

Analytical abstract of Dennett, D.C. 1990 "Memes and the Exploitation of Imagination" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 48, 127-35. Written by A. Student.

Dennett's goal is to convince readers that discrete, imitable ideas ("memes" in Dawkins' terminology) literally play the role of replicators in an evolutionary process. Dennett's basic argumentative strategy is to describe multiple analogies between genes and memes and between genetics and memetics. The quantity of examples is possibly intended to convince readers that the analogies are not merely superficial, but reflect a deep equivalence between genes and memes.

To get the gene-meme comparison going he depends on a characterization of evolution that refers abstractly to variation, replication, and differential fitness without specifying any material properties for replicators. He assumes without argument that genes (bits of DNA) are the replicators for life on Earth, and claims that other kinds of things could serve as replicators given the abstract characterization of evolution. In the world of ideas, replication = imitation, so the replicators are those ideas that tend to get imitated. Some memes are imitated more than others, providing the analogue to differential fitness, and they change over time, hence variation.

To bolster the genetics-memetics comparison, Dennett lists a number of common features. Meme replication, like gene replication, does not necessarily benefit the organisms carrying the memes (there are "bad" memes). Population genetics also transfers to population memetics with features such as frequency-dependent fitness and linked loci. Memes, like genes, restructure their habitats (i.e., brains, for memes). Etc.

Dennett admits that the idea of memes seems to make us less responsible (and thus less deserving of credit) for what goes on in our own minds. He accepts this consequence, and argues that it is confirmed by reports of introspection into the creative process that reveals authors, composers, etc., are not (fully) the authors of their own ideas. He maintains that resistance to the meme perspective is based on other complex memes that he calls filters.

Ultimately he doesn't seem to really care whether he's got a conventionally convincing argument, so long as he's successfully implanted the idea of memes in the heads of his readers.

Note: This abstract is written at an X320 level. Those receiving graduate credit in X755 are expected to know how to carry a similar analysis to greater depth.