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Kate Distin, *The Selfish Meme*, Cambridge 2005, pp. 231, pbk. £14.99.

The Selfish Meme establishes independent scholar Kate Distin among the leading memetics scholars. Distin has an exceptional ability to explain complex ideas clearly. The aim of the book is to expand Dawkin's suggestion that cultural evolution occurs via 'memes' - the cultural analogues of genes. The main argument of the book is that the 'meme hypothesis' is internally coherent and could form a solid basis for empirical applications. Distin provides a lucid account of how memes could provide the mechanism for cultural evolution. Distin is also adamant that memetic evolution is consistent with intentional, conscious, and responsible free agents. Distin's book achieves the aim it sets at the outset, but she runs into serious trouble when she claims (at the end of the book) that the meme hypothesis is more than a coherent possibility.

Dawkins' 1976 *The Selfish Gene* argued that genes were the units of biological selection. As the title of this book suggests, *The Selfish Meme* argues that memes (such as ideas, catch-phrases, fashions, or skills) are the units of *cultural* selection. After chapter 1 outlines the argument, chapter 2 introduces the meme hypothesis: the hypothesis that memes operate according to a Darwinian process. Distin notes that both memes and genes are replicators which evolve under conditions of competition. Chapters 3 - 7 offer a concise account of how selection, variation, and replication work in culture. Chapters 8 and 9 examine several commentaries on memetics. Chapters 10 - 12 give an account of the genesis and structure of memes, and how our minds relate to memes. Chapter 13 attempts to apply the meme hypothesis in practice, and chapter 14 concludes the book.

The book makes an important contribution to memetics by successfully exploring how the meme hypothesis *could* work, instead of focusing on how the meme hypothesis successfully explains particular cultural phenomena. The pitfall of the latter approach, which Distin criticizes, is that cultural phenomena can often be explained equally well by alternative (and sometimes mutually exclusive) theories. Distin aims to discover whether the meme hypothesis is reasonable by examining whether its underlying structure is sound. She explains everything we have to know to show that culture could evolve according to a Darwinian model. Just as Mendelian genetics helped explain the mechanism of action of Darwinian natural selection, so memetics may be better understood with Distin's account of memes.

Distin's central argument is that the units of cultural information (memes) are specified by their *representational content*. To borrow Distin's example, the representational content of my thought that 'such and such a book is on the table' is my mental content that carries information about bit of the world (the book). Perhaps because of its analytical rigour, *The Selfish Meme* is more compelling than its competitors. Distin exposes Richard Dawkins distinction between memes and mental viruses as question begging: if Dawkins considers something great, it is a non-viral meme; if not, it is a virus.

The trouble begins when Distin shifts from arguing that the structure of the meme hypothesis is sound to arguing that the meme hypothesis is true. In her conclusion, Distin claims that '[j]ust as the nature of DNA provides the mechanism for biological heredity, so the nature of representational content provides the mechanism for cultural heredity' (pages 200-1).

In fact there is scant evidence for a 'cultural DNA'. For starters, memes store information as representations, but to explain how information is represented, we need a theory of representational content. Yet even Distin acknowledges that philosophers can't decide which theory of representational content is correct. Her theory, she contends, is not inextricably linked to a particular theory of content. But it is partly linked to the 'simple indicator theory of content'. Further, it is conceivable that an acceptable theory of content may never emerge from the

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philosophical debate. An analogous problem in genetics would be if leading chemists disagreed fervently about the very nature of DNA.

The difficulties with the meme hypothesis are compounded at every turn. Controversy surrounds Distin's theory of how memes replicate (page 40), and vary (page 52). Even her account of memes as words and other 'cultural systems of representation' rests on shaky ground. In particular, she admits that there is an ongoing debate about whether language is the medium or the communicator of thought.

Overall, Distin shows that the meme hypothesis cannot be rejected on structural grounds. It is internally consistent and memes *could* play the role in cultural change that genes play in biological change. A model of clarity, the books appeal is wide - from philosophers to sociologists, anyone interested in how cultures change will benefit from reading *The Selfish Meme*. Her rigorous approach makes her theory more palatable than other theories of cultural evolution. However, once Distin claims that the meme hypothesis has been confirmed, problems abound.

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