooperation, our ability to imagine possibilities and to make them material, and our powerful aptitudes for belief, hope, and cruelty. In the 21st century significant shifts in our understanding of evolutionary biology and theory, radical expansions in the archeological and fossil records, and increasing collaboration across multiple fields of inquiry alter our capacities to investigate the human niche, how humans shape and are shaped by the world. Via exploring our evolution, the emergence of our capacity to create, innovate, and collaborate we develop better understandings of human natures and the answers as to why we believe. And, hopefully, to better contemplate the possibilities of human futures.

1. Who are we?

Monday 26 February 2018

Belief, evolution, and our place in the world

This first lecture sets the stage for understanding the development of human natures and our capacity for belief by introducing the theme and narrative structure of the series. Then, by laying out our evolutionary history, we embark on an answer to 'who we are' that is different today than it was even a decade ago. Starting with our shared primate heritage we situate humans among the other primates, uncovering the deep roots of our distinctive sociality and of our considerable creative and imaginative abilities. Then, via a highly condensed multi-million year journey, we survey the hominin lineage, the range of human-like relatives, illustrating a distinctive, and complicated, history of changing physiques and capacities facilitating the emergence of the human lineage.

2. What makes us human?

Tuesday 27 February 2018

The construction of the human niche and the capacity for belief

The first unequivocal members of the human line emerge from the cluster of human-like lineages about two million years ago. We call them the genus Homo. Rapidly they set off on a course that altered their bodies, minds, and the planet. One that is still underway. Over the past two million years the human lineage developed a suite of distinctive characteristics that are central to contemporary human capacities and lifeways. This lecture, drawing on the evidence from bones, stones, biologies and ecologies, illustrates the emergence of humanity's niche, our natures, via distinctive patterns of eating, caring, moving and creatively manipulating the world around us.

3. How did we change the world?

Thursday 1 March 2018

Being with, and believing in, others instigated the Anthropocene

The genus Homo began manipulating ecologies more than two million years ago. By 400,000 years ago humans had connected with fire to alter the world. By at least 120,000 years ago our ancestors were combining materials from plants, animals and minerals in increasingly complex new forms (glues and pigments). More than 20,000 years ago humans partnered with dogs and began the first mutual domestication project. However, in the last 15,000 years the magnitude, rapidity and impact of the humans' relationships with an increasing array of other species transformed bodies, societies, and the global ecosystem at paces outstripping everything before. This lecture offers a view of the emergence of increasingly complex and multispecies human communities and illustrates how sedentism, domestication, and the rise of particular beliefs and practices of property and identity, in combination with expanding patterns of inequality, created radically novel landscapes of caring and conflict.

4. How do we believe?

Monday 5 March 2018

Developing human culture

In the first three lectures we learn that humans are a particular kind of primate, and hominin, which manipulates animals, plants, ecosystems, and one another, and is capable of intense cruelty and amazing compassion. A major factor in developing this suite of capacities is our ability to create and sustain particular kinds of cultures and to be shaped by them. Human culture is a key to human natures, and core to human belief systems. While other animals have cultures, human cultures include tools, weapons, clothes, buildings, towns, etc... and teaching and learning on scales and with a level of structural complexity, and

impact, greater than in any other organisms. Human cultures are rooted in the linguistically mediated beliefs, institutions, histories, and practices of human groups. For humans, culture is a ubiquitous primary component, and potential driver, of our evolution. This lecture lays out just what human culture is, how it emerged, and why it is central to our capacities for, and processes of, belief.

5. Why do we believe?

Tuesday 6 March 2018

A human imagination and the emergence of belief systems

There are 5.8 billion people who identify as religiously affiliated around the globe, about 83 per cent of the world's population. Religious experience of some sort or another is a daily activity for most human beings and religion is woven into the hearts of the societies and nations in which we all reside. However, all contemporary religions and religious institutions are extremely recent in an evolutionary sense. For about 75 per cent of the evolutionary history of the human line we have very little material evidence that transcendent experiences and a recognition of the supernatural were prominent in the lives of our ancestors. But over the last 25 per cent of our history we see increasing evidence of creative meaning making in the material evidence left by our ancestors, possibly suggesting heightened transcendent experiences in their lives. The capacity to be religious emerged over our evolutionary history and religion eventually became a fixture of human identity. This lecture reviews current evolutionary ideas about how and why humans came to have religious belief, and offers an innovative alternative.

6. Does belief matter?

Thursday 8 March 2018

Belief, hope, and responsibility

Meaning, imagination, and hope are as central to the human story as are bones, genes, and ecologies. Why, and what, we believe matters. We are a species distinguished by our extraordinary capacity for creative cooperation, our ability to imagine possibilities and to make them material, and our powerful aptitudes for belief, hope, and for cruelty. Across our history the pace, impact and outcomes of the human niche (our way of being) has affected the planet and ourselves. But today we may be on the brink of changes and processes that are distinctive, even novel, with potentially catastrophic repercussions for humanity, other species, and the globe. Humans have become a (possibly, the) dominant force in global ecosystems and with such a role comes ethical and practical responsibilities. This final lecture connects the key data, themes and conclusions of the previous five to offer a suite of insights, possibilities, problems, and options for the future.

Agustín Fuentes

The Edmund P Joyce CSC Professor of Anthropology, University of Notre Dame

Agustín Fuentes completed a BA in Zoology and Anthropology, and an MA and PhD in Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley, and is a Professor and Chair of Anthropology at the University of Notre Dame. His research delves into the how and why of being human. Ranging from chasing monkeys in jungles and cities, to exploring the lives of our evolutionary ancestors, to examining what people actually do across the globe, Professor Fuentes is interested in both the big questions and the small details of what makes humans and our closest relatives tick. His current research foci include creativity, community, and meaning-making in human evolution, ethnoprimateology and multispecies anthropology, evolutionary theory, and public perceptions of, and interdisciplinary approaches to, human nature(s). Fuentes' recent books include *Evolution of Human Behavior* (Oxford University Press), *Race, Monogamy, and other lies they told you: busting myths about human nature* (University of California Press), *Conversations on Human Nature(s)* (with Aku Visala, Routledge) and *The Creative Spark: how imagination made humans exceptional* (Dutton).



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The Gifford Lectures

The Gifford Lectures were established in 1887 under the will of Adam Lord Gifford, a Senator of the College of Justice. They are held at each of the four ancient Scottish universities, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen and St Andrews. For well over a hundred years, the lectures have enabled a most notable field of scholars to contribute to the advancement of philosophical and theological thought.

Past Gifford Lecturers at Edinburgh include William James, John Dewey, Albert Schweitzer, Niels Bohr, Arnold Toynbee, Sir John Eccles, Iris Murdoch, Charles Taylor, Michael Ignatieff, Wentzel van Huyssteen, Noam Chomsky, Jean Bethke Elshtain, Simon Conway Morris, Alexander Nehamas, Robert Veatch, Jonathan Sacks, Diana Eck, Mike Gazzaniga, Terry Eagleton, Patricia Churchland, Bruno Latour, Steven Pinker, Rowan Williams, Catherine O'Regan, Jeremy Waldron, Helga Nowotny, Sheila Jasanoff, Kathryn Tanner, Richard English and Jeffrey Stout.

Further information

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