
”Memetics is Dead! Long Live Memetics!”: The importance of conceptual framing in replication-based approaches to evolution

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Abstract

As a scientific concept, the meme had a short, tumultuous life. Born with a bang in the provocative final chapter of Dawkins (1976), it died with a whimper three decades later when the *Journal of Memetics* closed ”due to a lack of quality submissions,” (Edmonds 2005). What happened?

The shift of conceptual frame Dawkins performed when he looked at the world ”from the gene’s-eye-view” has been powerfully employed to explain biological complexity, yet failed to provide a lens onto the subtleties of cultural organisms. Here I demonstrate that the difficulty of adopting the ”meme’s-eye-view” of culture with anything like the rigor of the genocentric view of biology eluded not only Dawkins (1976, 1982), but also Dennett (1991, 1995), whose wide influence proved disastrous for the burgeoning field of memetics. Dennett’s focus on semantics over syntax leaves his theory unable to demonstrate the existence of replicators forming a lineage-exactly the kind of individual we’re looking for to justify shifting our point of view in the first place (Hull 1982, 1988). After showing how Dennett used the meme to cloak a theory of cognition and culture based on non-Darwinian type/token relations in the dubious language of ”information,” I draw together work in material agency and evolutionary development to reexamine what it would mean to take the hypothesis of extra-genetic replicators (memes) seriously, what lineages thus formed should look like, how we could visualize them, and why such an approach is still worth pursuing.

Work Cited

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