

## Memes, Tradition, and Richard Dawkins

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These days, the internet is filled with memes. Everywhere we look online, we find some sort of viral picture of an ugly cat or a celebrity's face that someone has written a new caption for or put their own spin on. Memes dominate our online experience, and to be honest, they can be hilarious. However lighthearted it may be, this internet phenomenon illustrates a deeper dynamic that is always at play between an individual and culture. Though most of the time it is implicit and goes unnoticed, our individual creativity (or our ability to put a new spin on an internet meme) depends on our imitation of the culture we are already immersed in—without the “memes” that are embedded deep within our culture and language, we would not have any materials with which to create new ideas. Every innovation puts a new spin on an old meme.

The term “meme” comes from the evolutionary biology of Richard Dawkins' early work *The Selfish Gene*, in which he derives the term from the Greek root denoting imitation and uses it to describe a non-biological mode of evolution. In doing so, Dawkins shows a surprising resistance to thinking of human behaviour as simply the flow of genes and biological drives. He claims that though genes are an excellent example of self-replicating units (replicators), and much of human and animal behaviour can be described in terms of how genes compete for survival, there is no reason to think that genes as such have a monopoly on replicator status. “I think that a new kind of replicator has recently emerged on this very planet,” Dawkins suggests. “It is staring us in the face. It is still in its infancy, still drifting clumsily about in its primeval soup, but already it is achieving evolutionary change at a rate that leaves the old gene panting far behind. The new soup is the soup of human culture” (192).

Significantly, Dawkins makes the strong (but, as he notes, speculative) claim that once memes enter into an evolutionary process through human culture, human behaviour no longer answers directly to biological evolution. In fact, the flow of memes in culture may have a noticeable effect on the flow of genes in a population. To illustrate this, Dawkins describes religious celibacy as a meme that effects what genes enter into the gene pool. In this case, the meme, not the gene, is the primary determiner of natural selection.

With an evolutionary theory of memes, Dawkins puts forward a hypothesis describing culture formation, in which a wide variety of ideas (memes) compete for the attention of the individuals who propagate them. This explains how traditions, culture, and perhaps even language come about. For Dawkins, a persistent institution or tradition such as a church consists of a nexus of memes that reinforce one another: “Perhaps we could regard an organized church, with its architecture, rituals, laws, music, art, and written tradition, as a co-adapted stable set of mutually-assisting memes” (197). So a cultural institution, a way of life, or a set of practices gets set up, in this account, as a self-reinforcing meme-complex. In this way, such a position makes it easy to tell a story of how culture came to be the way it is, without reducing it to competition between genes.

Despite Dawkins' latent hostility toward religious institutions (evident in the fact that almost all

of his examples of memes border on a critique of the legitimacy of truth claims of religious people), his speculative theory of memes represents an important insight that is (surprisingly) compatible with the work Martin Heidegger, and Hannah Arendt and is important for thinking about ethical responsibility and culture.

In a somewhat militant and over-zealous tone, Dawkins ends his discussion of memes with what I find to be a key insight that deserves unpacking (and maybe a bit of rhetorical defusing):

“We have the power to defy the selfish genes of our birth and, if necessary, the selfish memes of our indoctrination... We are built as gene machines and cultured as meme machines, but we have the power to turn against our creators. We, alone on earth, can rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators” (*The Selfish Gene*, 201).

What Dawkins is getting at here is not all that different from Heidegger’s discussion of our thrownness into being with others and our inescapable cultural heritage. In an odd way, Heidegger makes precisely the same case in *Being and Time* as Dawkins does in the quote above. Heidegger explains, “The resoluteness in which Dasein comes back to itself discloses the actual factual possibilities of authentic existing in terms of the heritage which that resoluteness takes over as thrown. Resolute coming back to thrownness involves *handing oneself over* to traditional possibilities, although not necessarily *as* traditional ones” (*Being and Time*, 365). For Heidegger, “thrownness” means that we are already placed in a world even before we stop to think about the fact that we are a self at all. We’re fundamentally constituted by the world and by the rhythms of regular life that we see around us every day (which Heidegger calls “the they”). So in the spirit of Heidegger and in terms of Dawkins’ memes, we might say that our social lives are built out of the meme pool of our culture. Our individuality and self-expression is only possible by means of the meme materials available through everyday life in our culture.

One of Heidegger’s main concerns in *Being and Time* is that, though we are thoroughly constituted by our cultural heritage to the extent that we can only understand ourselves in its terms, we are not fully determined by it. When we revisit our thrownness into our culture and tradition in a “resolute” way, we hold ourselves distinct from it while being dependent on it for being an individual in the first place. In this way, we are able to hold ourselves at a critical distance from it, which gives us the ability to approach it with creativity rather than simply continuing on in its predetermined trajectory. When a person comes to grasp his or her individuality and take responsibility for it apart from the pressures of “the they,” Heidegger says that this person has entered into *authenticity*.

Though Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger were lovers in life and contemporaries in German philosophy, Arendt does not use much of Heidegger’s terminology. But their concerns seem to converge on this point, a point that Richard Dawkins also seems to think important. Arendt considers it imperative that, after the devastation of World War II, we come to grips with the fact that we are not fully determined by our culture, that we are paving our own path rather than one set out for us from which we cannot deviate. “[E]ach new generation,” says Arendt, “indeed every human being as he inserts himself between infinite past and an infinite future, must discover and ploddingly pave it anew.” (*Between Past and Future*, 13).

It seems to me that Arendt would echo Richard Dawkins idea, and perhaps even his passion, that we not consider ourselves dominated by the genes and the memes that constitute us. We have the freedom and the responsibility to build our own future because we are not predetermined by the workings of our bodies or our society.

Gadamer, following Heidegger, also emphasizing this point, describing the human person as “historically effected consciousness” that is fully constituted by being embedded in a historical tradition. Our prejudices (in the way Gadamer describes them) are given to us, we don’t choose them: “history does not belong to us; we belong to it” (TM 278). However, in acknowledging this, Gadamer aims to preserve, as Heidegger did, the freedom of the human person: “However much we emphasize that historically effected consciousness itself belongs to the effect what is essential to it as consciousness is that it can rise above that of which it is conscious” (337). According to Gadamer, this ability to rise above that of which a person is conscious makes humans distinct from other animals, which are simply embedded in environments.

“The argument I shall advance, surprising as it may seem coming from the author of the earlier chapters is that, for an understanding of the evolution of modern man, we must begin by throwing out the gene as the sole basis of our ideas on evolution” (191).

“I think that a new kind of replicator has recently emerged on this very planet. It is staring us in the face. It is still in its infancy, still drifting clumsily about in its primeval soup, but already it is achieving evolutionary change at a rate that leaves the old gene panting far behind. The new soup is the soup of human culture” (192).

“Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation” (192).

“Fundamentally, the reason why it is good policy for us to try to explain biological phenomena in terms of gene advantage is that genes are replicators. As soon as the primeval soup provided conditions in which molecules could make copies of themselves, the replicators themselves took over. For more than three thousand million years, DNA has been the only replicator worth talking about in the world. But it does not necessarily hold these monopoly rights for all time. Whenever conditions arises in which a new kind of replicator *can* make copies of itself, the new replicators *will* tend to take over, and start a new kind of evolution of their own. Once this evolution begins, it will in no necessary sense be subservient to the old. The old gene-selected evolution, by making brains, provided the soup in which the first memes arose. Once self-copying memes had arisen, their own, much faster, kind of evolution took off. We biologists have assimilated the idea of genetic evolution so deeply that we tend to forget that it is only one of many possible kinds of evolution” (194).

“Some memes, like some genes, achieve brilliant short-term success in spreading rapidly, but do not last long in the meme pool” (194).

“If a meme is to dominate the attention of a human brain, it must do so at the expense of ‘rival’ memes. Other commodities for which memes compete are radio and television time, billboard

space, newspaper column-inches, and library shelf-space” (197).

“Perhaps we could regard an organized church, with its architecture, rituals, laws, music, art, and written tradition, as a co-adapted stable set of mutually-assisting memes” (197).

“Memes and genes may often reinforce each other, but they sometimes come into opposition” (198).

“I conjecture that co-adapted meme-complexes evolve in the same kind of way as co-adapted gene-complexes. Selection favours memes that exploit their cultural environment to their own advantage. This cultural environment consists of other memes which are also being selected. The meme pool therefore comes to have the attributes of an evolutionarily stable set, which new memes find it hard to invade” (199).

“We have the power to defy the selfish genes of our birth and, if necessary, the selfish memes of our indoctrination... We are built as gene machines and cultured as meme machines, but we have the power to turn against our creators. We, alone on earth, can rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators” (201).

Arendt

“each new generation, indeed every human being as he inserts himself between infinite past and an infinite future, must discover and ploddingly pave it anew.” (BWP 13)

“Action, to be free, must be free from motive on one side, from its intended goal as a predictable effect on the other. This is not to say that motives and aims are not important factors in every single act, but they are its determining factors, and action is free to the extent that it is able to transcend them” (BWP 150).

“Because he *is* a beginning, man can begin; to be human and to be free are one and the same. God created man in order to introduce into the world the faculty of beginning: freedom” (166).

“It is in the very nature of every new beginning that it breaks into the world as an ‘infinite improbability,’ and yet it is precisely this infinitely improbable which actually constitutes the very texture of everything we call real. Our whole existence rests, after all, on a chain of miracles, as it were—the coming into being of the earth, the development of organic life on it, the evolution of mankind out of the animal species” (168).

“The decisive difference between the ‘infinite improbabilities’ on which the reality of our earthly life rests and the miraculous character inherent in those events which establish historical reality is that, in the realm of human affairs, we know the author of ‘miracles.’ It is men who perform them—men who because they have received the twofold gift of freedom and action can establish a reality of their own” (169).

Heidegger

“Publicness initially controls every way in which the world and Dasein are interpreted, and it is always right, not because of an eminent and primary relation of being to ‘things,’ not because it has explicitly appropriate transparency of Dasein at its disposal, but but because it does not get to ‘the heart of the matter,’ because it is insensitive to every difference of level and genuineness” (124).

“*The they is an existential and belongs as a primordial phenomenon to the positive constitution of Dasein*” (125).

“The self of everyday Dasein is the *they-self*, which we distinguish from the *authentic self*, that is, the self which has explicitly grasped itself” (125).

“We shall call this character of being of Dasein which is veiled in its whence and whither, but in itself all the more openly disclosed, this ‘that it is,’ the *thrownness* of this being into its there; it is thrown in such a way that it is the there as being-in-the-world” (131).

“The resoluteness in which Dasein comes back to itself discloses the actual factual possibilities of authentic existing in terms of the heritage which that resoluteness takes over as thrown. Resolute coming back to thrownness involves *handing oneself over* to traditional possibilities, although not necessarily *as* traditional ones.” - Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 365 (2010 Stambaugh revision).

Gadamer

“However much we emphasize that historically effected consciousness itself belongs to the effect what is essential to it as consciousness is that it can rise above that of which it is conscious. The structure of reflexivity is fundamentally given with all consciousness. Thus this must also be the case for historically effected consciousness” (TM 337).

“To have a world means to have an orientation towards it. To have an orientation toward the world, however, means to keep oneself so free from what one encounters of the world that one can present it to oneself as it is. This capacity is at once to have a world and to have a language. The concept of *world* is thus opposed to the concept of *environment*, which all living beings in the world possess” (441).

“Moreover, unlike all other living creatures, man’s relationship to the world is characterized by *freedom from environment*. This freedom implies the linguistic constitution of the world” (441).

“Man’s freedom in relation to the environment is the reason for his free capacity for speech and also for the historical multiplicity of human speech in relation to the world” (441).

“Inasmuch as the tradition is newly expressed in language, something comes into being that had not existed before and that exists from now on” (458).

“In fact history does not belong to us; we belong to it. Long before we understand ourselves

through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live. The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. *That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being*" (TM 278).