

MEMES

What Happens If You Say “Meme”

What a meme is supposed to be

“Memes” are the units of selection in culture as genes are the units of selection in evolution. When we talk of traits (height, hairiness, colour-blindness, and so on) being passed down through generations, we are also talking about genes being passed down. Likewise, when we talk of ideas being passed from person to person, we are also talking about memes. Richard Dawkins introduced the idea of memes towards the end of *The Selfish Gene*, where they were a means of demonstrating the wider applicability of the Darwinian algorithm of descent with modification. Memes seem to offer a new vocabulary for discussing travelling facts. They seem to be precisely the type of things that might enable us to gain insight into the transmission and reception of facts across time and between disciplines. Added to which, they are apparently a *scientific* way to talk about this.

But there are problems. It’s not entirely clear how seriously we are supposed to take

how more and more analogies can be threaded between the two fields. What goes for genetics goes for memetics. Someone who studies the transmission of memes is a “memeticist.” Someone who seeks to produce or alter

Unfortunately, the territory is largely occupied already – by anthropologists, sociologists, historians, and so on. And all of these scholars have their own distinctive and adequate vocabularies. There doesn't seem to be very much room in discussions of human culture for the evolutionary psychologists.

So one reason why memes might be popular with this type of thinker is their ability to provide a novel and (apparently) scientifically credible way in which to talk about culture. The effect of such a vocabulary might be the replacement of those vocabularies currently employed by anthropologists, sociologists, historians, and so forth, and to replace them with the vocabulary of memetics. Of course, there seems to be a contradiction here: if “meme” really is a surplus term, uselessly synonymous with “idea,” why resist its adoption? When we resist talking about memes

Two versions of memetics

The memetic theory arrives in two versions, a weak and a strong, between which proponents will vacillate depending upon what sort of argument they are being presented with. (This type of vacillation is characteristic of so-called th

How “real” is the meme?

It is very unlikely that the meme has a physical correlate in anything like the sense that genes have physical correlates. In genetics, there is something in the world (the nucleus of cells) that geneticists can point to and say, “This is where the genes are.” There is no such place where memes are supposed to be. They exist in people’s heads, of course, but they also exist even when they are not in anyone’s head. A gene doesn’t exist outside the cell. Additionally, in genetics, there are two levels of operation, and the bit that actually emerges isn’t identical with the gene at all: the gene is the code for the phenotype – the claw, the lens, the feather – and it’s the efficacy of this phenotype that increases the chances of the gene which blindly codes for it being transmitted onto the next generation (“efficacy” here need mean only “if it doesn’t hamper the organism too much”).

The second of these points is worth pursuing, as it is frequently raised by critics of the memetic theory. The clever and distinct thing about Darwinian evolution is the nature of inheritance. The charge against memetics here is that successive “generations” of memes are related by a wholly different mechanism of inheritance, such that the apparent analogies with the genetic theory are rendered trivial. Cultural evolution, in short, is “Lamarckian” – which means that memes acquire characteristics in between being passed on to other minds. One by one, the analogies with genetics begin to collapse. In fact, the analogy with genetics, in the end, is deeply misleading: (1) the meme lacks a physical correlate, (2) memetic replication is non-Darwinian.

Genetics or epidemiology?

Some problems with the strong (viral) version

The strong version of the memetic theory (which sees memes as “mind viruses”) certainly seems to do the work we want such a theory to do. And the new perspectives that strong versions of meme-speak allow – such as Dennett’s formulation that “A scholar is just a library’s way of making another library” (1990: 128) are indeed often striking, and an illuminating way of reconceptualising our relations with the culture from which we have emerged, and to which we contribute. But to invert priority in the ways that the (strong) viral account demands comes at a price.

The attractive aspect of the viral account is the transmission mechanism – unlike the genetic analogy, the viral account allows for “free-floating” memes, travelling between minds, then invading their “hosts.” In order to preserve this valance with virus transmission, it seems essential to relinquish free will. Only then does the strong memetic theory make sense. For some supporters (Susan Blackmore, for example), it happens that the meme theory is so alluring that they are “willing” to jettison free-will (inasmuch as that makes sense). But the world without free-will is going to be a very different place: taking memes seriously involves relinquishing much of our sense of personal accountability. Religious believers – frequently targeted by Dawkins – ought really to be pitied by him, they are (after all) only victims of the “God virus.” Dennett famously called the evolutionary algorithm Darwin’s “dangerous idea,” which is precisely how he characterises memes such as “free speech” (1990: 131). Does that mean that Darwinism, too, is just a mind virus?

Epistemological problems with memetics

Aside from the *ontological* problems – that is, the problems of what is a meme and where is a meme – there are also important *epistemological* problems: what type of knowledge do memes carry? What does being a meme do the status of the claim? Are all ideas memes, or only some? How can we discriminate between them? One of the interesting things about the memetic theory is that it is neutral with respect to the epistemic or moral value of an idea (or, to keep within their vocabulary, a “meme”); that is, how “true” or “good” an idea is. Memes even seem to subsume the very terms we might want to use to discriminate between memes: Dennett, for example, talks about the “memes for normative concepts – for *ought* and *good* and *truth* and *beauty*” (1990: 133). And whilst epistemic conditions are irrelevant to the success of a meme, they obviously exist – or else we’d have no means of measuring the meme’s divergence from them. In other words, virulence is not the condition we actually use to select ideas (excepting when those ideas are memes). Trying to figure out what it is that

allows us to discriminate between memes points up the problem of agency with respect to meme selection: if the very structures/mechanisms with which we discriminate between memes are also memes then even the memes we select will not be “our selections” but the selections of our memes.

Some consequences of having no epistemology

Saying that “memes are neutral with respect to epistemology” means a meme’s truth status is irrelevant to its success as a meme. In fact, the very idea of “true” or “false” becomes difficult to sustain. One of the reasons why memes are set up as being neutral with respect to epistemology is that Dawkins and Dennett (et al) want room to call religion (in particular, but also bubblegum-pop and bad jokes) “memes.” That way, you have a mechanism for answering the challenge of “*n*-million people can’t be wrong” without sounding anti-democratic (that is, they’re neither wrong nor right, simply in the grip of a powerful meme). Memes are neither true nor false, any more than genes are true or false. This is all very well, but trying to hold together an account of memes without recourse to something like “truth” becomes troublesome, especially when you want license (as Dawkins and Dennett certainly do) to call some views wrong or right or misguided or brilliant or, even, good or bad.

What are the *background conditions* for memes? How is it possible to have any epistemology – that is, any theory capable of discriminating between good and bad ideas or wrong and right ideas? In order to have a theory of truth and falsity, some meta-level capable of discriminating between memes seems to be required. How might such a level operate? Perhaps in the same way as Darwinian natural selection operates within the laws of physics, so too dooT1gn oas Da

memes. It's okay for the laws of physics to be in charge of how Darwinian selection works, but it is altogether more difficult to see how the laws of logic might have arisen. (The problem becomes even more trenchant in the case of mathematics, where properties are defined in relational terms: "2 + 2" is part of what "4" *means*. Raising, of course, the additional problem of whether mathematics is also a memetic issue.) There seems to be both memes and "something else." Not everything in the head is a meme, there are also "meme complexes." (Perhaps the ability to discriminate between truth and falsity is an emergent property of such meme-aggregations, as moral agency is an emergent property of gene-aggregations like us humans. Agency doesn't exist in arms or legs or cells, but it does exist in whole persons. Might the ability to distinguish truth (or the laws of logic, or any of the meta-level memes) appear out of the right clump of memes?)

Of course, even without (logical) "truth," there is still room to discriminate: a meme could be called "bad" or "damaging" if (for example) it harmed people. So, Dawkins will argue, religion is a "damaging" meme in this respect because it causes more suffering than it salves. Evolution, on the other hand, is a "good" meme because it helps us understand our relation with the world. The epistemology you would end up with would be one which replaced "truth" with utility, and "falsehood" with inefficacy or liability to cause suffering. It sounds like a good way of thinking about the world, and so it should come as no surprise that a fully fleshed out account of how this would look already exists in the writings of the American pragmatists like John Dewey and William James and these days Richard Rorty who feel that ideas are tools not principles, and objectivity means nothing more than consensus, and truth can be cashed out as usefulness, and so on. But this is hardly the type of epistemology you would expect a realist such as Dawkins (for example) to embrace.

So the sensible (or at least, the "logically consistent" route – whatever this might now mean) would seem to be to reintroduce epistemology, or allow memes to compete in terms of truthfulness as well as virulence. The problem with that move is that the meme account has lost its shine: we're back to where we started from with "ideas."

Works cited

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