



Are humans just machines for propagating tweets?

Description

Some tweets are a bit like genes in that they get reproduced many times over, they mutate, they thrive and persist if the environment is right, and there's a lot of wastage – most don't get retweeted, liked or remarked. So there's something like natural selection going on.

One of the nice propositions about **genes** is that humans and other organisms (the phenotypes) are the vehicles by which genes transmit themselves. According to Richard Dawkins the genes are –selfish– agents intent on their own survival and multiplication. The genes that produce phenotypes with the best characteristics for survival in the phenotype's environment are the genes that survive and pass their DNA on to subsequent generations of phenotypes.

We complicated and elaborate humans are (just) machines for the replication and transmission of genes, i.e. DNA molecules. There's something appealing about that proposition amongst those ([Posthuman](#)) humans intent on counteracting the conceit that humans are the only beings in control, or that matter, in the world we live in.

Memes are like genes in the social realm. According to Dawkins, –They [memes] are patterns of information that can thrive only in brains or the artificially manufactured products of brains – books, computers, and so on. –! As they propagate they can change – mutate– (158). Memes also jump (unlike genes) from one replicator medium to another, e.g. brains, to books, to computers and back again.

Tweeting bigly

Following meme logic, humans are (just) machines, amongst other replicator machines, for propagating memes, and also for effecting the memes' transition from one replicator medium to another, according to psychologist Susan Blackmore in *The Meme Machine*.

Tweets are patterns of information after all. So perhaps they are memes, or contain memes. There's some merit in thinking of particular individuals (phenotypes) as machines for propagating tweets. More significantly the tweet is the thing, the agent. The tweeter is the mere vehicle for replicating tweets, and

for transposing the tweet-meme's patterns from one replicator medium to another: newspapers, local radio stations, websites, speeches, brains, Twitter, Facebook, etc.

Liberal intellectuals already think of demagogues such as Donald Trump as symptoms rather than originators or agents in control of their own outcomes. Now we can think also of demagogues as servants of the meme. Demagogues are replicators, transmitters or cogs in the Twitter-orrery.

Certainly, some people have said Trump can't help himself from the compulsion to tweet. The memes have also recruited a team of staffers to assist the meme replicator (See [http://heavy.com: Does Donald Trump Run His Own Twitter Account?](http://heavy.com/Does Donald Trump Run His Own Twitter Account?))

If the meme thing is correct, then it applies to all tweeters. The idea that we are replicators of language is not a big deal, unless the memes for which the tweeter is the vehicle frequently insist on the meme replicator's greatness and autonomy and he believes it: "My IQ is one of the highest" and you all know it! Please don't feel so stupid or insecure; it's not your fault! (Trump Quotes: [The Man Behind the Mouth](#)).

References

- Blackmore, Susan. 1999. *The Meme Machine*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press
- Dawkins, Richard. 1996. *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe Without Design*. New York: Norton
- Zetter, Kim. 2008. Humans are just machines for propagating memes (interview with Susan Blackmore). *Wired Magazine* [Online](#)



Notes

- According to meme theory, memes combine and recombine, but there's nothing comparable to biological gendering and sexual reproduction as a way of ensuring diversity in the gene pool. There are many other disanalogies of course identified in the meme literature.
- There's the problem of the meme unit. Dawkins and Blackmore like to use religious memes, which I think they regard as somehow arbitrary. In any case, is the the meme the taking of the communion elements, transubstantiation, the mass or the Catholic church? Memes also seem to deal with time and history in ways radically different to genes. Memes can be talked about, revived, and disputed. Other than as a metaphor, meme theory gets a bit frayed if we have to start thinking of every utterance as a meme or *metameme*.

- A gene is a fragment of DNA. We talk about a gene for green eyes, or blood type. Apparently the DNA strand is the replicator. I've assumed the *replicator* is the machine that replicates the tweet/meme, and is therefore the human tweeter. Reading the literature, I think the text of the tweet is actually the replicator, like a fragment of DNA. The person, machine, book, or website, etc that stores and reproduces the meme is a *vehicle* (or *interactor*). Calling on Dawkin's definitions, Blackmore explains that "Vehicles or interactors carry the replicators around inside them and protect them" (5). Unlike genetic theory, meme theory is so dodgy that it's not really worth splitting hairs over the analogy.

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1. Nature

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