

# The Global Migration of Ideas: Memes and Metaphysics

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## I

One of the most amazing things about the world in which we live is the technology of communication. The written word is printed and distributed quicker than ever before. We have satellite radio and hundreds of TV channels. And now we have our cell phones and internet access that enable us to reach out to the world with the touch of a few buttons. In considering this technology one can easily conclude that ideas, rather than simply organisms and objects, move from person to person. Indeed, given the current state of globalization, it seems that ideas undergo an unprecedented degree of *global migration*. They spread, reach across the world, and influence people from radically different cultures.

These facts seem obvious enough. But let us pause for a moment and ask a very simple question: how can *ideas* migrate? It is easy to see how living creatures and objects move from place to place. Can we see how ideas migrate from mind to mind? It doesn't seem as easy. To be sure, there are various accounts of cultural diffusion that provide explanations. We learn how cultures come to share ideas based on direct contact, intermediate contact, stimulus diffusion, or forced diffusion. These accounts are certainly helpful. Yet most accounts of diffusion are incomplete insofar as they fail to address what I think must be addressed if we are to have full comprehension on this topic: the nature of the mind and its ideas. Do we even know what the mind is? What ideas are? How can we grasp any dimension of idea migration without answering these questions? It doesn't seem possible.

Of course, some people think these questions are too general and not worth wasting time on. But I am a philosopher and philosophy is about asking, and attempting to give well-argued answers to, general and fundamental questions about ourselves and the world. Thus I will consider two philosophies of mind and ideas that will illuminate the global dimension of idea migration. One of these accounts is naturalistic and can be investigated empirically to a large extent. Yet I have also included a metaphysical account of mind and ideas that will help us explore the possibility that many thoughts, visions, feelings, and ideas can reach our mind—perhaps our soul—without migrating to it through the senses. My hope is that this two-fold approach of empiricism and metaphysics will be conducive to inquiry and will open our minds to possibilities we might otherwise overlook.

## II

In 1859 Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*. The ideas presented therein have, over time, become the foundation for modern evolutionary biology. The majority of biologists and scientists see Darwin's ideas as indispensable to any convincing explanation of how various species have, and continue to, evolve. So let's look at an account of the human mind that is consistent with this Darwinian model.

The first thing we need to accept if we follow this path is that the mind can no longer be understood as an ethereal, spiritual substance of some sort that is different in nature from the body. Rather, the term mind denotes a set of dynamic, attending, and selective functions of the brain—thinking, concentrating, imagining, feeling, and so on—that presumably have survival value. One can put it tersely as follows:

- **Our mind is nothing but a set of brain functions.**<sup>1</sup>

This is a *naturalistic* account insofar as it assumes no supernatural powers of any kind and places our minds in the physical world of space and time. We can better understand this Darwinian-based view of the mind by looking at a Darwinian-based account of ideas.

In 1976 the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins published a very influential and controversial book entitled *The Selfish Gene*. The book argues for a gene-centered view of evolution and claims that bodies are essentially survival machines created by the genes in order to replicate themselves.<sup>2</sup> Of course, to say that a gene is selfish is just a helpful personification: genes have no intentions. But it is useful to think of genes *as if* they had such intentions. By doing so, we can come to see that it is *their replication that matters most*, not the survival of the organism. Usually what is good for the survival of the genes will be good for the organism or the group to which the organism belongs. But there is no necessary connection between the two.

Now one of the criticisms of the book was that it reduced all Darwinian evolution to genetic mechanisms. But in the book Dawkins introduced a new concept called a *meme* to avoid such a reduction. In 2006 Dawkins wrote: “My original purpose in advocating memes, indeed, was to counter the impression that the gene was the only Darwinian game in town—an impression that *The Selfish Gene* was otherwise at risk of conveying” (2006, 197). I think memes will help us fill out our account of mind and, ultimately, approach an understanding of the global migration of ideas. Dawkins puts forth the following terse definition of meme:

- **A meme is a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation.**

He then goes on to give a very helpful definition by example with a comparison to genes:

Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperm 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. If a scientist hears, or reads about, a good idea, he passes it on to his colleagues and students. He mentions it in his articles and lectures. If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain. (1976, 206)

Some have argued that the comparison between memes and genes can only go so far. They argue that memes are abstract entities that defy scientific analysis and don’t follow the laws of natural selection. But meme evolution can be seen to obey the laws of natural selection exactly if these laws are given a more general formulation free of common biological associations. Philosopher Daniel C. Dennett, in his book *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*, formulates these laws as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> In considering the global migration of ideas from mind to mind we might want to keep in mind some other definitions of mind. Here is a helpful list from Peter A. Angeles’ *Dictionary of Philosophy*: **Mind**: **1.** Consciousness. Awareness. **2.** Human rational powers. Thought. The capacity to think. **3.** Psyche. Self. Ego. Personal identity. **4.** Soul. Spirit. Spiritual substance. **5.** That which endures throughout changes of consciousness (experience, awareness). **6.** That entity which performs such functions as sensing, perceiving, remembering, imagining, conceiving, feeling, emoting, willing, reasoning, extrapolating into the future, judging. **7.** The name for those features listed in 6 but not possessing any ontological reality as an entity or substance. **8.** The name for the adaptive responses of an organism to its environment in the struggle for survival. The dynamic, attending, and selective functionings of the organism upon items in its internal and external world that have possible survival value (and in the higher forms of mind have intrinsic interest).

<sup>2</sup> Recall that in the nucleus of each of our cells there are 23 chromosomes, which are pairs of DNA. Genes are segments of DNA molecules that make up chromosomes. They are hereditary units that generate proteins by transcribing their codes onto RNA molecules. Genes are made up of different sequences of four molecules: adenine, cytosine, guanine, and thymine. The genome is the complete set of human genes found on the DNA: the complete set of the sequences of these molecules. See <http://www.genome.gov/>

- (1) variation: there is a continuing abundance of different elements
- (2) heredity or replication: the elements have the capacity to create copies of themselves
- (3) differential “fitness”: the number of copies of an element that are created in a given time varies, depending on interactions between the features of that element and features of the environment in which it persists (343).

These general conditions enable us to see, on the one hand, how meme theory is not reducible to genetics and, on the other hand, how meme theory can follow the laws of natural selection. To be sure, the DNA molecule is the replicating entity with which we are most familiar. But that is no reason to reduce natural selection to the mechanism of DNA and RNA. Dawkins asks: “But do we have to go to distant worlds to find other kinds of replication and other, consequent, kinds of evolution? I think that a new kind of replicator has recently emerged on this very planet” (1976, 206). And Dennett rightly notes: “These new replicators are, roughly, ideas” (344). So, on this account, we can say this:

- **Ideas are memes—self-replicating units of cultural transmission—that move from brain to brain.**<sup>3</sup>

But we must avoid thinking that memes are active and the brain passive. Consider Dennett again:

The haven all memes depend on reaching is the human mind, but a human mind is itself an artifact created when memes restructure a human brain in order to make it a better habitat for memes. The avenues for entry and departure are modified to suit local conditions, and strengthened by various artificial devices that enhance fidelity and prolixity of replication: native Chinese minds differ dramatically from native French minds, and literate minds differ greatly from illiterate minds. What memes provide in return to the organisms in which they reside is an incalculable store of advantages—with some Trojan horses thrown in for good measure, no doubt...But if it is true that human minds are themselves to a very great degree the creations of memes, then we cannot sustain the polarity of vision we considered earlier; it cannot be “memes versus us,” because earlier infestations of memes have already played a major role in determining who or what we are. (365)

This passage helps fill out the above definition of mind as what the brain does. We now see that brains and memes are involved in a creative, mutually affecting relationship. Mind develops in large part because of memes; but memes will also be affected by the type of brain they inhabit. In nature we are familiar with the process of genetic mutation. Here we can have *memetic mutations* that give rise to interesting variations as well. Think of the ways different cultures appropriate ideas from each other and, in doing so, create variations that can become more useful, dangerous, funny, profound, etc. And, as Steven Pinker has pointed out, the mutation process of memes is not random as it is at the genetic level: “Memes such as the theory of relativity are not the cumulative product of millions of random (undirected) mutations of some original idea, but each brain in the chain of production added huge dollops of value to the product in a non-random way”

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<sup>3</sup> In considering the global migration of ideas we might want to keep in mind some other definitions of idea. Here is a helpful list from Peter A. Angeles’ *Dictionary of Philosophy*: **Idea**: (Gk., idea, “concept,” “class,” “kind,” “idea,” “mode,” “sort,” “species,” “form,” “nature,” “from *eidos*, “visual appearance,” “form,” and *idein*, “to see,” “to grasp conceptually”). **1.** Anything that is a content (object, item) of consciousness. Any act of awareness. **2.** A mental image or picture of something. **3.** The real likeness, representation, or essence of a thing embodied in an object and grasped by intelligence. **4.** Any general notion, thought, mental impression, or concept. **5.** Anything fantasized, fictionalized, or imagined. **6.** A belief, opinion, supposition, or doctrine held. **7.** Something designed or intended to take place, such as a plan. **8.** An archetype, ideal, or pattern to be followed.

(Dennett, 355). So we are not, in the end, totally passive hosts that are used to perpetuate memes. Unfortunately, we are that to a great extent: we are all too familiar with the experience of being taken prisoner by a terrible pop song hook that runs over and over in our head all day. But we are also transformed in positive ways by memes and, in turn, intentionally develop them into new memes and complexes of memes called *memeplexes*.

But what does this have to do with the global migration of ideas? Well, the forms that can replicate themselves over the long run will survive as other memes pass away. *And the more a meme replicates the more it has the potential to be global.* Humans have populated the world and we promise to continue to cover even more ground in the future. Memes can do the same. They move about in the *infosphere* and find their way—through email, fax, TV, radio, books, signs, etc.—into the neural networks of human brains. Some of these memes won't replicate much at all. Some will replicate for a while and die out suddenly or slowly. And some may persist and even spread across the globe. For example, the meme *democracy* has proved attractive and continues to spread as communism, fascism, and tyranny seem less attractive to many. Certain classics of music—say the opening of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony—are known the world over. And there are certain religious memes that have global appeal. Consider these possible candidates that Dawkins gives in his book *The God Delusion*:

- You will survive your own death
- If you die as a martyr then you will be rewarded in the next life
- Heretics and blasphemers should be killed or punished
- Belief in God is a supreme virtue
- Faith, or belief without evidence, is a virtue
- Everybody must respect religious belief with a higher and automatic respect than that given to other kinds of belief
- There are things in the universe that we will never to understand. And this lack of understanding is a good thing since in mystery there is fulfillment (2006, 199)<sup>4</sup>

But what makes some memes migrate through more brains than others? Well, we have seen that one condition for natural selection is “the number of copies of an element that are created in a given time varies, depending on interactions between the features of that element and features of the environment in which it persists” (Dennett, 343). This condition can be used for specific analyses. Let's say the element is the meme “you will survive the death of your body.” Now let's say that the environment in which the meme exists is a fearful environment of humans in touch with death on a regular basis. We might then expect that the meme will have appeal due to widespread fear. We could then make a daring generalization and argue, with psychologist Ernest Becker, that almost all humans deny death.<sup>5</sup> This claim, if true, could help us give an account of the universal appeal of the afterlife meme. Of course, we need not stop at psychology. We could easily incorporate sociology here as well as anthropology. If we know the *meme mores* of a culture we could infer whether or not new memes will survive. Memes that are consistent with these mores can link with them into memeplexes that will be selected to replicate and vice versa. So, in effect, we can use anything we know about humans to better understand why certain memes have more global appeal than others. In each case, it would be a question of delineating

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<sup>4</sup> Dawkins argues that these religious memes are viruses that have the potential to generate irrationality and death. These memes bring about, among other things, war, bigotry, and the abuse of children.

<sup>5</sup> See *The Denial of Death* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1973).

the memetic element and then charting its environment, both biological and cultural, to see if replication in brains is more or less likely.<sup>6</sup>

Keep in mind that meme replication, as mentioned earlier, will not necessarily be of use to the material base that hosts the meme. A meme like racism may end up injuring a racist individual who lives in an enlightened society. One need only think of how certain high-profile people show their racist colors and suffer dire consequences. Nonetheless, the *meme* may spread via media controversy and replicate *precisely because someone was punished for being racist*. And one can imagine certain religious memes of intolerance spreading and leading to the destruction of many brains while the meme lives on in brains marked by hate and vengeance. That said, in many cases there will be a symbiotic relationship between an organism and its memes. For example, the meme “tolerance of others is good”—a meme consistent to a large extent with a democratic society—can end up creating less war and thereby replicate both the meme and the genes of its host.

So it seems that, among the changes that have come along with the phenomenon so many call globalization, one of the most radical is this: there are more memes invading us than ever before. We transform them and are transformed by them. At times we thrive on getting more of them. Many of us love new ideas, new art, new fashions; we love championing visions of the good and feel justified in spreading political concepts and religious ideals to brains that don't have them. There is a lot of good and bad in all of this. On the one hand, we are bombarded with memes that alter our minds in negative ways. We face the slogans, the misinformation, and the disturbing images and we want to shut down and stop the flow of information. On the other hand, we have experiences of being altered for the better by a meme. We come to see things in a new light and enjoy the exhilaration that follows a creative moment marked by serendipity. So being part of global memetics is a double-edged sword. Thomas L. Friedman comments on this situation in his book on globalization entitled *The World is Flat*:

When you start to think of the world as flat, or at least in the process of flattening, a lot of things make sense in ways they did not before. But I was also excited personally, because what the flattening of the world means is that we are now connecting all the knowledge centers on the planet into a single, global, network....But contemplating the flat world also left me with dread, professional and personal. My personal dread derived from the obvious fact that it's not only software writers and computer geeks who get empowered to collaborate on work in a flat world. It's also al-Qaeda and other terrorist networks. (8)

As a result many of us will want to engage with the infosphere in a highly selective manner. And here we see that certain memes—the ones associated with education, logic, and science—can be our ally and help us select memes conducive to truth, goodness, and beauty. The questions arise: Can we make education memes global? Can we instill those logical memes that will help us reject memes that lead to unsound conclusions? Can we adopt memes that will help destroy—perhaps forever—the memes of racism and sexism? Propaganda and sophistry? Meaningless

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<sup>6</sup> Of possible interest here might be Malcolm Gladwell's book *The Tipping Point*. Gladwell argues that epidemics have three central characteristics: (1) contagiousness; (2) the fact that little causes can have big effects; and (3) change doesn't just happen gradually but at one dramatic moment. He then analyses this third factor which he calls the “tipping point”. This phenomenon is then broken down into three central factors: (1) the law of the few; (2) the stickiness factor; (3) and the Power of Context. Reading his analysis in conjunction with memetic theory has proven helpful. *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2000). Another popular book along these lines is *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*, by Chip Heath and Dan Heath (New York: Random House, 2007).

clichés and fallacies? These are just a few of the critical questions this account of the mind and memes poses to us in a global age.<sup>7</sup>

### III

Now it must be admitted that this account of memes is speculative at times and has some significant problems. Here are a few:

- If ideas are memes how can we understand what memes are? Wouldn't an idea of a meme be a meme? And if so, wouldn't we be presupposing in our explanation of memes precisely the very memes that need to be explained? To do so is to commit the fallacy of begging the question.
- We might also ask more questions about how exactly memes get into the brain. Of course, we have some ideas (memes?) of how this process occurs. But we are far from grasping how information moves through the channels of the nervous system to end up "represented" in the brain somewhere.
- We can argue that the mind is not something we can quantify and reduce to a system of mechanics, whether genetic or memetic. In other words, we can agree that the mind is essentially a set of functions in the brain but argue that these functions, unlike the potassium pump for example, in principle defy scientific analysis. Mind would be an emergent phenomenon like the quality of wetness emerging from hydrogen and oxygen: no matter how much you look for wetness in the atoms you will never find it. But wetness and mind would still be natural phenomenon.<sup>8</sup>

These are all important objections. Yet they are hardly decisive. Science may indeed learn enough to give an account of how mental representations occur. The mind, although still so mysterious, may become increasingly less so. And memes may be discernible into different types, complexes, and qualities that may allow us to explain one meme or set of memes in terms of another without begging the question (just as scientists explain one natural law in terms of a *more general* law without begging the question). In any case, many are willing to push on with memetics despite these difficulties given the positive results we have seen thus far. Dennett expresses the sentiment of many meme-sympathizers when he writes: "Whether or not the meme perspective can be turned into science, in its philosophical guise it has already done much more good than harm..." (Dennett, 368).<sup>9</sup> According to Dennett, the real alternative to this Darwinian-based account of mind and ideas is to posit something inherently mysterious and supernatural. Consider this passage:

What, in fact, is the alternative to this through-and-through Darwinian vision of a mind? A last hope for the Darwin-dreaders is simply to deny that what happens to memes when they enter a mind could ever, ever be explained in "reductionistic," mechanistic terms. One way would be to espouse outright Cartesian dualism: the mind just can't be the brain, but, rather, some *other* place, in which the great and mysterious alchemical

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<sup>7</sup> By instilling an understanding of fallacies (mistakes in reasoning) in our brain we can hope to detect, name, and remove memes that generate irrational thought and action. For a few lists of fallacies, please visit: <http://www.logicalfallacies.info/>  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Logical\\_fallacies](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Logical_fallacies).

<sup>8</sup> This view of mind is notably maintained by Noam Chomsky, Jerry Fodor, and Colin McGinn.

<sup>9</sup> Memetics has already produced a large body of results: Richerson's and Boyd's *Not by Genes Alone*, Shennan's *Genes, Memes, and Human History*, Aunger's *The Electric Meme*, Distin's *The Selfish Meme*, Brodie's *Virus of the Mind: The New Science of the Meme*, and Blackmore's *The Meme Machine*.

processes occur, transforming the raw materials they are fed—the cultural items we are calling memes—into new items that transcend their sources in ways that simply beyond the ken of science. (368)<sup>10</sup>

But what could this “other place” be where mysterious alchemy occurs? It certainly may not exist. But what if it does? Could it have some bearing on how we understand the global migration of ideas?

#### IV

I think it is possible such a “place” exists and that, if it does, certain insights about the universality of ideas can become a little clearer. So I propose we briefly look at the metaphysical side of things if you will. We have already looked at a naturalistic account of how ideas migrate and how we might go about explaining how they globally migrate. Now let us look at the possibility that ideas can reach our mind without migrating to it through the senses. We can begin by turning to Carl Jung’s theory of the collective unconscious.

In 1936 Carl Jung introduced a theory to the world that still resonates with many people. He argued that all humans have a dimension of their unconsciousness that does not owe its existence to their personal experiences. This dimension would not come about as a result of individual development and things that were once conscious subsequently becoming repressed. Rather, the contents of this dimension would be inherited. This dimension would be collective, in all of us, and it would consist of certain *archetypes* that would form a type of collective memory. Jung writes: “The concept of the archetype, which is an indispensable correlate of the idea of the collective unconscious, indicates the existence of definite forms in the psyche which seem to be present always and everywhere” (Campbell, 60). This theory was posited as means of explaining the recurring images and patterns in dreams and myths that are shared across cultures. For “everywhere we find the idea of a magic power or substance, of spirits and their doings, of heroes and gods and their legends. In the great religions of the world we see the perfection of those images and at the same time their progressive incrustation with rational forms” (57). These archetypes have been established over time as our species experienced certain repetitions and then are inherited by people who never had those experiences at all. When certain environmental stimuli are encountered, the archetype can be activated:

There are as many archetypes as there are typical situations in life. Endless repetition has engraved these experiences into our psychical constitution, not in the form of images filled with content, but at first only as *forms without content*, representing merely the possibility of a certain type of perception and action. When a situation occurs which corresponds to a given archetype, that archetype becomes activated and a compulsiveness appears, which, like an instinctual drive, gains its way against all reason and will, or else produces a conflict of pathological dimensions, that is to say, a neurosis. (66)

To be sure, this theory is at once compelling and implausible. But how could we all inherit these archetypes? Jung says they are “engraved” on our “psychical constitution”. But how? We know that genes are the sole units of heredity and they don’t pass along experience. In light of this problem we could, as most people in scientific orthodoxy do today, view Jung’s theory as useless given its inability to account for the *biology* of archetypes.

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<sup>10</sup> Dennett doesn’t consider the possibility of a mind that is both in nature but not located in the brain. Such a view of the mind is given by biologist Rupert Sheldrake who argues that the mind is a field that can interact with morphic fields—fields that hold collected memories—when similar problems are faced. For more information on this fascinating field-based theory of mind and ideas, visit [sheldrake.org](http://sheldrake.org)

But we might try to give a metaphysical account of archetypes. Such an account would attempt to rationally explore this notion of archetypes beyond the reach of empirical inquiry. Jung, in his discussion of the collective unconscious, notes that Plato (427-347 B.C.) had a metaphysical account of the archetypes: “In Plato, however, an extraordinarily high value is set on the archetypes as metaphysical ideas, as “paradigms” or models, while real things are held to be only the copies of these model ideas” (55). I think it will be interesting to briefly consider Plato’s notion of the archetypes. Once we do so, we will be in a position to have a more account of that “other place” of which Dennett spoke where mysterious alchemy occurs.<sup>11</sup>

In his dialogue *Timaeus*, Plato has his character Timaeus tell us a “likely story” about how our cosmos came to be. We learn that there was a very powerful and very good Demiurge (craftsmen for the people) who brought chaos into cosmos (order) by structuring unruly matter with entities called the Forms. These Forms are eternal—they have no relation to time or motion at all—and they are not in space. Since they exist outside of space and time they are in the realm of *Being* rather than the changing realm of space and time called *Becoming*. The Forms are also perfect. This perfection makes them the ideal models for *mimesis*: for artistic creation that *imitates* something. According to Timaeus, working from an imperfect model results in a poor work of art. Therefore the Demiurge used the perfect Forms so his creation would be as perfect as possible. And the Demiurge’s work is indeed beautiful despite the imperfections caused by the resistant matter that prevented, and continues to prevent, a complete realization of order in us and the universe.<sup>12</sup>

But Forms are not just used to bring about cosmos. They are also integral to knowledge. Plato thinks we can only know objects that never change. Everything in the physical world is constantly changing. Therefore, no knowledge would be possible if we had *only* the sensible realm of objects. But if the Forms exist then they can be objects of knowledge since they exist outside the physical world and don’t change. Thus what we have here is a metaphysical dualism—two entirely different realms—being postulated as a means of grounding truth. In Plato’s dialogues we encounter various inquiries into these Forms and it is repeatedly postulated that there are Forms for physical objects as well as moral, mathematical, and aesthetic concepts. This would mean there is an objective foundation for all human inquiry. As a result, we can hope to refute relativists who claim there are no objective standards of good and bad and even true and false. We are now in a position to give a brief definition of Platonic ideas:

- **Ideas are eternal objects that exist independently of us and provide an objective blueprint both for the changing world and for our knowledge.**

But how do we contact these ideas? According to Plato, we have a soul as well as body. This soul is an in-between being that occupies the body but can also, if it leads a philosophical life, make some degree of contact with the realm of Being and the Forms. So here, too, we have a dualism: we are both body and soul. Our definition would then read as follows:

- **Our mind is really a soul, an in-between being, that inhabits our body but can gain access to another realm of being.**

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<sup>11</sup> A more comprehensive inquiry could look at other metaphysical accounts of mind and ideas. Certainly philosophers influenced by Plato could be considered such as Plotinus, St. Augustine, Ficino, and Bruno. But rationalists such as Spinoza and Leibniz could be considered as could the grand visions of German idealists like Schelling and Hegel. In particular, Schelling and Hegel are interesting for the topic of global idea migration since they saw the development of ideas and human consciousness as evidence for a spirit coming to full consciousness of itself through humans.

<sup>12</sup> Read Plato’s *Timaeus* at <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/p/plato/p71ti/>

This view is obviously not for the tough-minded empiricist! But the great psychologist and philosopher William James (1842-1910) has a nice way of lending some credibility to the thesis. Interestingly, he starts his account with the definition we gave earlier of the mind as a set of functions in the brain. In his short book *On Human Immortality* he writes: “My thesis now is this: that, when we think of the law that thought is a function of the brain, we are not required to think of productive function only; *we are entitled also to consider permissive function or transmissive function.* And this the ordinary psycho-physiologist leaves out of his account” (James, 15). James is saying this: we usually think the brain produces thought. But perhaps the brain can also engage in transmission—perhaps it can tune in and pick up ideas from without. James writes eloquently about this possibility:

Admit now that *our brains* are such thin and half-transparent places in the veil. What will happen? Why, as the white radiance comes through the dome, with all sorts of staining and distortion imprinted on it by the glass, or as the air now comes through my glottis determined and limited in its force and quality of its vibrations by the peculiarities of those vocal chords which form its gate of egress and shape it into my personal voice, even so the genuine matter of reality, the life of souls as it is in its fullness, will break through our several brains into this world in all sorts of restricted forms, and with all the imperfections and queernesses that characterize our finite individualities here below. (16)

This account paints the picture of our brain as a transmission device through which soul can act and through which “the genuine matter of reality”—something like Plato’s Forms—can break through in an imperfect manner. It would be a matter of a *brain-threshold* opening:

A medium, for example, will show knowledge of his sitter’s private affairs which it seems impossible he should have acquired through sight or hearing, or inference therefrom. Or you will have an apparition of some one who is now dying hundreds of miles away. On the production-theory one does not see from what sensations such odd bits of knowledge are produced. On the transmission-theory, they don’t have to be ‘produced,’—they exist ready-made in the transcendental world, and all that is needed is an abnormal lowering of the brain-threshold to let them through. (26)

James then adds another observation that enables us to tie this all in with global idea migration: “We need only suppose the continuity of our consciousness with a mother sea, to allow for exceptional waves occasionally pouring over the dam” (27). The idea here is this: many thoughts, visions, feelings, and ideas can reach our mind—our soul—without migrating to it through the senses. Our brain, to be sure, is involved in the transmission; but it is not producing that which comes in. So we might consider the possibility that what seems like meme migration may, in rare cases, be a transmission from a common transcendental source. In a sense, this would be a metaphysical interpretation of Jung’s theory of the collective unconscious. Anyone, anywhere, may, given certain experiences, make contact with that sea of transcendent objects. We would, in effect, have action at a distance without the aid of a physical medium. It would be like connecting to a spiritual internet without a physical server, wires, and electricity. It would be a global connection of souls to their source.

## V

Obviously this account is speculative. But James says the production theory of the brain is “not a jot more simple or credible in itself than any other conceivable theory. It is only a little more popular” (22). All science can do, James says, is correlate certain brain activity with certain mental experiences. Modern neuroscience can indeed do this to a remarkable degree. But clearly

it can do more than James allows: it can stimulate parts of the brain to bring about certain mental effects. Insofar as this can be done, it suggests we can establish *causal* connections as well as correlations between brain and mind. Pinker gives a few examples:

When a surgeon sends an electrical current into the brain, the person can have a vivid, lifelike experience. When chemicals seep into the brain, they can alter the person's perception, mood, personality, and reasoning. When a patch of brain tissue dies, a part of the mind can disappear: a neurological patient may lose the ability to name tools, recognize faces, anticipate the outcome of his behavior, empathize with others, or keep in mind a region of space or of his own body. (41)

To many, this means the mind is not a soul separate from the brain. If it was, how could mind and brain *interact* at all? It doesn't seem physically or logically possible. This is indeed a problem for any dualistic vision like the one James has sketched. He admits this but adds a justification: "Just how the process of transmission may be carried on, is indeed unimaginable; but the outer relations, so to speak, of the process, encourage our belief" (23). In other words, it is in the ability of the transmission theory to help us explain, to some extent, the mysteries of premonitions, apparitions, clairvoyant visions, and the whole range of mediumistic capacities that, on the production view of the brain, remain impossible (25). And James is convinced that the production of consciousness from brain cells faces no less a formidable task as it moves forward naturalistically. One might argue that these two views are not mutually exclusive: the brain can have both productive and transmissive capacities and can receive both memes and transcendent Forms. Pinker alludes to this possibility in reference to the universality of mathematical objects:

According to the Platonist conception of number favored by many mathematicians and philosophers, entities such as numbers and shapes have an existence independent of minds. The number three is not invented out of whole cloth; it has real properties that that can be discovered and explored. No rational creature equipped with circuitry to understand the concept "two" and the concept of addition could discover that two plus one equals anything other than three. That is why we expect similar bodies of mathematical results to emerge from different cultures or even different planets. If so, the number sense evolved to grasp abstract truths in the world that exist independently of the minds that grasp them. Perhaps the same argument can be made for morality. (192)

Pinker, who is against any dualistic view of the self, is nonetheless suggesting that the brain could develop certain capacities which, in turn, could enable it to make contact with Plato's Forms of shape and number. These Forms, being eternal and constant, lead to similar results all over the globe. Mathematics, like music, seems to be a universal language. But how? Does it need to come from memes into our brains? Perhaps much of it can. But perhaps some of it comes from our brain's ability to open to another place of universal shapes and mathematical forms. Many famous mathematicians claim something like this must indeed be the case.<sup>13</sup>

## VI

In closing, it must be admitted there is a serious tension between Darwinian-based and metaphysical accounts of the mind and ideas. The Darwinian accounts stick with nature and the metaphysical accounts tend to posit a metaphysical dualism with objects outside of space and

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<sup>13</sup> Some famous Platonist mathematicians include Kurt Godel, Roger Penrose, and Frank Tipler. For more information on Platonism, see <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/platonism/>

time. Many would see this as more than a tension and claim there is a contradiction with no hope of reconciliation whatsoever. But the explanatory power of both views is remarkable and it may be wise to keep physics and metaphysics talking to each other as we wrestle with the problem of how ideas manage to migrate from mind to mind across the globe. By doing so we may hope to grasp possibilities and truths we might otherwise miss.

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Note that we need not rely solely on logical memes to counter the influx of nonsense from the infosphere. Susan Blackmore, in her book *The Meme Machine*, claims that Zen meditation is a process of bad meme "pruning". I think this is right and it is a good example of how a non-dogmatic religious approach can be part of the problem rather than solution when it comes to meme selection. Ordinarily, our experience is interpreted through a complex system of concepts, dualities, expectations, judgments, inferences, and images. Such things tend to prevent pure experience from coming to pass. Zen isn't a system of beliefs. It is a meditative practice that enables one to reach pure experience as much as possible. Now koans are perplexing statements or stories that are used in meditation. They are perplexing precisely because the unenlightened pupil approaches a solution from within the limits of his or her usual way of thinking—from within a certain framework of entrenched memes. To master a koan is to see *what* that certain framework is. Here are a few koans: What was your face before the birth of your parents? / No pine has two colors, old and new. / What is the sound of one hand clapping? See *The Little Zen Companion* by David Schiller.

We can further clarify this account of divine *mimesis* by distinguishing between the *what*, *why*, and *how* of *mimesis* in the *Timaeus*. We have the following:

- What is being imitated? The eternal Forms. Note that the Forms can't be depicted or mirrored because they are not spatial objects. Thus the universe we see and interact with is not an imitation in the sense of depiction; rather, it is a mysterious metaphysical *participation* of the things in Becoming with the eternal Forms in the realm of Being. This is an excellent example of how the Greek conception of *mimesis* is not limited to a depiction of objects but may include less tangible phenomena like emotions, patterns, or essential properties.
- Why are they imitated? They are imitated because the Demiurge is good and seeks to reduce chaos to as much order as possible.
- How are they imitated? We don't know all the details of this metaphysical mystery (Timaeus admits he is just a *man* giving a *likely* account). But we do know that the creation is *measured*: it is a product of mathematical proportion. According to Timaeus, nothing disordered can be intelligent or good. So the Demiurge's benevolent and intelligent efforts to bring about a beautiful order *must* unfold in a measured fashion.

Memes/mimesis connection – footnote at least (Dawkins’ account of how he got the name)

Jung quotation ... instincts? Campbell Sheldrake critique

So if not in the genes or brain where?

Segway – James on two types of brain function...transmissive – but what are we picking up? Turn to Plato – influence (Augustine, Plotinus, Ficino, Bruno, etc)...plausibility in mathematics Pinker 192 but also other forms: failures of Jung– innate archetypes are not in genes and, on the above account of memes, there are no innate ideas (although there are innate determining factors in the brain that play a crucial role in our development).

The metaphysical dualism is crucial for Plato. Once we divide the world into two realms - one intelligible and one physical - we can then say that knowledge is possible.

Also, the forms give form to the the physical world. If you see a tree it is because the physical matter of the tree participates, in a mysterious way, with the perfect form of treeness. The Demiurge, you will recall from last week, uses the forms to create the physical world and makes it as close to the perfect forms as possible.

The physical world is an imitation of the perfect world - it is a shadow.

So the realm of Becoming has the imperfect form it has because of Being - because of the Forms.

You will see these two functions covered in the section on Plato's forms.

## Data

PP: 245: Choice: Platonism or physiological structures of the brain

Levi-Strauss: structures of culture and society are reducible to hypothetical structures of the brain

Noam Chomsky: innate grammar

**Direct diffusion** is when two cultures are very close to each other, resulting in intermarriage, trade, and even warfare. An example of direct diffusion is between the United States and Canada, where the people living on the border of these two countries engage in hockey, which started in Canada, and baseball, which is big in American culture

**Forced diffusion** occurs when one culture subjugates (conquers or enslaves) another culture and forces its own customs on the conquered people. An example would be the [conquistadors](#) that took over the indigenous population and made them practice Christianity.

**Indirect diffusion** happens when traits are passed from one culture through a middleman to another culture, without the first and final cultures ever being in direct contact. An example could be the presence of Mexican food in Canada, since they have a huge country in between them.

Heliocentric diffusionism -- the theory that all cultures originated from one culture.

(see [Grafton Elliot Smith](#)) **Grafton Elliot Smith**, (August 15, 1871 in Grafton,

New South Wales, - January 1, 1937 in London) was an Australian anatomist and a famous proponent of the hyperdiffusionist view of prehistory.

Culture circles diffusionism (*Kulturkreise*) -- the theory that cultures originated from a small number of cultures.

Evolutionary diffusionism -- the theory that societies are influenced by others and that all humans share psychological traits that make them equally likely to innovate, resulting in development of similar innovations in isolation.

## Diffusion

Solutions to similar problems

Solutions that worked were favored by natural selection (PP 292, Dawkins quotation)

PP294-5

Becker argues that the problem of heroics is the central problem of human life. Indeed, it goes deeper into human nature than anything else because it is based on the child's need for self-esteem. As a result, healthy self-development is intimately connected to an awareness of the heroics one is practicing and whether or not this heroics satisfies two ontological motives: the need to affirm oneself and the need to yield (251). Unfortunately, many people suffer from the Oedipal project which is the attempt to become *the father of oneself* or, in more traditional philosophical vocabulary, a *causa sui*. The Oedipal project is essentially “a flight from passivity, from obliteration, from contingency” (36).

According to Becker the Oedipal project is not the narrowly sexual problem of lust and competitiveness that Freud presents in his early work. Rather, the Oedipal project sums up the basic problem of the child's life: “whether he will be a passive object of fate, an appendage of others, a plaything of the world or whether he will be an active center within himself—whether he will control his own destiny with his powers or not” (35). Those with this project defy the need to yield—and by doing so they end up denying death as well. By denying death they are bound to engage in a heroic project that is not conscious of its limits. Such heroism is pathological and can lead to suffering for themselves and others. But if one overcomes this project then one must face one's contingency and no longer deny death. And the sincere acceptance of death is actually the condition for adopting a healthy heroics that allows one to take a stand, leave a mark, and find meaning in a way that is not irresponsible and dangerous.

Diffusion as a concept is well accepted in general. But it leads to controversy when diffusion in certain contexts becomes difficult to explain.

Diffusion theories also suffer from being inherently speculative and hard to prove or disprove; especially for relatively simple cultural items like "pyramid-shaped buildings", "solar deity", "row of standing stones", or "animal paintings in caves". After all, the act of diffusion proper is a purely mental (or at most verbal) phenomenon, that leaves no archaeological trace. Therefore, diffusion can be deduced with some certainty only when the similarities involve a relatively complex and partly arbitrary collection of items — such as a writing system, a complex myth, or a pantheon of several gods.

Another criticism that has been leveled at many diffusion proposals is the failure to explain why certain items were *not* diffused. For example, attempts to "explain" the New World civilizations by diffusion from Europe or Egypt should explain why basic concepts like wheeled vehicles or the potter's wheel did not cross the ocean, while writing and stone pyramids did.

There are accounts from comparative religion and mythology that show us how widespread certain symbols really are. And ethnographers have provided evidence for universal modes of behavior and belief.

Please note all these definitions, varied as they are, are either implicitly or explicitly referring to a mind of some sort. As mentioned above, we can certainly look past the mind as we consider how ideas globally migrate. Consider the following three forms of cultural diffusion:

- **Direct diffusion** is when two cultures are very close to each other, resulting in intermarriage, trade, and even warfare.
- **Forced diffusion** occurs when one culture subjugates another culture and forces its own customs on the conquered people.
- **Indirect diffusion** happens when traits are passed from one culture through a middleman to another culture, without the first and final cultures ever being in direct contact.

Here we don't see a lot about ideas; we see the words 'culture', 'forces', 'people', 'intermarriage', 'trade', and so on. But if it is the case that ideas are intimately bound up with some theory of the mind then we may see these accounts of diffusion as insufficient.

How can we really hope to explain the global migration of ideas via a form of diffusion that says so little about how ideas are acquired by the mind? I don't think we can. So let us try to delineate three theories of mind and try to see how they can support some interesting accounts of idea migration. As we work through these theories, we will have the opportunity to see how the above definitions of ideas come into play.

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## IV

### Morphic Resonance

Mind: The Mind is an Extended Field – transmissive function of brain

Ideas: morphic resonance etc

What might it explain?

collective unconscious (Jung)  
conscience collective (Durkheim)  
collective mind (Freud) cf. PP247

telepathy  
remote viewing  
etc.

related to Evolutionary diffusionism -- the theory that societies are influenced by others and that all humans share psychological traits that make them equally likely to innovate, resulting in development of similar innovations in isolation.

Rupert Sheldrake is primarily concerned with the problem of *morphogenesis* or how form comes into being. He also wants to approach the problem within a radically evolutionary model of the cosmos, that is, a model that sees evolution as applying not only to culture and biology but to physics as well: the laws of physics are more like habits that have evolved since the big bang.

Now, he thinks there are three popular but ultimately unacceptable theories of morphogenesis:

1) Platonic

- 2) Aristotelian
- 3) Mechanical

The Platonic and Aristotelian approaches fail because they cannot account for the *evolution* of form since forms are eternally fixed and cannot undergo transformation (e.g., Plato's forms are eternal, non-physical objects that exist outside of space and time and Aristotle's forms, although existing within nature, are also unchanging). Also, the Platonic and Aristotelian approaches leave us with divisions between being (the unchanging, immaterial aspects of the world) and becoming (the changing, material aspects of the world). Such divisions are non-naturalistic and thus any explanation along these lines will not be as simple as other approaches that see everything as part of one natural, changing cosmos.

But what about the mechanical approach? Sheldrake sees the mechanical approach as materialism: there is nothing but matter in motion and the laws of nature. Now, he has a problem with traditional materialism because it, like Platonism, still commits to the dualism of the physical and the non-physical, since presumably the non-physical laws are eternal (i.e., having no relation to time at all) and have not evolved. Many today still see the laws of nature as eternal even after the big bang - something that doesn't make sense to Sheldrake. Of course, in the 17th century the laws were in god's eternal mind. But with the advent of a secular view of nature the laws still hung around, out of god's mind, but no less mysterious as a result. Thus the so-called eternal laws that are often used to explain morphogenesis have an intrinsically mysterious relationship to the changing world of nature: how could something eternal outside of time relate to something in time? How could something from Platonic heaven relate to the physical world of earth? How could we ever explain such an interaction? Isn't it logically impossible to have something eternal causally interact with something temporal?

But there are other problems with the mechanistic approach to morphogenesis. Sheldrake argues that the genetic code in the DNA molecules determines nothing but the sequence of amino acid building blocks in protein molecules. The genes dictate the primary structure of proteins, NOT the specific shape of a particular organ. The DNA is the same in all the cells of our arms and legs and everywhere else in the body. Yet somehow cells, which have been programmed identically, behave differently and generate tissues and organs with different FORMS. But this is not possible from the genes and DNA alone. Of course, time may reveal that it is possible. But Sheldrake believes the materialistic agenda of discovering the origin of form from matter in motion alone will fail. So what else could there be?

Sheldrake believes that those who support the mechanistic explanation try to talk about genetic programs, selfish genes, patterns of information, internal representation, germ plasm, etc. All these additions, according to Sheldrake, ultimately re-introduce some vitalistic, dualistic, or anthropocentric factors into the materialistic worldview. He has some interesting arguments against these additions.

He also presents a general argument that was expressed by Collingwood as follows:

"A negative result of introducing the idea of evolution into natural science was the abandonment of the mechanical conception of nature. It is impossible to describe one and the same thing in the same breath as a machine and as developing or evolving. Something which is developing may build machines, but it cannot be a machine.....A machine is essentially a finished product or closed system. Until it is finished it is not a machine" (*The Idea of Nature*, 114).

Sheldrake agrees with this line of reasoning and sees attempts to mechanize a living, developing organism as misguided. Nature has mechanisms; nature is not a mechanism.

So, again, what else could there be to account for morphogenesis? Well, Sheldrake believes that the best way to think about morphogenesis should come from a general worldview called the holistic worldview. This view is an alternative to the vitalist and mechanical views. What it shares with the mechanical is the view of the unity of nature (against the vitalist accounts which often include mysterious souls, powers, or some kind of *elan vital*) but keeps the vitalist insight that the world is full of living organisms at all levels, organisms whose form cannot be reduced to the physics and chemistry of simpler systems. Sheldrake, coming from this perspective, suggests that we turn to the *physical phenomenon of fields* since fields, or non-material regions of influence, are part of nature and have inherently holistic properties (for example, you can cut a magnet in half and each half will have a full magnetic field around it as an invisible region of influence).

By turning to fields as a strategy, Sheldrake thinks he can:

- 1) Avoid the fixed forms and dualisms associated with Plato and Aristotle
- 2) Avoid the inherent mysteries of vitalist accounts
- 3) Preserve what we know about protein formation in DNA and genes but add something *natural* to help explain shape AND how shape can evolve with purpose and be influenced over time in an evolving process

Now, he notes that earlier attempts to delineate morphic fields had recourse to Platonism insofar as people tried to explain the non-material regions of influence on the genes mathematically and ultimately metaphysically. Sheldrake thinks his morphic fields can be modeled mathematically but do not presuppose the Platonic metaphysical baggage associated with so many mathematical models. According to him, these new fields he is proposing,

"are a new kind of field so far unknown to physics with an intrinsically evolutionary nature. The fields of a given species, such as a giraffe, have evolved; they are inherited by present giraffes from previous giraffes. They contain a kind of collective memory on which each member of the species draws and to which it in turn contributes. The formative activity of the fields is not determined by timeless mathematical laws--although the fields can to some extent be modeled mathematically--but by the actual forms taken up by previous members of the species. The more often a pattern of development is repeated, the more probable it is that it will be followed again. The fields

are the means by which the habits of the species are built up, maintained, and inherited" (*The Rebirth of Nature*, 110).

Of course this hypothesis of formative causation through morphic resonance is controversial. But it is testable and, according to Sheldrake's data, there are many encouraging results. He is also very good at responding to skeptics that like to refute his results. If you go to his website ([sheldrake.org](http://sheldrake.org)) you can read both the critiques of him and his responses. Also, you can see test results and find out how to participate in experiments yourself.

Any inference to the best explanation has to proceed in accordance with some criteria. Among them are:

- 1) Simplicity
- 2) Scope
- 3) Consistency
- 4) Coherence
- 5) Fruitfulness
- 6) Testability

Sheldrake's approach commits us to accepting a tremendous number of fields since all living organisms at all levels will be organized by them. This is not a plus for the theory. But at least the hypothesis is a naturalistic one and can hope to account for form and purpose. The scope of the theory is immense: it can explain form at all levels and how form can evolve. Thus not just form but the continuity between forms and how they change can be understood as well. It seems to me that his theory is self-consistent and, of course, it coheres with much of what science has already established in genetics, molecular biology, and physics. Of course the laws of nature would have to be embraced as habits and Darwinism would have limited scope. But it is not as revolutionary as so many make it out to be. And lastly, and here is where the theory has great promise, there are many other unexplained aspects about the world besides morphogenesis that might be explained by this theory. Thus his view promises to be fruitful. Indeed, his last few books are attempts to prove that morphic resonance can help us understand -- naturalistically understand -- things like telepathy, the sense of being stared at, remote viewing, psychic experiences, dreams, rituals, the collective unconsciousness, creativity, the evil eye, and sacred times and places. I am particularly impressed with his application of his theory to human consciousness and how morphic resonance can help us understand the difficult issues of memory and self-identity in a model that is totally different from the usual mechanistic model. The mind, according to Sheldrake, is extended like a field -- and this view can account for our most basic experiences and intuitions unlike our current model that the mind IS the brain which goes against many of our experiences and intuitions. His account of telepathy is based on this model of a natural, extended mind and is found in his book *The Sense of Being Stared At*.

So I would argue that Sheldrake's hypothesis, while not confirmed and certainly bizarre at times, seems to be a good option given some of the other choices. It doesn't violate

Ockham's razor as much as other approaches and for the most part may conform to the criterion for a good explanation. Sheldrake moves from a strong historical sense, engages in speculative audacity, and then tries to devise experiments for empirical verification. I think those factors make him very interesting to consider. Perhaps most interesting to me *is his constant attempt to ground ideas, feelings, intuitions, and experiences that have been interpreted as supernatural and utterly mysterious in naturalistic terms.* This approach promises to retain the bits of truth that may be found in the practices of many "unscientific" and "primitive" cultures. Too many scientists have become as dogmatic and dismissive as the religious and superstitious people against whom they argue. I like Sheldrake for keeping