FAME! MONEY! POWER!

Kate Distin

Kate Distin introduces the theory of the selfish meme – and questions whether we are all 'meme machines'.

Do you want lower taxes? Better schools for your children? Less crime? Lucky for you – all you need to do is vote in the next general election, and all this will be yours!

Well, maybe not. If we really believed that, we'd turn out to vote in far higher numbers than we do. Electoral apathy stems largely from doubt about the difference that our votes will make.

Yet politicians clearly believe that there's some merit in making these promises. Like advertisers, they continue to invest their collective millions in an attempt to sway our opinions. And indeed, like adverts, political campaigns do have some effect. At least some voters will have their minds changed by what they read and hear in the run-up to an election.

This is why the politicians continue to make pledges that most of their constituents, if asked, would say that they don't trust. A voter might have a rational scepticism about these promises, but if the party machine is doing its job well then he will nonetheless find his attention caught by them. And if his attention, once caught, is held, then it might ultimately have an effect on his voting behaviour.

This pattern of competition between ideas for our attention, and the effects that they can have once we accept them, is not unique to politics. Richard Dawkins has suggested that the whole of human culture can be seen in this way — that cultural selection is truly analogous to the natural selection that takes place between competing genes in biology.

Dawkins is not alone in viewing human culture through a Darwinian lens, but having coined the term 'memes' to refer to the units of cultural selection, his name is justly connected in many people's minds with the meme hypothesis. A 'meme'

is his word for a cultural replicator, analogous to the gene in biology.

Since that coinage, in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins himself has not greatly extended his theory. Yet this is a theory that deserves to be reassessed. Its greatest risk is that it might collapse into the trivial assertion that some ideas survive whilst others disappear. Of course cultures change, ideas spread and technology develops, but what do we gain by claiming that this is all due to a genuinely evolutionary process?

One of the advantages of seeing culture as a seething mass of competing ideas, replicating and varying and being selected over time, is that it neatly explains the disconnection between an idea's truth and its success. Is Labour really the best party for the economy? Is it true that the Conservatives would be best on immigration? If most people think so, that's what counts in the battle for votes.

We can ask similar questions in any other area of culture you might care to mention. Are hipsters *honestly* the most flattering option for most women? Or are they so widespread (like many of the derrieres they encase) just because they're fashionable? Is the current number one *really* the best piece of music available this week — or is it just the one that's had the most effective marketing? Is Atkins *truly* the most effective diet, or just the most popular amongst trend-setting celebrities?

Ideas are not guaranteed success by being the most truthful, artists by being the most talented, or mobile 'phone deals by being the best value. The success of any aspect of culture depends on its ability to gain and retain human attention.

For memes, human attention is the equivalent of food and sex. It's what they need in order to survive and reproduce. And their success or failure in the battle for this resource will be determined — as it is for genes — largely by context.

For both genes and memes, 'fitness' is a relative term. When we say that a characteristic increases fitness we mean that it gives advantages *in a certain context.* Outside that context it may well be a disadvantage: picture a cheetah against a

snowy background, or a polar bear against a sub-Saharan one, and you'll see what I mean.

The same is true in culture. In the competition for university admissions tutors' attention, a good private education might once have given certain application forms an advantage — in the current climate it may do the opposite. Politicians, too, know that context is all. Why else would the same candidate sweep to victory in one election and be cast aside in the next? Perhaps she has radically altered her policies; maybe he has since been cowed by scandal. Or just possibly the political landscape has changed so much that old policies and attitudes are now as much use as lungs under water.

Is there no hope, then, for the truth? Are we doomed always to elect the party with the best spin, rather than the party that will actually be best for the country? (The two may coincide, of course, but from a memetic point of view that's all it would be: a coincidence.)

Fortunately for us, one of the most effective ways in which memes can retain our attention is by according with our experience. Do you believe that the earth is flat? No: you've seen evidence that it isn't. Scientists are not just storymakers: their theories are tested against the best available evidence. Nobody would commit his life to a religion if he didn't believe that he had good evidence in its favour. A healthy scepticism — the tendency to check out the truth of what we are told — can help us to match our beliefs to reality.

Some writers have seen in Richard Dawkins's theory the implication that the human mind is nothing but a meme machine. I disagree. As the political parties spin their sound bites towards us, we can choose which to catch and which to throw back. We can *reflect* on the competition between the selfish memes of their policies. We can *judge* them against what we know about the parties' motives; against the evidence of their past actions; against our own circumstances and needs.

The human mind is not just the product of its memes. We are born with a certain mental potential, the gift of our genes. Of course, genes can do nothing without environmental input:

even if you have the genetic potential to be six feet tall, without adequate childhood nutrition you may reach nothing like that height. Just as the body needs nutrition, then, and its muscles waste without exercise, so the human mind needs the cultural nutrition of memes in order to develop its full potential. But memes do not 'build' the mind in the way that genes build the body. Our minds choose, think about, reject, combine and have feelings about memes. We are not just our memes, any more than we are just our genes.

Are we, though, the only species that has memes as well as genes? Does memetics imply that there is something unique — qualitatively as well as quantitatively — about human culture? I would argue that it does. What evolves in culture, as in biology, is essentially *information*, represented in various ways. We humans are not alone in being able to form representations of various aspects of the world — there is evidence that at least some other creatures can, for example, notice differences between quantities of items, or in other words that they have at least a limited ability to count. But we are alone in being able to create and choose between a variety of different systems of representing that information.

We don't just count the items. We talk about their quantity in a variety of natural languages. We represent their quantity in Roman numerals, reject that system in favour of Arabic numerals, and then make choices about the base of our Arabic numeral system. We debate which of these systems is the most useful, discover that the answer depends on the situation, and competently switch between them as functionality or convention demands: binary for computer programming, decimal for basic mathematics, duodecimal when we buy eggs and Roman when we go to the movies.

Uniquely among the species, then, not only can we represent information but we can *meta-represent* it, forming representations of our representations, re-representing them in an alternative format, and extracting information from the format in which we originally encountered it. No longer tied to a particular context, our cultural information is free to evolve in a way that elements of other species' culture cannot.

Other primates have hierarchical social structures, with group leaders and battles for power. We debate methods of democracy and taxation. We condemn our politicians as liars, and then vote for the ones who lie the most convincingly. We despair because there seems to be no way of breaking through to the truth.

But we should not despair. The human capacity for meta-representation, which made possible the evolution of memes, is the very same capacity that can help us to reflect on the worth of the memes that we encounter. If we fall prey to a lurid urban myth, we can check it out and laugh later at our own gullibility. If we elect 'low-tax' politicians who raise taxes by stealth, we can throw them out at the next election.

The theory of the selfish meme will not really bring you fame, money or power — but you already knew that. What it can give us is a greater understanding of the ways in which ideas compete for our attention; a greater awareness of the frequent disconnection between an idea's popularity and its truth. The party that wins an election will be the one whose memes have had the most success in the battle for our attention — but once we see the campaigning in this light, we can begin to make decisions about which of them deserve it. As Dawkins himself put it almost three decades ago, 'We, alone on earth, can rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators.'

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