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The Power of Belief

Why do we believe in the things that we do, and where does our confidence in these beliefs come from? Ninian Smart explains in his article on the dimensions of religion that “the feeling aroused by ... a mysterious something which draws you to it but at the same time brings an awe-permeated fear” is one of the core components of a religion (3). This experiential/emotional dimension of religion encapsulates the feelings and personal experiences associated with religion that make belief so compelling, and this belief is not limited to religion. This dimension is utilized to analyze complex themes in *Contact* (Zemeckis 1997) and *The Matrix* (Wachowskis 1999). Both films explore the questions of belief and its relationship to reality through the lens of experience and emotion by delving into the search for truth, faith in the absence of proof, and a belief so strong that characters are willing to sacrifice their lives to defend it.

Humanity has an innate desire to seek the truth and see reality for what it truly is. Often this desire is driven by feelings and gut instinct, and whatever is discovered as a result of this search often impacts one’s beliefs and outlook of the world. In the film *Contact*, Dr. Ellie Arroway, a scientist and an atheist, knows in her heart that there must be other life somewhere out there in the universe. Even though her colleagues doubt its existence and think she is wasting her time, Ellie dedicates her entire life to finding other intelligent life, and her tireless search eventually pays off when she discovers an alien signal from the planet Vega. In a telling scene

(*Contact* [26:22 - 27:14] [here](#)) Ellie loses her funding and is berated for wasting her career, but she refuses to give up her search because of the persistent feeling that she has that there is something else out there. In a similar vein, the film *The Matrix* features Thomas Anderson, better known by his internet pseudonym Neo, chasing rumors to find answers to his questions. He has heard about a mysterious individual named Morpheus and has this gut feeling that there are things he does not or cannot know. When Neo meets Morpheus, he finally learns the truth about his reality: his whole life has been a lie spent in the Matrix, a computer program tricking his brain into believing everything is real while his actual body is being used as a battery. Upon their first encounter Morpheus tells Neo, “You are here because you know something. What you know you can’t explain. But you feel it ... it is this feeling that has brought you to me. ... Remember, all I’m offering is the truth” (*The Matrix* [scene](#)). Neo’s feelings drew him to Morpheus, just as Ellie’s feelings led her to search for alien signals. Ellie and Neo are both driven to discover the truth because of what they feel, and the resulting life-changing discoveries go on to become the foundation for beliefs later in each film.

While experiences and emotions guide humanity to secure their beliefs, they also pave the way to strengthen those beliefs. People still trust their beliefs without hard evidence because of the strength of their emotions and experiences. In *Contact*, the signal from Vega that Ellie discovers contains instructions to build a spacecraft, and after much debate Ellie secures the exclusive opportunity to go to space and visit Vega. She experiences an incredible journey and even meets with an alien in an experience not unlike what many imagine an encounter with God might be equated to. However, back on Earth it seems like she never left and many doubt that her experience really happened. Ellie is faced with the same situation as much of the religious community that she has spent the whole movie at odds with: having an incredible, revealing

experience to validate her beliefs but no way to prove that it really happened to anyone else. When she is questioned about why she will not recant her account, she emotionally responds, “Because I can’t. I had an experience. I can’t prove it, I can’t even explain it, but everything I know tells me it was real” (*Contact* [scene](#)). Ellie’s experience and the emotions it invoked sustains her belief even though there is no evidence and others doubt her. Belief without proof is tackled a little differently in *The Matrix*. Instead of presenting a character without evidence to verify an experience like in *Contact*, *The Matrix* forces a character to believe something with evidence supporting the contrary. After Neo comes to terms with the truth about the Matrix, he learns that Morpheus firmly believes that Neo is “the One” destined to take down the Matrix once and for all. However, when Neo visits the Oracle, she tells him that he is in fact not the One in a crucial conversation (*The Matrix* [scene](#)). Neo goes through the rest of the movie believing that there is nothing special about him until the very end when he is cornered with no other options. Then he starts to believe, despite the evidence to the contrary, that he is the One because of the power that he feels (*The Matrix* [scene](#)). Suddenly Neo is able to manipulate the Matrix in amazing ways and save the day, all because he believed that he was the One. In both films, the characters must grapple with their beliefs in light of a lack of evidence or even in spite of counter evidence, yet they still believe because of their experiences and the emotions they invoked. Ellie believes in the Vegans because of her experience in space, just as Neo is able to believe that he is the One because of his experiences in the Matrix and the power that he feels. Experience and emotion provide a way for humanity to still believe in the absence of hard evidence.

The ultimate test of any belief is how much one is willing to sacrifice to defend it, and the ultimate sacrifice that one could offer up is their own life. In *Contact*, Ellie believes so strongly in the prospect of alien life that she is willing to embark on a risky mission that she very well

might not return from. To her, it is worth the risk of dying if there is a possibility of visiting the intelligent life she has spent her whole life dreaming about, which is shown in a conversation between Ellie and her religious colleague (*Contact* [1:20:29 - 1:22:26] [here](#)). Her belief in the Vegans means more to her than her life, exemplifying the connection between belief, emotion, and experiences. Similarly in *The Matrix*, Morpheus is so certain that Neo is the One that he is willing to sacrifice his own life to guarantee that Neo can escape. On the flip side, Neo believes so deeply in Morpheus as a leader that there is no doubt in his mind that he should risk his life to save Morpheus (*The Matrix* [scene](#)). These characters believe in each other so much that they value the other's life more than their own because of their experiences with the Oracle, their experiences with each other, and the emotions they feel for each other as friends. In the end, all these characters' decisions to risk their own lives are based on their beliefs (in the Vegans as good and trustworthy, in Morpheus as a leader, in Neo as the one), but the core behind these beliefs are the experiences and emotions of the characters who hold them.

Our emotions and experiences strongly influence our beliefs by guiding our search towards what will become a belief and then acting as proof in the absence of evidence. The opposite is also true, as our beliefs can greatly impact our emotions and experiences. The connection between experience and belief and the associated emotions is undeniable as audiences view Ellie's journey discovering and visiting the Vegans and Neo's process of learning about the Matrix and realizing that he is the One. Smart concludes that the dimensions of religion "all help to express the various ways in which human beings conceive of themselves, and act in the world," which is certainly what *Contact* and *The Matrix* aim to do (9). With their captivating science fiction tales, they also succeed in telling deep and relevant stories about belief through emotion and experience.

Appendix

(in order of mention)

Contact: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W_1FbCq9oL4 [26:22 - 27:14]

Ellie's financier pulls the plug on her funding and tells that she is wasting her career, but Ellie remains committed and defiant.

The Matrix: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6rrPP-QOF3k>

Morpheus and Neo meet for the first time and discuss the truth about reality.

Contact: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sWrWZaPnFzY>

Ellie gives a speech about her experience at the hearing after she returns.

The Matrix: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bb9aga-Wy-Q>

The Oracle gives Neo important information about his beliefs.

The Matrix: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aXNLdw9CUgE>

Neo begins to believe that he is the One.

Contact: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W_1FbCq9oL4 [1:20:29 - 1:22:26]

Ellie and her colleague have a conversation about the risk of the journey to Vega and what it is worth.

The Matrix: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GPRbIIMJI4Y>

Neo uses belief to justify his decision to save Morpheus.

Works Cited

Contact. Directed by Robert Zemeckis, Warner Bros. Pictures, 1997.

Smart, Ninian. "The nature of a religion and the nature of secular worldviews." *The World's Religions: Old Traditions and Modern Transformations*, Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. 10-25.

The Matrix. Directed by Larry Wachowski and Andy Wachowski (Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski), Warners Bros. Pictures, 1999.