

It's not me! It's my genes! Or is it my memes?

Noncommercial use is encouraged. Commercial use only with my written consent. Feedback is appreciated.

© Ana Viseu -- May 7, 2000

In 1976 Richard Dawkins published *The Selfish Gene*, in which he lays the argument that genes replicate, not because that is what is good for us, but rather because it is what is good for them. Then, came genetics and DNA, the source of life. And with genetics we discovered that most of whom we are--at a biological level--is in the hands of our genes. Put simply, genes are "any hereditary information" and when combined they form DNA. It is the structure of the DNA that makes each of us be the way we are, according to this view.

Research in the area of genetics has been in the order of the day for some time now and most of us are familiar with some aspects of it. But, in one of the courses I took during last term (on education of all things) I was surprised to hear about the 'anger gene'. Apparently, science has found that anger is caused by a gene. The conclusion being that if your 3-year-old is prone to bad temper and distress, you should beware because it may last forever. However, you can also be relieved, it's not your fault. It's your child's genes.

Dawkins also points out that genes are not the only type of replicators, there are also memes [1]. Memes, just like genes, are composed of information, but of a different sort. Memes live in the infosphere, the place where cultural evolution takes place [2]. Memes stand to culture, as genes to biology. That is, they are the cause and drive of cultural evolution. Let's see how it works. Memes are ideas that replicate themselves by jumping from brain to brain. Urban myths--such as the woman drying up the cat in the microwave--are examples of memetic replication. The other characteristic of memes is that they are 'selfish' (just like genes), that is, their main interest is to replicate themselves, independent of the goodness or badness to their hosts. For example, the idea of 'drinking 'till you drop' is common among university freshmen. However, this idea clearly endangers their studies (and health!). Finally, the argument is that there are far more memes than brains, and thus, "[w]henver there is any spare thinking capacity memes will come along and use it up"[3].

Not everything is a meme. In principle, first person experiences are not memes. However, the pervasiveness of memes is so great that it is impossible to distinguish between what is, and what isn't a meme. In the end, "[memes] are the very stuff of our minds. Our memes is who we are"[4].

Thus, from now, whenever necessary, you should use the greatest excuse of all: "It's not me! It's my genes! Or is it my memes?"

But, on a more serious level, what are the real implications of such a (dangerous) approach to the world?

The first, and already stated above, is the de-responsibilization that comes along with such a view. If not we but the memes themselves are responsible for their replication then who is the accountable actor: the individual, or the meme?

The second, and as important, is the increasing de-humanization of our environment (and of ourselves). By de-humanization I mean the loss of the sense of the "whole". By constantly dividing the person into small independent units, the meaning of personhood is lost. As Steven Talbott puts it--in the field of medicine--by paying so much attention to the genes in the microscope we seem to have lost the patient [5].

This leads directly into the third point, that of the reduction to information. If we are but our genes and memes, and these are composed of information, then it follows that we are also information. In a talk given at the McLuhan Program Paul Levinson stated that the digital divide is not between those who have access and those who don't, but rather between that which can be digitized and that which can't. Well, if we are nothing but information then we can certainly be assembled and reassembled at will. In a way its a reversal of the hopes expressed some years ago about new technologies. Back then the hope was that new technologies with their networking features, would reconnect us to ourselves, and thus enhance the human in us. Apparently, however, it is us who become more and more digital, and virtually expressed in a language of 1s and 0s. It is us who become a social prosthesis for the virtual.

The supremacy of information is certainly not new. We have all heard that we live in an information society, where information is the main asset. But, in order for information to become knowledge--that is for information to be of any use--it needs to be interpreted. This implies, that information can never be neutral it contains meaning. Well, the same for our memes. Dennett argues that "what is preserved and transmitted in cultural evolution is information--in a media-neutral, language neutral sense" [6]. But neither language nor the media can ever be neutral, the simple fact that I write these lines giving them a 'public shape' radically changes their content.

If this is true, then the idea of memes fighting with memes for the sake of memes sounds implausible. The fact of the matter is that what gives meaning to information is the fact that we are not isolated individuals but rather social beings who live in communities with certain social practices and dynamics. We are not (and should not be) passive receivers of these practices, but rather active (re)producers and, this activity implicates choice and responsibility.

References:

[1] For more information see Susan Blackmore, *The Meme Machine*, (1999) and Daniel Dennett, *Darwin's dangerous idea* (1991). Blackmore represents the 'strong meme' stand, for her just about everything can, and should, be explained by memetic logic. Blackmore advocates that we, ourselves are nothing but a memeplex (a group of coadapted memes) to which she gives the name of selfplex. Thus, all our expressions of individuality are indeed a victory of a successful meme. Dennett stands for a 'softer meme' version.

[2] Dennett, p. 347

[3] Blackmore, p. 41

[4] Ibid, p. 22; see also Dennett, pp. 367-368.

[5] Talbott, lecture at CFP 2000. See also his book (1995).

[6] Dennett, pp. 353-354