

# The Compulsion to Convince

By

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In 1976, renowned biologist Richard Dawkins coined the term *meme*, which has since become a meme. A meme, like genes and DNA, is a replicator of information that allows life to evolve. Only, instead of being a biological entity, memes are ideas and behaviors that allow the transference and evolution of human cultures. “Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches,” Dawkins says, in his book, *The Selfish Gene*, going on to explain that, “Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation.”<sup>1</sup>

Because of this, it is my belief that human consciousness, in particular, which has evolved more than any other animal to exchange information through the sharing of culture and ideas, is biology’s attempt to free information from its genetic confines. Through us, life is striving to become wireless, to use a modern analogy—to exist, function, thrive, and reproduce beyond its current organic limitations. It wants to leave its bodies behind to have a boundless existence, whether we call it digital or spiritual or something else.

But this is merely philosophical speculation on my part, based on what I understand about the forces driving evolution. For our purposes, as human beings with bodies and ideas and cultures, how do memes impact our lives as they are? To answer this, it’s important to understand, as Dawkins points out, that “memes should be regarded as living structures, not just metaphorically but technically.”<sup>2</sup> Memes are not analogous to genes but are themselves real structures that have influence over us and can shape our behaviors and lives.

From an evolutionary perspective, this is pretty interesting, but from an individual perspective that’s self-aware and believes it has free will, it can be disturbing. Again, as Dawkins says, “When you plant a fertile meme in my mind you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme’s propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell.”<sup>3</sup> This isn’t a very attractive pitch, that our brains, if that’s where memes are stored, or our minds, if a mind is something more than a brain, are parasitized by at least some of the ideas we are bombarded with every day. As James Gleick writes in his book, *The Information: A History, A Theory, A Flood*, “In cultural evolution, a meme is a replicator and propagator—an idea, a fashion, a chain letter, or a conspiracy theory. On a bad day, a meme is a virus.”<sup>4</sup>

Biology doesn’t seem to care much about individual organisms beyond their usefulness in procreating to pass on their genetic information, which is why Dawkins titled his book *The Selfish Gene*. Many organisms, like the Mayfly, cicada, and cuttlefish die almost immediately after mating and giving birth. In the same way, our ideas often outlive us, some of which were passed on to us from others to begin with and some of which we, in turn, pass on to others before we die. If what is true of genes is also true of memes, of memetic information, then, difficult as it is to hear, our purpose in life as individuals may be nothing more than to incubate ideas and pass them along to

others before we die. This doesn't make us feel very special, at least not as individuals, to consider ourselves conduits for the flow of ideas that might not be our own even if we think they are.

Like recessive genes, there are probably recessive ideas that never fully go away and that occasionally show up, hoping to finally take hold, and there are some dominant memes that have remained so for thousands of years, both in the form of ideas and cultural behaviors. As Gleick says, "Whether an idea arises uniquely or reappears many times, it may thrive in the meme pool or it may dwindle and vanish. The belief in God is an example Dawkins offers— an ancient idea, replicating itself not just in words but in music and art. The belief that the earth orbits the sun is no less a meme, competing with others for survival."<sup>5</sup> Again, memes express themselves as ideas, but also as culture, including music, which is why many songs and melodies survive their authors by getting "stuck" in our heads. They also express themselves as catchphrases, images, art, and other entities we tend to refer to as "culture."

If memes are like genes, and if genes are selfish, as Dawkins argues, then it's reasonable to conclude memes are selfish, too. That is to say, they don't care if they parasitize our brains, causing us to host, nourish, and devote ourselves to them, whether they serve us well or not. As cognitive scientist and mathematician Douglas Hofstadter has famously said, "When I muse about memes, I often find myself picturing an ephemeral flickering pattern of sparks leaping from brain to brain, screaming 'Me, me!'"<sup>6</sup>

If all of this is so, it helps explain why we can be so defensive of our own ideas and why we often feel threatened by or angry at those who disagree with us. There is an instinct in our parasitized brains or minds that instructs us to defend our ideas and our culture so they can live long enough to get passed along. This isn't unlike the parental instinct in most creatures that drives them to risk their own lives to protect their young. We are protective of our beliefs and ways and naturally fear or dislike those with different beliefs and different ways.

Book banning, book burning, the Inquisitions, the Crusades, McCarthyism, the Cold War, today's Culture Wars, political extremism, all stem from this drive to protect the memes we have inherited or that have been cultivated in our fertile minds by others. This instinct to protect and defend our own ideas and ways, and to dislike, even despise, those with other ideas and ways, is indiscriminate. That is to say, we can feel just as defensive of ideas that we've come up with on our own as we are of older ideas that have already been propagating themselves for a while. This general instinct is there to help assure we work to protect and pass on the information contained in our memes.

So, just as people discriminate against others based on genetic differences, people discriminate against others based on memetic differences. These differences can be between neighbors or nations. Even well-meaning parents often want to control the beliefs and ways of their children by forcing their own beliefs and ways upon them. This is one sure way for the memes to propagate

themselves and, feeling right, parents have no qualms about sacrificing the freedom and autonomy of their own kids to make sure they instill them the right ideas and ways.

None of this is to say that genes and memes are aware of what they are doing. Gleick says, "Dawkins's way of speaking was not meant to suggest that memes are conscious actors, only that they are entities with interests that can be furthered by natural selection."<sup>7</sup> That is to say, they are not sinister, but they do evolve and have a life all their own that transcends their individual host organisms.

Still, this is a rather sinister way of looking at how we communicate information, be it through the exchanges of genes or memes. We know that through sexual reproduction, genetic information is comingled to create something new. There are certain dominant genes that tend to show up most often but, even then, the result is something a little different than before. Sometimes memes are forced on us, and it is these that are slow to evolve, even though they can last thousands of years. But when we share our ideas and ways freely in a free society, hoping to share insights and gain new perspectives, our ideas and ways comingle, adapt, evolve, and change, much like the offspring of genetically different parents.

The question before us is which of these is the way in which we choose to communicate? Are our ideas and ways implants that we instinctively protect and propagate by forcing them on others? Or are we lovers of reason, and freedom, and tolerance, so much so that we cocreate new ideas and ways that better serve us all? When put it in these terms, the choice should be simple, but there are far too many people in the world ready to go to war with those they disagree with.

I used to think this was so mostly of conservatives on the extreme right. After all, what better name is there for those who want to cling to old ideas and ways, even when they have been disproven or no longer serve us, than *conservative*? Yet, in recent years, I have seen this same instinct manifest on the Left. Not to suggest this is something new, only that I've only just begun to notice just how pigheaded some liberals can be. I'd like to continue believing those who claim to have liberal values are immune to these viruses of the mind, but this isn't always so. Liberals are human beings, I don't care what Fox News says about us, and we are just as driven by the instinct to protect and propagate our memes as anyone else.

As I look back over my 23 years in Unitarian ministry, I've encountered more than a handful of members who have become so committed to their own beliefs and ways of doing things that they behave in illiberal ways, to put it politely. The drive toward dominance that these selfish memes instill in us can be overwhelming at times.

In his book, *On Being Certain*, neurologist Robert Burton says the "*feeling of knowing* and its kindred feelings should be considered as primary as the states of fear and anger...<sup>8</sup> Certainty and similar states of 'knowing what we know arise out of involuntary brain mechanisms that, like love or anger, function independently of reason."<sup>9</sup> This is a profound statement, that what we

experience as “knowing” or “certainty” is an emotion, not reason. The surer we feel, the surer we can be that we are in the grip of a powerful feeling and should learn to control our response to it as much as we do any other impulse.

It should also be kept in mind that unlike fear and anger, the feeling of knowing is accompanied by a flood of dopamine into our system. In other words, being certain feels really good! It can feel so good that some of us become addicted to the feeling and crave those moments we can shout, “Eureka, I’ve got it,” or being in a continuous state of knowing by being a “know it all” all of the time.

On a large scale, the instinct to protect and propagate our memes, encouraged by pleasurable feelings, can, as I’ve said, lead to terrible injustices, to wars, and oppression, and discrimination on national and global levels. But it can also become damaging within our own relationships and among small groups. Nobody likes a know it all, as the saying goes, nor someone who isn’t willing to listen to others. Such individuals end up with few meaningful friendships. In small groups, individuals addicted to their ideas and their ways can become extremely draining as they try to bend everyone else to their will. For the feeling of being right leads to feeling self-righteous, and when we are self-righteous, we feel justified in doing whatever it takes to preserve our own ideas and ways.

Overcoming these instincts isn’t easy for any of us and I suspect few if any of us aren’t overcome by feelings of self-righteousness now and then. Fortunately, there are many values and habits we can put into practice to help prevent us from being complete pawns of memes striving for dominance.

The first suggestion I have is to practice emotional intelligence. There are five qualities of emotional intelligence: Self-awareness, self-control, self-regulation, social skills, and empathy.

The first of these, self-awareness, is the most important, but it’s also the hardest. For it is very difficult to recognize we are in the throws of an emotion when it’s happening. But, with practice, it can be done by recognizing the signature of a particular feeling. In this case, the feeling of knowing is accompanied by an urge to defend our position, to shut down or control conversation, to insist that we get our way, and to be angry at those we disagree with.

Once we learn to recognize the signs, it’s important to acknowledge, “I’m having a strong emotional reaction” and, therefore, should wait until it passes before taking any action. That’s where the self-control comes in. Self-control means not acting on our emotions in ways we might later regret.

We self-regulate our emotions when we are able to switch to another, more manageable, feeling or to a state of emotional calm. This can be done almost anywhere at anytime with a simple breathing technique—just take a few deep breaths to turn your sympathetic nervous system off and your parasympathetic nervous system on.

Instilling good social skills, which also takes thoughtfulness and practice can greatly reduce the likelihood that we'll behave in ways we'll later regret. These begin with respect for others and the willingness to genuinely listen to what they have to say. It means being curious, collaborative, and flexible when working with others. It certainly means not trying to control or working behind the scenes, outside of the group context, to manipulate circumstances or to cause factions.

And it means having empathy for those we do disagree with by trying to understand where they are coming from. Having empathy isn't about agreeing with them, but not demonizing or disliking them just because we do disagree. It's about not letting ourselves become so self-righteous in our pursuit of another dopamine rush that we are willing to turn friends into enemies or to dehumanize those within our own communities.

Finally, as I've said, liberals are not immune to these viruses of the mind, but liberal values emerged during the Renaissance as an emotionally intelligent response to the hatred, cruelty, and violence caused by this drive for ideological and cultural dominance within us. These values are rooted in the principles of freedom, reason, and tolerance. For when we believe all people should be free to express themselves, including those we disagree with, no matter how vehemently, we are able to override the memetic instinct to dominate others. When we require empirical and well-reasoned evidence for our own beliefs so that we are less likely to merely rationalize our emotions, then we can more easily let go of those memes that no longer serve us, even the most insistent and enduring memes. And when we are tolerant, we assure our communities and societies can live in peace no matter our differences.

When these values are in place—freedom, reason, and tolerance—our minds are not parasitized by selfish-memes. Rather, the free and tolerant exchange of reasoned ideas and ways is more akin to lovemaking, which results in a blending of ideas and cultures that can be new and unique and beautiful.

<sup>1</sup> Dawkins, Richard. *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford Landmark Science) (p. 249). OUP Oxford. Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 249f

<sup>4</sup> Gleick, James. *The Information* (p. 9). Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 312.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 310.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 314.

<sup>8</sup> Burton, Robert, *On Being Certain*, St. Martin's Press, New York, NY, 2008, p. 40.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, preface.