A meme is similar to a parasite: it infects a biological creature and pushes it to act and think in certain ways. What we today call “culture” is the accumulation of these memes. Memetics is the study of culture by analysis of these memes. Two questions should be distinguished: Whether memetics is worthwhile and offers anything more than trivial and obvious truths, and the validity of conceiving of memes as entities. I argue that while memes may be helpful in guiding our intuitions, the over-extrapolation of genetic scientific notions to culture is misleading and relies on the incorrect notion of a meme as something that, like genes, can be thought of as an independently existing entity.

Memetics applies Darwin’s theory of natural selection to ideas, creating a theory of evolution for culture analogous to the theory of evolution for genetics. For natural selection to occur, you need, to quote Dennett: (1) “variation”; (2) “heredity or replication: the elements have the capacity to create copies or replicas of themselves”; (3) “differential fitness”: a selection pressure, which “selects” the most fit elements for survival and the rest for elimination. Just as organisms have evolved in accordance with these general laws, ideas similarly evolve according to these general laws. The memetic corollaries: (1m) how ideas replicate; (2m) how ideas vary; (3m) what is the “differential fitness” of the idea – in other words, how good is an idea? These three laws guide the evolution of culture.

1 Daniel Dennett, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea* (1995) 343
2 Good meaning a relatively high survival potential related to the environmental circumstances.
Let us memetically analyze the idea of the wheel. It seems a general principle of ideas that they may replicate whenever someone new conceives of it. One could become infected, as it were, by the meme of wheels by reading or hearing about them abstractly. Or, one could see a physical wheel, and then they would have the meme in their mind. So (1m) is satisfied. (2m): We can imagine someone individually working to improve a specific type of wheel, and so the attempts to innovate actually change the idea of the wheel. While the basic structure is still the same, when we compare a car wheel from today and a wooden carriage wheel from two hundred years ago, it is clear that some aspects of the meme have varied, and we can attribute at least part of this variation to active or passive human thought. (3m) Humans with this meme are able to transport objects, and themselves, more easily. The entire transportation economy relies on the wheel now, so removing it would make a lot of things exceedingly difficult. So, once the wheel meme has been incorporated into the societal structure, it is very difficult to remove, and is thus unlikely to be eliminated.

In my memetic analysis of the wheel, we can see how this theory falls short of its goal to offer insightful significant information about culture. My accounts of 1m, 2m, and 3m as they apply to the wheel meme only offered us trivial information that we already knew. If one wants to deduce nontrivial truths from 1m, 2m, and 3m, it seems that one has to grapple with the deeper questions that sociologists and philosophers have already been dealing with. For 1m, is it true that memes replicate? When you convey an idea to me, there is no certainty at all that I am thinking the same exact thought that you wanted to convey. What information is actually being conveyed? For 2m, how is it that humans change the meme? It seems to be a complete misunderstanding of ideas to ever think of them as static
in the same way that genes are static. How can we tell what memes are the same memes, and which memes just look the same (analogy vs. homology)? Genes vary randomly, whereas memes vary with intention. Where does this intentional creativity come from? Dennett offers a persuasive account of a biological notion of creativity; so that is the interesting response; memetics itself is not what helps us understand this question. While memetics doesn’t answer these questions, maybe it is worthwhile insofar as it pushes us to ask certain questions we wouldn’t have asked otherwise.

I am not just straw-manning memetics. When Dennett invokes memetics to explain certain phenomena, he similarly draws simple conclusions that similarly offer either trivial truths or raise these deeper questions, in which case they are only useful in as much as they make us consider these questions:

Other things being equal, memetics predicts that conspiracy-theory memes will persist quite independently of their truth, and the meme for faith is apt to secure its own survival [...] Indeed, the meme for faith exhibits frequency-dependent fitness: it flourishes particularly in the company of rationalistic memes. In a skeptic-poor world, the meme for faith does not attract much attention and hence tends to go dormant in mind, and hence is seldom reintroduced into the infosphere.

The ideas here are 1) conspiracies are difficult to disprove because any evidence contrary to the theory is dismissed as part of the conspiracy and 2) people tend to be less faithful when there are fewer skeptics because there are fewer opportunities to talk about faith because fewer people are objecting to it. These are interesting, and plausible analyses. But memetics doesn’t offer us definitive answers, it merely helps us think about social phenomena in a different way. Either the result from seeing problems memetically is obviously true, like 1, in which case we didn’t need memetics to give us the answer, or the result is an entry point for a deeper conversation that requires going beyond the domain of memetics, like 2. Only in the latter case is memetics useful, and even then only as an entry
point. Confirming the validity of claim 2 requires exploring the survival fitness of faith and a much more thorough societal and psychological understanding that draws on the psychology of religion and dissention, as well as socioeconomics. Dennett might respond that these investigations all fall under the broad sweeping category of “survival fitness.” Perhaps this is right, but my point is that this does not get us very far, and we quickly fall into the same questions requiring hard theoretical work that we were facing before learning about memetics. In the best case, memetics is an “intuition pump,” to use Dennett’s own term, for raising new questions for these disciplines to respond to.

But this innocent memetics can easily turn sour. The spoiling mistake is seeing memes as too directly analogous to genes and parasites - as independently existing objects of cultural categories of thought. Dennett takes the analogy between memes and genes too far, and we can see how it leads him to ignore certain problems raised by the examples he gives. He begins by defining them as “distinct memorable units” like “vendetta” and “reconstructionism.”\(^4\) This seems alright, but later it is very clear that he sees them not as vague memorable units but rather as entities independent from humans: “In particular, the entity that exhibits the Lamarckian talent of passing on an acquired characteristic is not the human agent, but the meme itself.”\(^5\) Memes aren’t merely memorable units like “wheel,” they’re actual entities with their own type of evolution. Dennett gives the example of Mozart thinking to himself “I have nothing to do with [his own brainchildren]” desiring to show our general intuitions that ideas just come to us, which supports the claim that they are independent entities.\(^6\)\(^7\) If this were true, then we have intuitions that memes are indeed

\(^4\) 344
\(^5\) 355
\(^6\) 346
independent entities that infect us like a biological parasite and his theory doesn’t seem that far-fetched. Yet, as he explicitly notes, his story about Mozart is utterly false! It never happened. It’s curious that he didn’t find a true example from another artist, of which he claims there are many. It is possible that he couldn’t actually find another good example, because the notion that all of our ideas are not our ideas and are rather independent floaters who’ve happened into our brain is really unintuitive; when people colloquially say “the idea just came to me” they certainly are not claiming that some cultural parasite has hijacked their brain.

Memes are a tool for thinking about thinking. But it would be incorrect to see memes as entities in themselves, separate from human thought. One logical consequence of thinking about them in this way is believing that it would be possible for humans to exist without memes at all where we are all just hairless apes; that there is another possible world where memes never infected our minds. Of course, human thoughts are not a result of some parasitic invader, but rather are a result from the nature of our minds. Memes are just a type of idea. Any investigation into memes, therefore, is an investigation into human thought, and must deal with the deep psychological, philosophical, and societal questions that humans have been grappling with for millennia. While it may give us a method for approaching these problems in a novel way, it certainly does not avoid these questions altogether.

This misconception of memes leads Dennett astray, demonstrating the dangers of considering memetics to be more than a thinking tool. In attempting to extrapolate the
genetic notions of tracing descent and analogy versus homology to *Romeo and Juliet* and *West Side Story*, he writes,

> What is in common, of course, is not a syntactic property or system of properties but a semantic property or system of properties: the story, not the text; the characters and their personalities, not their names and speeches. What we so readily identify as the same thing in both cases is the predicament that both William Shakespeare and Arthur Laurents want us to think about.⁸

Firstly, the commonalities of the plays are *not* “so readily” identifiable, but if we are examining the descendent memes then this is a presupposition that Dennett needs to start off with. The story, the characters and their personalities are in fact very different; It is possible that there are many people who have seen both plays and did not immediately recognize that *West Side Story* shares some themes with *Romeo and Juliet*. Dennett’s presupposition of this clear similarity is necessary for the meme-picture of clearly distinguishable commonalities between different manifestations of memes (in order to isolate the theme you are referencing). Secondly, the assertion that WWS descended homologously from R&J (that it not only looks the same, but one it not only looks the same, but one actually originates from the) gives an absurdly simplified view of ideas in order to fit them into the memetic box. The two stories share some themes and Laurents really was inspired by Romeo and Juliet; but the assertion wants to say more than these two trivial truths (if it didn’t, then it would just be offering these obvious facts in an obfuscated manner). It wants to say that there is a non-metaphoric meme entity being passed from R&J to WWS, just as there are genes passed from my parents to me, and somehow the type of relation is rooted in this history of the ideas (it’s not just similarities, it’s similarities due to a historical connection). But there are many questions ignored by this view, because they apply to ideas but not to genes: How much did Shakespeare affect Laurents relative to

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the infinite number of other explicit and implicit memes involved in WWS’s being written? Following that, how many other memetic ancestors does the WWS have? What is the justification for thinking that historical connection to ideas of the past determines a certain type of similarity between memes? Must the connection between memes be conscious, or is it acceptable for the descent to pass on through unconscious influence? When does a meme change substantially enough to be considered a different meme, or what if two memes entirely blend together? These questions are impossible to adequately answer because they all presuppose an independently existing entity meme, which fails to adequately describe the actuality of ideas.

While memetics has some potential to shed light on difficult societal, psychological, and philosophical questions by offering a new way of looking at these long-asked questions, it also has a great capacity to mislead. In fact, Dawkins himself, the originator of the memetics, repudiated it as a science of culture likely because of its being taken to absurd extremes (Dennett notes this repudiation, but weakly chalks it up to Dawkins wanting to preserve his status without grappling with any of the criticisms). The resulting memetics is somewhat milquetoast, but at least it is defensible.