



Corporate Culture and Complexity Part 2C: The Selfish Meme

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“If something exists in the external world and can be imitated, it is at least potentially a meme. To be sure, memes are impotent unless they find their way to groups of human beings with functioning neural and motor systems.”

— William Benzon, **Beethoven's Anvil: Music in Mind and Culture** (2001)

The last two newsletters introduced the new science of memetics, in order to explain how memes and memplexes create culture. However, we believe that the real power of memetics lies in its ability to describe a new evolutionary track for the human species that is both parallel to, and separate from,

genetic evolution. What makes memetics so intriguing is that memes can replicate at the *speed of imitation*, whereas genes replicate at the speed of human reproduction. We believe that this essential difference between memes and genes may dictate which one guides, and ultimately controls, human evolution.

Why is this important? If memes are in control, they dictate our thoughts and actions, without us even being aware that this is occurring. The *certainty trap*, described in the last newsletter, is one example of how memes already control our thoughts and actions. The good news is that, if memes are in control, and we have the ability to select the memes that win, then we can create anything. The bad news is that, developing a conscious awareness of which memes are operating, and when they are

operating, requires us to think quite differently from the way in which we currently think.

Today, you can constantly see examples of how memes replicate, how quickly they replicate, and what the effects are of this ability to replicate through imitation. For example, more and more people are buying SUVs (sport utility vehicles). The reasons people purchase one type of vehicle over another is due primarily to the prevailing meme of the time — the meme that has **won** in the minds of the general public. There can be any number of reasons people use to rationalize their decision to buy an SUV. They may believe that SUVs provide more safety on the road, especially when driving and in accidents. They may believe that SUVs that are also 4-wheel drives may be easier to drive in any weather conditions. Whatever the reason for purchasing SUVs, the fact is that more and more of these vehicles are being sold. The SUV meme is a meme that seems to be winning, for the time being.

In order to win, memes must meet some need for the human population. According to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, author of **The Evolving Self**, “Generally memes that do the job with the least demand on psychic energy will survive. An appliance that does more work with less effort will be preferred.” In other words, humans are attracted to memes that promise to make life easier or more pleasurable. However, in order to become attracted to the meme, memes need to be sold. How are memes sold? They are sold via *meme-spreading machines*, such as word of mouth, television, radio, billboards, internet, and magazines. The meme of the SUV is generally sold in the media,

and is designed to appeal to certain target groups. Then, the types of people who buy SUVs continue to sell the meme, either by word of mouth, or by simply driving them. For example if people who seem to be successful buy an SUV, other people may want to imitate this behaviour, because they equate owning and driving an SUV with success.

Now, *here's the rub*. Memes don't care if they are beneficial for humans. They care only about being replicated — and they're *selfish*; they simply want to be replicated. According to Susan Blackwell, author of **The Meme Machine**, "We must be absolutely clear about what *selfish* means in this context. It does not mean [memes] *for* selfishness. ... *selfish* here means that the [memes] act only for themselves; their only interest is their own replication; all they want is to be passed on to the next generation." Thus, both beneficial and parasitic memes get replicated, and the winner can be either healthy or unhealthy for the carrier. Csikszentmihalyi warns that "Although we might initially adopt memes because they are useful, it is often the case that after a certain point [memes] begin to affect our actions and thoughts in ways that are at best ambiguous and at worst not in our interest. ... The point is that, once a meme is well established, it tends to generate inertia in the mind, and forces us to pursue its logical consequences to the bitter end."

A meme that seems to be beneficial at first may, in fact, be harmful and parasitic in the long term. For example, people may buy an SUV because they think it is safer. When they drive an SUV it *feels* safer, because they sit higher in this type of vehicle, and they can see more.

This means that, to people who value safety, an SUV *must be* safer to drive. Taken a step further, SUVs *must also be* safer in an accident. This is the allure of a meme that has a high potential to win. It meets a need in us, and we can rationalize the adoption of the meme with logic, or what we believe to be logic. In fact, extensive consumer testing has shown that SUVs are actually more dangerous to drive. One reason is that a safe feeling actually causes people to drive these vehicles more recklessly, and to take more chances. Another reason is that, in an accident, the damage to the SUV and its occupants is much greater, due to the construction of the SUV.

Whether we like it or not, memes control our thoughts and actions. Even if we tend to choose memes that are beneficial, they quickly take over and start controlling our thoughts and actions, even if they are harmful in the long term. According to Csikszentmihalyi, "... immediately after the meme has come into existence, it begins to react with and transform the consciousness of its creator, and that of other human beings who come into contact with it." This means that memes move quickly into a form that is imitated without any thought. And they spread from one host to another like wild fire. Then, *without thinking*, people defend and protect the meme by rationalizing its use, even in the midst of evidence to the contrary. We call this form of rationalizing *meme defense*.

In organizations, *meme defense* shows up in a number of ways, including questions that require *certainty-type answers*. In the last newsletter, we listed a number of these types of questions (see below). How often have you heard these questions asked in your own organization? Which memes are these questions protecting?

1. How long will this process take?
2. What results will be produced?
3. What will actually happen to create those results?
4. What guarantee is there that this process will work?
5. How much will this cost?
6. What is the return on investment?

We are not saying that these are not important questions. What is at issue here is how these questions create only certain types of answers — answers that are based on the *illusion of certainty*. Whether or not the question is defending a meme depends on how it is asked. For example, another way to ask the first question is "How long are we willing to try this new approach before we judge whether or not it will work?" In other words, are we willing to experiment, and to be surprised by what we discover as a result of the experiment? Or, are we so fixed with believing that we can know everything before we start that we never try anything new? Is the defending the status-quo meme more important than exploring creative and new approaches?

"The human species is peculiarly vulnerable to being invaded by material memes not so much because we need the comforts they provide, but because ... objects and conspicuous consumption provide such obvious symbols for the expansion of the self."
— Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, **The Evolving Self** (1993)

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