

Phil\*2000  
Philosophy of Biology  
Reflection Questions due February 7  
Please submit by CourseLink

Please note that instead of the scheduled reading by R Wilson (“Levels of Selection”) we will be reading Chapter 11 of The Selfish Gene, “Memes, the New Replicator.”

Questions

- 1) Dawkins argues that in order for memes to qualify as units of selection in their own right they must possess the three (by now, familiar) properties of longevity, fecundity and fidelity. On page 252 (the paragraph beginning with “this brings me to the third general quality of a successful replicator”) he notes that fidelity poses some potential problems. Memes arguably are subject to considerable transmission error or distortion when passed from one mind to another. They also undergo “blending” when combined with other ideas.
  - a) Briefly explain whether these are serious problems for the meme idea. If memes lack fidelity does it mean that an evolutionary approach to culture is doomed?
  - b) Try to devise an experiment that would allow you to measure the amount of transmission error or blending (either one, or perhaps both) to decide empirically whether it is an issue.
  - c) Can you think of cultural practices or institutions that prevent transmission error or blending, thus preserving the fidelity of certain memes?
  
- 2) Dawkins has very little to say about the interaction between genes and memes. He mentions in passing that they can “reinforce” one another, but doesn’t say how. Although he also mentions that meme evolution can be opposed to gene evolution, such as the meme for celibacy in priests, but he doesn’t say much else about their interaction. It is as if meme evolution happens largely independently of gene evolution. My question is whether you also think that meme evolution is independent of gene evolution, and if so, why? Alternatively, can you think of cases in which memes and genes would be expected to co-evolve?