Foreword

Daniel Dennett

If there is one proposition that would-be memeticists agree on, it is that the flourishing of an idea – its success at replicating through a population of minds – and the value of an idea – its truth, its scientific or political or ethical excellence – are only contingently and imperfectly related. Good ideas can go extinct and bad ideas can infect whole societies. The future prospects of the meme idea are uncertain on both counts, and the point of this book is not to ensure that the meme meme flourishes, but to ensure that *if it does, it ought to*. It works towards this worthy end by creating a landmark, a fixed point not of doctrine but of evidence and methods, some shared acknowledgement among the leading proponents and critics about how the issues ought to be addressed.

The annual Superbowl of American football draws a huge television audience, and as a result attracts advertisers who are willing to pay more than a million dollars for half a minute of the viewers' distracted attention. In the last few years, an interesting subspecies of Superbowl advertisers has sprung up: the fledging 'dot.com' Internet companies that pour a substantial portion of their initial capitalization into a single make-or-break Superbowl debut, hoping that this brief exposure will launch them safely into the competitive future. Why don't they just advertise on the Internet, their chosen field of battle? A similar question was raised a year earlier about *Wired*, the (traditional, printed-on-paper, on-sale-at-newsstands) magazine of the Internet. What do these traditional media offer that is not (yet) available on the Internet? For one thing, they offer the guarantee of *shared attention*. When you watch an ad during the Superbowl, you know that you are seeing the same ad, at the same time, as millions of other viewers, and you know that they know this as well. When you see stacks of the same magazine at every newsstand, you know that when you read it that you are not alone in reading it; many, many

others will read or have already the very sentence you are reading. These evanescent communities of shared – and knowingly shared – attention play a crucial role in engendering hard-to-achieve confidence in the message, however trivial the topic. They do this by promising a plethora of paths for coordinating the distributed intelligence, making it possible for people to compare notes, pool their knowledge, confirm or disconfirm their individual opinions. It's not that people recognize this promise and reflect on it – and of course they almost never act on it, pursuing those paths of enquiry – but they just somehow feel better, knowing that they are part of a large audience, and this is why they are in fact right to feel better: it is hard to get away with telling a lie in such a public arena. If you stumble upon a tempting but improbable claim during the Superbowl program, you may be skeptical, but at least you will realize (probably subliminally, without articulating it) that the advertiser has risked a contagion of disbelief by broadcasting instead of narrowcasting, this message. A website may reach five million people, but they all engage, in effect, in five million private communications. We may all be getting the same message, but unless we know this, we won't reap the benefits of truly shared intelligence. As the idiom goes, it helps to know that we are all on the same page.

The advertising that goes on everywhere in science – all those vigorous campaigns mounted on behalf of theories or hypotheses – avoid degenerating into mere propagandizing because the academy creates structured networks of knowingly shared attention and mutual knowledge, so that more or less everybody can be on the same page. It is not enough that a thousand clever thinkers have read many of the same books and articles and come to similar conclusions about them; they must know that this is so. There needs to be a scientific community.

Within such a community controversy can reign without rancor and constructive disagreement can prosper, because approximately all the accumulated knowledge of the participants can be brought to bear on a few focal points, a *competitive* but also *concerted* effort. Now that there are more than a handful of serious contenders in the form of partisan proposals (see the bibliographies of the chapters), it is time to start sorting them out. A start is all. I am not entirely persuaded by *any* of the chapters in this book, but this Foreword is not the time and place for me to take issue with them. This Foreword is the time and place for me to applaud the fact that serious consideration of the meme meme is now underway at last, after several decades of relatively ineffectual campaigns by

proponents and critics. The workshop from which this volume springs was heated but constructive, and now a wider audience can get on the same page. It will be the first of many, I predict.

Skeptics may be tempted to think that my Foreword itself demonstrates the futility of the idea of memetics, by emphasizing the underlying rationality, the intentionality, of the purported 'vectors' of the meme meme. How can mindless Darwinian algorithms cope with such mindful culture-makers, subliminally sensitive to such issues as whether or not the environment includes many paths for coordinating distributed intelligence? But in fact, evolutionary approaches to such underlying conditions of rationality have been leading the way, illuminating the background conditions for communication, cooperation, the establishment of norms and customs, and other phenomena familiar to students of culture. The open question is not whether there will be a Darwinian theory of culture but what shape such a Darwinian theory will take.

It is obvious that there are patterns of cultural change – evolution in the neutral sense – and any theory of cultural change worth more than a moment's consideration will have to be Darwinian in the minimal sense of being *consistent with* the theory of evolution by natural selection of *Homo sapiens*. The demand of this minimal Darwinism are far from trivial, and the ferocity with which Darwinian accounts of the evolution of language and sociality are attacked by some critics from the humanities and social sciences show that in some influential quarters, mere consistency with evolutionary theory is not yet the accepted constraint it ought to be. This is a fact of life that we must deal with: fear of a thin edge of the wedge misleads many who hate the idea of a *strong* Darwinian theory of cultural evolution to resist conceding even consistency with evolutionary theory as the obvious requirement it is. In this volume, minimal Darwinism is taken for granted; no skyhooks are sought within its pages. But there are still plenty of grounds on offer in criticism of various versions of the strong Darwinian thesis of memetics. It will be most interesting to see what settles out of this new exploration.

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