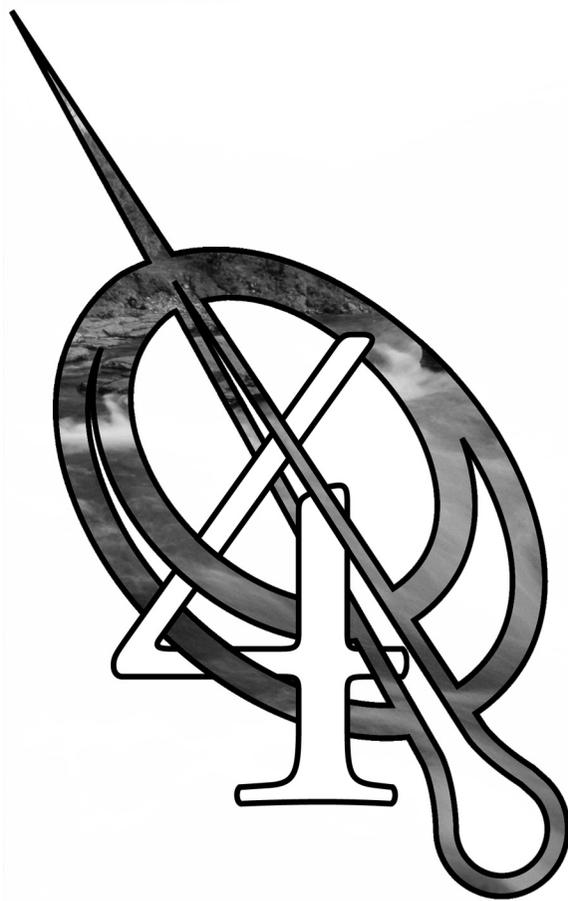


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a philosophical argument for
Meme(tic)s

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THE GREATEST IMPACT OF Darwinism was arguably its offer of a plausible account of the natural emergence of life. For the first time it became possible to fully describe how complex, efficient organisms could arise from their simpler ancestors without requiring the postulation of an intelligent creator. This dramatic shift in perspective caused a reevaluation of the assumptions of many fields of inquiry, including psychology, sociology, and philosophy. Currently, the majority of academics and intellectuals accept that man is not a perfect organism produced by a divine intelligence, but rather, the product of a natural process of slow, systematic change.

There is, however, one area in which such a shift in perspective did not occur: our relationship to our own thoughts. Just as we once observed the complexity and efficiency of life and concluded that it could only be the work of a sentient creator, we presently assume that human thought is the product of an intelligent design: our own. Despite the wide currency of the Darwinian perspective, the notion of ourselves as the intelligent designers of our thoughts still lies at the root of our self-definition. Considering the enormous advances in scientific knowledge that followed the rise of Darwinism, it would be worthwhile to question the role of man as intelligent designer as best we can.

In the clearest possible terms, immediate experience reveals to us that we are the authors of our thoughts, or at the very least the arbiters of them — we experience such authorship when we think creatively, and arbitration when we choose to ponder one idea instead of another. I am writing this essay, and thus I am the creator of the ideas within it. You are reading this essay, and, presumably, intelligently deciding whether or not you will accept the ideas presented. In the face of such overwhelming evidence, we are left with little choice but to conclude that our thoughts are the spontaneous, deliberate products of our free-willing minds.

We consider ourselves unique and anomalous in this respect. Our newfound evolutionary perspective has allowed us to ascribe a sort of mindlessness onto the whole of nature apart from ourselves, describing it as the product of a blind mechanical process, devoid of the intelligence, creative power, and deliberative faculty that we alone possess. When confronted with the embarrassment of a computer with calculative capabilities exceeding our own (at chess, say), our immediate defense is that machines cannot think creatively, critically, intentionally, or reflexively. We believe ourselves to have entirely unique and incredibly anomalous powers, the possession and use of which frees us — somehow, in some way — from the laws that govern the rest of the universe. Just as Creationism was unshakable before Darwinism, we have never been able to escape this conclusion, for no other has been consistent with the evidence available, and no new tool analogous to the theory of evolution has been offered.

The meme, a recent invention of evolutionary theory, seems a likely candidate. Though its scientific validity has been in question since its proposal, there is a substantial philosophical case for memetics which has yet to be made, and its potential philosophical ramifications are significant.

The first section of this essay briefly describes the theory of memetics, and rebuts a few of the immediate arguments against it. The second contains a philosophical argument for the theory. The third is an examination of the philosophical implications of memetics, particularly focusing on the similarity between the pragmatic and memetic perspectives. The lesser goal is to provide a philosophical account of memetics, and the greater is to make a convincing case for memetics as an object worthy of further philosophical consideration and investigation.

I: THE THEORY OF MEMETICS

Broadly defined, a meme is a “unit of culture”—a phrase, a way of dressing, an idea, and so forth—which behaves like a gene. Proposed by the evolutionary theorist Richard Dawkins in a speculative afterthought to *The Selfish Gene*,¹ the idea was initially slow to catch on. Recently, however, its adoption by a number of prominent authors — most notably Daniel Dennett² and Susan Blackmore³ — has rekindled interest in the meme, and a small community of scholars has sprung up around the idea, publishing articles, a dedicated online journal⁴ and a flurry of books, both popular and academic.⁵ Work on the subject has been rather insular, however, and as this paper has the general philosophical public as its intended audience, I will quickly paraphrase the foundations of the idea before making my argument for it.

A gene can be usefully defined as a high-fidelity biological replicator, i.e., any portion of a chromosome that can pass an intact copy of itself on to the next generation.⁶ By determining the phenotype of an organism, a gene can influence that organism’s chances of reproducing, and therefore its own. A gene becomes prevalent in a population only by producing more copies of itself than its competitors.

Like a gene, a meme is a replicator; it is a “unit of culture” which is able to reproduce itself with a high degree of fidelity. Where the gene proliferates through the population of organisms it inhabits, the meme’s environment is the human mind, and it reproduces by transmitting itself from one mind to another. The degree to which a meme will become widespread in a population of minds is therefore dependent on its reproductive fitness, which in turn is determined by its influence on the minds that it inhabits.

¹ Dawkins, Richard. *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford University Press, 1976. Hereafter: *Selfish Gene*.

² Dennett, Daniel. “Memes and the Exploitation of Imagination.” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 48(2):127135, 1990.

—. *Consciousness Explained*. Little Brown & Co., 1991.

—. *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*. Simon & Schuster, 1995. Hereafter: *Dangerous*.

³ Blackmore, Susan. *The Meme Machine*. Oxford University Press, 1999. Hereafter: *Meme Machine*.

⁴ The Journal of Memetics – Evolutionary Models of Information Transmission; <http://jom-emit.cfpm.org/>

⁵ In his essay “Taking Memetics Seriously” (Hull, David. “Taking Memetics Seriously.” *Aunger 2001*: 43-57, 2001.), David Hull attempts to date the beginning of serious study of memetics: “My intuitive guess is that memetics as an active research program is quite new, no older than a dozen years. During this period numerous workers from a variety of backgrounds have devoted themselves to expanding on the notion of memetic evolution – and no higher standard than voting with one’s career exists in science.”

⁶ *Selfish Gene*, p. 28.

Since resources are limited, genes which are good at replicating themselves will survive, and those which are not will become extinct. The maximization of reproductive potential over its lifespan is therefore the only measure of success for a gene, and we should assume that a gene continues to exist solely because it is a good replicator. To use Dawkins' famous anthropomorphization, genes must be "selfish" — if they are to survive, their only "goal" must be to maximize their own reproductive potential.

Chain letters are an excellent example of memes at work:⁷ they are highly prolific because they have hit on a way of hijacking human minds with an instruction set which ensures their own reproduction. Furthermore, since each "child" carries the same set of instructions, it is just as capable of reproduction as its parent.⁸ The chain letter is widespread simply because of its reproductive potential — in fact, it is so perfectly designed for reproduction that it is difficult to imagine it failing. Despite this, however, a chain letter has no other redeeming qualities. It contains no truth, and does no good to anyone, including its originator; it is reproduced because it can be, and nothing more. Like a gene, a meme such as a chain letter must be "selfish," concerned only with its own reproductive potential, and completely blind to qualities such as truth or value.

This example is typical of the "weak" claim of memetics, in which the meme is described as a virus, parasitizing our otherwise reasonable minds for its own ends.⁹ This makes for riveting reading, but as long as we are only talking about one meme at a time, as long as we have no broader context, it can be little more than an interesting narrative — a description, not an explanation. The weak claim is not very hard to swallow, but neither is it very interesting, at least as philosophers use that word.

By contrast, the strong claim¹⁰ of memetics is both dubious and fascinating. The weak claim states, “Some ideas are memes, and act similarly to biological replicators.” The strong claim concurs, and expands the assertion to, “*All* ideas are memes, and they *are* replicators.” Dan Sperber, a cultural evolutionist and prominent critic of memetics, describes the potential impact of the strong claim as follows:

Once the general idea of a meme is understood — and especially if it is understood fairly loosely — it is all too easy to see human social life as teeming with memes. More generally, aren’t words, songs, fashions, political ideas... and just about everything cultural, items that get copied again and again, with the more successful items managing to invade more minds over longer periods of historical time, and to recruit those minds to further their own propagation? If this were so, if culture were made of memes in Dawkins’ strong sense, then the study of culture could — and arguably should — be recast as a science of memes or ‘memetics.’ The Darwinian model of selection could be used, with proper adjustments, to explain the properties, the variety and the evolution of culture, just as it explains the properties, the variety, and the evolution of life.¹¹

In the strong claim (which I will refer to simply as “memetics” from here on), the sum total of all memes (that is, all of human culture) make up an evolutionary system, and undergo natural selection just as genes do. This is at the very least initially plausible because evolution as proposed by Darwin is *substrate neutral*: evolution will take place in any system in which the proper conditions are present, regardless of its composition. These conditions are variation, heredity, and differential fitness;¹² in other words, if the elements of a system have varying characteristics which are passed on through reproduction and which influence the success of reproduction, natural selection will take place. According to memetics, human culture is made up of such elements, and should therefore be considered an evolutionary system.

⁷ The chain letter is probably the least controversial canonical example of a meme; Dan Sperber has supported it (Sperber, Dan. “An Objection to the Memetics Approach to Culture.” Auger 2001: 163-173, 2001. pp. 163-164. Hereafter: Sperber.) and it is one of the few memes that it is open to mathematical analysis. The interested (and the skeptical) will find an excellent statistical analysis of chain letter mutations at <http://www.silcom.com/~barnowl/chain-letter/evolution.html>, as well as an extensive bibliography.

⁸ There can, of course, be errors such as word substitution in the reproduction process, but as long as the letter still instructs its recipient to «copy me!» with sufficient strength, the letter will continue to reproduce, albeit with a new mutation that distinguishes it from other lines of descent. See the Internet address referred to in note 3 for more information.

⁹ Dawkins, Richard. “Viruses of the Mind.” *Dennett and His Critics: Demystifying Mind*. Ed. Bo Dahlbom. Blackwell Publishers, 1995.

¹⁰ The distinction between the weak and strong claims is adapted from Sperber, p. 164.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Dangerous*, p. 343.

Despite its initial plausibility, the validity of the theory has been vigorously debated in recent years, and has not gained even remotely wide acceptance in the academic community. Even a cursory survey of the published literature diagnoses the problem: those who aren't immediately fascinated by the theory haven't been giving a compelling reason to accept it. Most such objections come from scientists, and not without reason: even among those working in the field there seems to be little consensus on its finer qualities, or the boundaries of its application. An evolutionary biologist considering memetics might naturally wish to conduct a statistical analysis of the propagation of a meme within a population, but will likely become discouraged upon discovering that there are no standard units of measurement, no means of data collection, and most damningly, no real agreement on which elements of culture or behavior should and should not be considered memes. Susan Blackmore, arguably the most prominent memeticist, has argued that memes are only those behaviors which are acquired through imitation,¹³ and the inclusion of her definition in the *Encyclopedia of Evolution*¹⁴ would give her the strength of authority, if it weren't for the fact that within the same reference volume Daniel Dennett defines memes as "packets of information" which are replicated, regardless of the behavioral means employed.¹⁵

Until these issues are resolved, the possibility of a science of memetics seems questionable. Dennett himself is pessimistic:

[Biological] species are invisible without a modicum of stasis, but remember, too, that this is an epistemological, not a metaphysical, point: if species weren't rather static, we couldn't *find out* and organize the facts needed to do certain kinds of science; that wouldn't show, however, that the phenomena weren't governed by natural selection. Similarly, the conclusion here would be a pessimistic *epistemological* conclusion: even if memes *do* originate by a process of "descent with modification," our chances of cranking out a science that charts that descent are slim.¹⁶

However, the implication of Dennett's pessimism is significant: despite the inherent difficulties to any phenomenal investigation of memes, we don't need to throw out the metaphysical possibility of a science along with the epistemological. Scientists are unlikely to investigate memetics without the latter, but philosophers are subject to no such constraints, and the lack of empirical evidence in favor of memetics will not invalidate a philosophical argument for it.

There is one more argument of this type that must be laid to rest. We have noted above that memetics is possible because Darwinian evolution is substrate neutral — but we still must offer some account of what this substrate might be. The simple answer is that memes are electro-chemically encoded in the neural network of the brain, and it typically elicits a simple counterargument: in that case, mustn't every instance of a meme be accompanied by an identical brain structure? It must be conceded that this is unlikely, but this admission does not mean that the meme cannot truly exist. Dennett responds to this argument by noting that a meme no more needs to be reduced to its substrate than a gene does — the latter, like the former, is made up of transcribable information physically encoded.¹⁷ He concludes,

Those who question whether memes exist because they cannot see what material thing a meme could be should ask themselves if they are equally dubious about whether words exist. The word *cat* isn't made out of some of the ink on this page, and a recipe for chocolate cake isn't made out of flour and chocolate.¹⁸

If the lack of an identifiable and universal substrate were a legitimate criteria for the falsification of a theory, we would have to reject far more fields than memetics (cognitive psychology, for one, since it is the study of the functional properties of the mind and brain, abstracted from physical particulars). Work in philosophy of language would suffer equally, insofar as it would be necessary to locate a universal brain structure corresponding to “words” before discussion could even begin. Likewise, we should not deny ourselves the opportunity to examine memetics philosophically simply because we cannot precisely identify a universal brain structure which encompasses every meme.

¹³ *Meme Machine*.

Blackmore, Susan. (1998.) «Imitation and the Definition of a Meme,» *Journal of Memetics – Evolutionary Models of Information Transmission*: 2 (1998). http://jom-emit.cfpm.org/1998/vol2/blackmore_s.html.

¹⁴ Blackmore, Susan. (2002.) Entry for «meme.» *Encyclopedia of Evolution*, 2002.

¹⁵ Dennett, Daniel. (2002.) «The New Replicators.» *The Encyclopedia of Evolution*, 2002.

¹⁶ *Dangerous*, pp. 355-6.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 82-83.

II: THE ARGUMENT FOR MEMETICS

First, a note about terminology: I have chosen terms which are easily understood, but must qualify my usage of them. The word “idea” in the following argument can be read in the common sense of the word; examples might be democracy, racism, the wheel, solipsism or the belief that aliens abducted Elvis. This interpretation will provide the reader with a more or less accurate model of the processes I describe. However, taken broadly my definition should encompass anything that is included in “culture” — a category which is not limited to those mental objects we commonly call “ideas.” For example, the tendency to pronounce the word ‘nuclear’ as ‘NOOK-yuh-ler’ is certainly cultural, and therefore falls under what I will be calling “ideas.” By ‘acceptance,’ I mean the process by which an idea in the broader sense becomes internalized by the mind it has been presented to, and therefore capable of further reproduction, whether or not a conscious decision making process took place. If a mind has accepted an idea in this fashion, I will describe it as “holding” that idea.

To begin with, what problem are we trying to solve? If we look back on history, it is obvious that cultures change, or ‘evolve’ in the loose sense of the word — certain ideas become popular, while others fall out of favor. The question we must set for ourselves is, “*Why and by what means* does this change take place?” We are therefore looking for

place within cultures over the course of decades or centuries, but also the minuscule cultural changes that occur every time an individual accepts or rejects an idea. There are a multitude of possible explanations for these phenomena, including those offered by cultural evolutionists, anthropologists, and historians, but the feature that distinguishes memetics from these alternatives is that *ideas are considered selfish replicators, which exist only because they are able to propagate themselves*, and we should rightfully call any theory of culture which makes such a claim to be memetic. Finally, we are making a philosophical investigation, so we should start from a few stable premises and explore their implications. A likely way to begin, therefore, should be a constraint on the types of theories of cultural change we may propose:

P1: *Any plausible theory of cultural change must be consistent with the findings of science generally, and the theory of evolution by natural selection specifically.*¹⁹

For many readers, this point will not require debate. As noted above, the theory of evolution is so well established, having been confirmed countless times over, that anyone who accepts the epistemological validity of science and its methods as a whole is almost immediately bound to agree with it. It therefore serves excellently as the logical foundation for our argument.

Of course, there are numerous philosophical stances which would negate the truth value of science, and thus of evolution, and these must be dealt with if the argument is to have any power. The conceptual space of philosophy is so fragmented and so various, however, that it would be impossible to refute each of these positions, among them skepticism, solipsism, theism, et al, individually. In general, however, we should note that all of these are extreme epistemological positions: the skeptic must maintain that effect and cause are not contingent upon one another, though science has made great advances based on that very assumption; the theist must first provide an argument for his faith, a historically doomed venture. The evidence is overwhelmingly in favor of the scientific method's efficacy — or, more specifically, the efficacy of taking the scientific method to be true — and if there is a reasonable argument that shows we would be better off if we did *not* take it to be true, the burden of proof is on the dissenter.

For now, we must take the findings of science, and specifically the theory of evolution, to be true, for otherwise we must reject them all together, which seems to me a far worse result than anything memetics could produce.

P₂: *As constrained in P₁, a theory of cultural change must consider human behavior to be the product of evolution, and accordingly a physical brain process. Since the decision to accept or reject an idea is a type of behavior, we should consider acceptance and rejection to be physical events, and thus subject to the same causal laws as all physical events.*

P₃: *Since they interact causally with human behavior, ideas should be considered physical objects—that is, either identical with or supervenient to a physical substrate in the brain—and therefore subject to causal laws.*

¹⁹ In the forward to *Aunger*, Daniel Dennett suggests the same constraint: “It is obvious that there are patterns of cultural change—evolution in the neutral sense—and any theory of cultural change worth more than a moment’s consideration will have to be Darwinian in the minimal sense of being *consistent with* the theory of evolution by natural selection of *Homo sapiens*. The demands of this minimal Darwinism are far from trivial, and the ferocity with which Darwinian accounts of the evolution of language and sociality are attacked by some critics form the humanities and social sciences show that in some influential quarters, mere consistency with evolutionary theory is not yet the accepted constraint it ought to be.” (Dennett, Daniel; Introduction to *Darwinizing Culture*.)

These two points will be the most difficult in the argument, because their plausibility is dependent on the specific position one takes within the philosophy of mind. Many readers may find the above statements dubious, because they seem to presuppose the existence of psychophysical laws; for philosophers, the demand for consistency with evolution is not enough to assuage doubt. The conflict is an old one. Donald Davidson suggests that it stems from an apparent contradiction between the following three principles:

The first principle asserts that at least some mental events interact casually with physical events. [...] if a man perceives that a ship is approaching, then a ship approaching must have caused him to come believe that a ship is approaching. [...]

The second principle is that where there is causality, there must be a law: events related as cause and effect fall under strict deterministic laws. [...]

The third principle is that there are no strict deterministic laws on the basis of which mental events can be predicted and explained.²⁰

The third principle, which is widely accepted, seems to contradict P2 and P3, which depend on human behavior obeying nomological causality. However, if the possible dissenting positions are divided according to Davidson's model (materialism, epiphenomenalism, Cartesian dualism, and anomalous monism), it becomes clear that the difficulty is far less than it first seemed. The materialist is unlikely to disagree with either statement, since he believes all mental events to be physical events, and thus nomological (rejecting Davidson's third principle); while the epiphenomenalist won't be troubled by them, for though he considers mental events anomalous, for him they have no causal efficacy on the physical events which produce them — the physical events are therefore doing all the work of behavior-production, and are free to behave as nomologically as they like. Out of the two positions which would take exception,

the first is Cartesian dualism, which maintains that the mental is separate from the physical and yet has causal efficacy over it. This is the less difficult of the two: dualism is so inconsistent with the theory of evolution that the two are mutually incompatible, and the position has been so thoroughly discredited by now that it is difficult to imagine a proper rebuttal being made from it. As before, the burden of proof lies with the dualist — for now, we will move on.

The final position is anomalous monism, Davidson's own stance, which, as the name suggests, claims that all mental events are physical events, while denying that mental events follow strict causal laws.²¹ The relationship between the mental and the physical is therefore one of supervenience, or dependence without reducibility:

Such supervenience might be taken to mean that there cannot be two events alike in all physical respects but differing in some mental respect, or that an object cannot alter in some mental respect without altering in some physical respect.²²

To say that mental events are supervenient on physical events thus allows us to identify a decision or an idea with a brain process or state without requiring us to “explain them away” by reducing them completely to physical events, just as we would like to say that a particularly moving painting is identical with the pigments spread on the canvas, but reject the idea that the emotional power of the image is “nothing but” the properties of the paint. This is an identity theory which allows for emergent properties: in short, it describes how the mental may be “something more” than the physical and yet ultimately stem from it. Under anomalous monism we can therefore talk about how mental events and states must be dependent on the causal relations between physical objects and states, *despite* the fact that

²⁰ Davidson, Donald. “Mental Events.” *Experience and Theory*, ed. I. Foster and W. Swanson. University of Massachusetts Press. 1970.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

... even if someone knew the entire physical history of the world, and every mental event were identical with a physical, it would not follow that he could predict or explain a single mental event.²³

For those who cannot agree with materialism, therefore, anomalous monism will provide the necessary support for the claim made in P2, albeit in slightly modified form: insofar as we consider acceptance and rejection of ideas to *supervene on* physical events, we can consider them to act causally, for though they do not obey strict causal laws, their existence is dependent upon the physical events with which they are identical, and since the latter must obey causal laws, for our purposes we may treat the former as though they do as well. The simplest way to do this is to eliminate the mental from the discussion altogether — if we can say confidently that any event affecting behavior must be physical insofar as it does so, and thus must be subject to nomological causality. The impossibility of predicting or describing the character of the accompanying *mental* event therefore becomes moot, because it does not alter the description of the behaviors of acceptance and rejection, which are all that we are concerning ourselves with.

P4: *Following P2 and P3, for any individual S and any idea T, whether S will accept or not accept T is dependent on the properties of and interactions between S and T including: the other ideas that S holds (U, and the predispositions of S to accepted one type of idea over another (V); the properties of T (such as its ease of communication); the interactions between U, V and T; the manner in which T is introduced to S, etc. This holds true of the other activities of ideas, including transmission; S will transmit T to other individuals according to all these properties.*

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What this means, in essence, is that we will believe or not believe the ideas presented to us according to the properties of the entire system which includes S, T, U and V, and that *if the properties of the system remain constant the same result will occur every time*. This claim is consistent with both materialism and anomalous monism as presented by Davidson.

To sketch a highly simplified example: the idea of Creationism is presented to Jones. Among the ideas Jones currently holds are those of Darwinism and the scientific method, and he is predisposed to think empirically. Jones is therefore highly unlikely to accept Creationism, because (a) he already holds the idea of Darwinism — the two ideas conflict, and (b) as a result of his predisposition towards empiricism and the already held idea of scientific method, Jones' criteria for acceptable ideas demand that they be empirically verifiable. Were these preconditions not present, Jones might indeed find Creationism acceptable. Indeed, Creationism has been hugely prolific throughout history as a result of properties which make it plausible and speed its proliferation in the right contexts.

phenomenal experience, and that he finds it unpleasant to have an experience which is unaccounted for by any idea, it is easy to see how the idea of himself as “prime mover” might be acceptable to Jones despite its conflict with the idea of evolution. This idea has indeed become relatively widespread, and it has done so by exploiting the predispositions of human minds to accept one idea over another. Here we have an example of an idea being transmitted and held, regardless of its seeming conflict with widely-held ideas, as a result of the interaction of its own properties with the properties of its targets. This brings us to our last point:

There is another subtlety of this conclusion to point out, one to which the example can be extended. Is it possible that Jones could accept an idea which comes into conflict with those he currently holds? The answer is ‘yes,’ if the conditions allow it. Take for example the idea of the human mind as a “prime mover,” which is certainly in conflict with evolution. If we add to the conditions outlined above that Jones is highly predisposed to accept any idea which accounts for and is supported by his immediate

P5: *Following P4, all other things being equal, an idea will be transmitted often and held widely as a result of its own inherent properties. An idea which is “good” at being transmitted and accepted will be transmitted and accepted more often, and thus will be more prevalent within a population.*

As should be clear by now, this conclusion is the primary tenant of memetics, the feature that distinguishes it from competing models of cultural change. Ideas do not proliferate and persist because they are true, or even because we deem them true; rather, they do so because they are *good at traveling* and *good at being accepted*. This is precisely the third property required of an evolutionary system, as well as the feature that distinguishes memetics from competing theories of culture. As for the first two properties, ideas certainly exhibit variation; and what is communication, if not the replication of ideas? Taken as a whole, therefore, human thought — the sum total of every idea in every human mind — should therefore be considered an evolutionary system, in which ideas compete with one another for dominance. The eventual products of such a system are equivalent to those of genetic evolution: due to the influence of natural selection, only those ideas which are best at replicating will survive. We should therefore assume that any idea which continues to exist does so solely because it has done a good job of exploiting its environment — our minds — for its own replication. Every idea is, therefore, a meme.

²⁴ James, William. "What Pragmatism Means." Lecture 2 in *Pragmatism*. Longman Green and Co. 1907: 17-32.

Hereafter: *What Pragmatism Means*

— "Pragmatism and Common Sense". Lecture 5 in *Pragmatism*. Longman Green and Co. 1907: 63-75.

— "Pragmatism and Humanism". Lecture 7 in *Pragmatism*. Longman Green and Co. 1907: 92- 104.

— "The Will to Believe." *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. New York: Dover Publications, 1956.

²⁵ *What Pragmatism Means*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

III: MEMETICS AND PHILOSOPHY.

The broad strokes of the philosophical impact of memetics should now be clear: as a conceptual framework, it is a way of looking at ideas which is at odds with most of Western philosophy. But there is more work to do: to firmly root memetics as a valid philosophical stance, its relevance to traditional philosophical subjects needs to be demonstrated, and some of the specific positions that such a stance might entail require a preliminary examination. In the interest of space I will limit myself to the strongest example I have found: the striking similarity between the theories of truth provided by memetics and the pragmatic philosophy of William James.

One of James' most notable characteristics as a philosopher is his remarkable ability to account for the way people actually behave when working with ideas. Even more striking is the degree to which such these accounts often sound like the work of a memeticist; in fact, examples of this similarity are so numerous²⁴ that I feel our purpose would be better served by quoting one long passage rather than many short ones:

Schiller and Dewey particularly singled out for generalization is the familiar one by which any individual settles into *new opinions*. The process here is always the same. The individual has a stock of old opinion already, but he meets a new experience that puts them to a strain. Somebody contradicts them; or in a reflective moment he discovers that they contradict each other; or he hears of facts with which they are incompatible; or desires arise in him which they cease to satisfy. The result is an inward trouble to which his mind till then had been a stranger, and from which he seeks to escape by modifying his previous mass of opinions. He saves as much of it as he can, for in this matter of belief we are all extreme conservatives. So he tries to change first this opinion, and then that (for they resist change very variously), until at last some new idea comes up which he can graft upon the ancient stock with a minimum of disturbance of the latter, some idea that mediates between the stock and the new experience and runs them into one another most felicitously and expeditiously.²⁵

Here James' work clearly supports the memetic narrative concerning the way in which one idea is accepted over another — the idea which succeeds is that which makes the best fit within the available environment. It also accurately describes a phenomenon that hasn't yet entered our discussion: in an evolutionary system it is likely that any available environmental niche will be filled, assuming that the variation and quantity of its elements is sufficient. Likewise,

if conditions in a mind are such that a certain idea will be much more acceptable there than any other, that idea will inevitably arise there, by virtue of natural selection. This phenomenon becomes especially important when applied to James' following comments on the nature of truth:

This new idea is then adopted as the true one. It preserves the older stock of truths with a minimum of modification, stretching them just enough to make them admit the novelty, but conceiving that in ways as familiar as the case leaves possible. An *outré* explanation, violating all our preconceptions, would never pass for a true account of a novelty... The most violent revolutions in an individual's beliefs leave most of his old order standing. New truth is always a go-between, a smoother-over of transitions. It marries old opinion to new fact so as to ever show a minimum of jolt, a maximum of continuity. We hold a theory true just in proportion to its success in solving this 'problem of maxima and minima.'

... Purely objective truth, truth in whose establishment the function of giving human satisfaction in marrying previous parts of experience with newer parts played no role whatever, is nowhere to be found. The reasons why we call things true is the reason why they *are* true, for 'to be true' *means* only to perform this marriage-function.²⁶

James considers true beliefs to be nothing more than those which are *useful* to us — here he is simply describing a special case of that theory, in which an idea is considered true because it effectively resolves our “inward trouble,” proving itself useful. The last sentence makes his meaning quite clear: such an idea is not simply *called* true, but *is* true, because this is the only sense in which truth has any meaning.

It should be clear that this is the only “truth” which a meme could be said to possess. After all, epistemological truth has no survival value whatsoever for a meme, and memetics is therefore entirely neutral on the subject of truth-value. Of course, an idea which could be verified by the correspondence theory of truth (for example) might be more successful among those who held that theory than another meme, but this proves nothing about either the idea or the theory — after all, an idea which is a lie is likely to be successful among those who accept all lies. From “the meme’s-eye view,” truth and falsity are simply two more selectable characteristics among a vast multitude of alternatives.

The closest the meme has to a measure of worth is its fitness — in other words, how good it is at getting itself accepted into an environment. And insofar as that environment is composed of other ideas, James gives a perfect description of what a meme must do in order to be successful: the other memes residing in environment are probably already quite well entrenched, and would be well-defended against any outsider which tried to usurp them; the successful candidate meme will as a general rule be the one which is able to take up residence while causing the least disturbance. As both James and memetics predict, the idea which best “solves the problem of maxima and minima” is the only one that we will accept. In memetics, as in pragmatism, acceptability might as well be our criterion for truth, as we have no other means by which to judge ideas.

What's more, though we can identify traits which will benefit every meme which possesses them, such as the ability to enter a mind with a minimum of disturbance, it is unlikely that a single meme would possess these traits in relation to *every* mind. As noted above, the idea of Creationism is unlikely to have a high level of fitness within the mind of an evolutionary biologist, regardless of the inherent properties which may make it a good meme. (This mirrors James' own work in *The Will to Believe*, in which he writes of the distinction between "live and dead hypotheses.") This means that memetic truth must be ultimately contextual, for each meme will have a different fitness level, and thus a different truth value, depending on the environment it is found in. This is, of course, consistent with the contextuality present in James' own pragmatic theory of truth.

From this rough sketch we can begin to see how a memeticist-philosopher might begin to think about the traditional problems of philosophy. Specifically, he will probably be inclined to take the pragmatic view of truth as being dependent on efficacy and causality. This, of course, can only be a start, but hopefully it will serve as an indicator to other philosophers that the memetic approach is worth investigating and pursuing. As I have shown, memetics is that strange animal, a scientific theory with both a philosophical justification and philosophical implications. We know we shouldn't ignore it, but how do we deal with it? Philosophers will require much more in order to believe memetics valid, but now memetics may have its foot in the door – and with enough exposure, it should get the fair chance to prove itself, fit or unfit, that every meme deserves.