

Chapter 2

The Spread of the Race Meme

The Meme Meme

In his 1976 book, *The Selfish Gene*, biologist Richard Dawkins put forward a provocative idea. He proposed viewing Darwinian natural selection, which explains the origin, spread, and increasing complexity of life on our planet, as a more general principle that could be applied to any self-replicating system. Dawkins explicitly intended such systems to include abstract ideas as well as concrete objects. He coined the term *meme* to refer to culturally transmitted entities, like “tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes, fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches” (p. 192), that spread and evolve through differential survival. As he put it:

The gene, the DNA molecule, happens to be the replicating entity that prevails on our own planet. . . I think that a new kind of replicator has recently emerged . . . still drifting clumsily about in its primeval soup, but. . . achieving evolutionary change at a rate that leaves the old gene panting far behind. The new soup is the soup of human culture. . . (p. 192).

Imitation, in the broad sense, is how memes can replicate. But just as not all genes that can replicate do so successfully, so some memes are more successful in the meme-pool than others. This is the analogue of natural selection. . . qualities that make for high survival value among memes. . . [are] longevity, fecundity, and copying-fidelity (p. 194).

The idea is that a meme that make lots of long-lived exact copies of itself will occasionally make an inaccurate copy. If that variant has a reproductive advantage then it will spread, regardless of its truth or beauty (though truth and beauty are among the repertoire of tricks memes use to spread themselves).

In her 1999 book, *The Meme Machine*, psychologist Susan Blackmore took the meme concept and ran with it. Viewing humans as meme vehicles in much the same way that Dawkins views organisms as gene vehicles, Blackmore took “the memes’ eye view” in exploring the meme concept and the evolution of increasingly complex meme forms and structures. The following are a few examples of her ideas.

Blackmore asks why it is that we always have something occupying our consciousness, including trivia, such as jingles from TV commercials that we would rather be free of. Her answer is that memes that grab our attention spread more

effectively than those that do not and therefore crowd out the meme competition (as well as mental silence or emptiness).¹

Blackmore introduces concepts such as the *memeplex*, or coadapted meme complex, to describe memes that replicate better as a group than individually. Ideologies and religions are examples of notably fecund memeplexes. The *selfplex* is a key memeplex that evolved in the domain that psychologists and social scientists refer to as the self (including the self-concept, body image, and a wide range of related subject matter). She discusses gene–gene, gene–meme, and meme–meme coevolution, and speculates in some detail on the role of memes in the evolution of the brain and the development of consciousness (a particular interest of hers).

Naturally, *The Meme Machine* was a controversial book, and stimulated much discussion (Dennett, 2006; Distin, 2005), notably within Robert Aunger’s multidisciplinary edited volume *Darwinizing Culture* (2000). As the book title indicates, the meme concept offers a mechanism to explain the otherwise nebulous phenomena of cultural evolution and cultural diffusion. Criticisms of the concept include a demand for a precise, testable meme definition, and the complaint that definitions like “whatever is passed on when people imitate each other” (Blackmore, 2000, p. 26) are circular.

This complaint might have some traction when applied to ideas about meme–gene interactions in the evolution of the brain, since it would be advantageous to be able to specify the meme component of the interaction as clearly as the gene component. When it comes to the diffusion of cultural ideas and objects, however, conceptual vagueness or circularity may be less troublesome. In operant conditioning, for example, the definition of a reinforcing stimulus is circular—it is a stimulus that reinforces. Nevertheless, the concept of a reinforcer has been an extremely productive one, yielding all kinds of reproducible data about conditioning, extinction, generalization, schedules of reinforcement, and so forth. In a similar way, if the meme concept yields new data, empirical relationships, and theoretical insights about cultural phenomena (or anything else, including the brain and consciousness for that matter), then it should be regarded as a useful one. If all that it yields are words talking about words, then it may have to be abandoned as not scientifically productive.

This chapter uses meme terminology because it presents a unifying conceptual framework for quite varied material. In addition, there may be explanatory value to viewing the spread of memes as a dynamic process propelled by Darwinian selection. This would be in contrast to merely observing that concepts spread (some more than others) and labeling the process *diffusion*. The validity of the points made and the overall thrust of the argument do not, however, depend on the use of meme terminology (or jargon, depending on your point of view).

¹Blackmore also discusses a variety of reasons that some memes are better at grabbing our attention than others—illustrative examples of which are involvement with emotions or with biological needs like hunger and sex.

The main concept of interest in this chapter is *race*. It is easy to see that race is a meme,² and a rather important one at that. For example, historian Niall Ferguson (2006) explicitly uses the term *race meme* in exploring its pivotal role in the exceptionally bloody history of the twentieth century.

The aim here is both more limited than and different from Ferguson's. It is to contrast two elements so as to make clear that they are distinct phenomena. The first is the gradual migration of humans out of Africa and around the planet over tens of thousands of years, accompanied by climatic adaptations and genetic drift that have led to variations in people's visible characteristics (as well as non-visible characteristics). The second is the rapid migration of the race meme out of Europe over a few centuries, accompanied by cultural adaptations to economic, political, and social conditions.

Out of Africa

The broad outlines of the origin of modern humans in Africa, and their subsequent spread around the globe, have been well known for more than a half century. With new archeological finds, and especially with new genetic techniques, the picture is becoming ever-clearer and more detailed. Naturally, different methods within and between the disciplines of archaeology and genetics always produce somewhat different results. For example, each gene has a different history (e.g., mitochondrial DNA is passed down in the female line and women can have only a limited number of children; the Y chromosome is passed down in the male line and Genghis Khan fathered thousands, so that millions of men now carry his Y chromosome). In addition, groups that died out may leave archeological remains but no genetic trace.

Briefly, the story is this. Anatomically modern humans first appeared in East Africa about 150,000–200,000 years ago—a very short time, whether measured against the history of the planet, or of life on Earth, or of mammals, or even of primates (Dawkins, 2004). This brief time span, compounded by a bottleneck about 70,000 years ago, when our species was nearly wiped out and our genetic variability was greatly diminished, is one of the reasons why we have no races in the biological sense. In addition, since we have been peopling Africa with our kind for all of human history, that continent contains the great bulk of the limited biological diversity found in our species.

About 70,000–100,000 years ago, the first modern humans left Africa through the Middle East and went on to populate the Eurasian continent. Those who left Africa represented only a small proportion of the genetic diversity on the continent at the time—or even of people near the land bridge (now Egypt) or possible water route (now Somalia). Subsequently, about 12,000–15,000 years ago, during the last

²Actually, it is a memplex, though it will be called a meme for the sake of brevity, and the shortened form will be used when referring to other memplexes.

ice age, a few people in northwestern Asia crossed into the New World, probably following game.

The Genographic Project of the *National Geographic* has been reconstructing human migrations from DNA evidence; its website (<https://www3.nationalgeographic.com/genographic/resources.html>) offers up-to-date depictions of the routes we have taken to populate the planet. In addition, the *Race: Are We So Different?* project of the American Anthropological Association (<http://www.understandingrace.org/home.html>) offers archeological evidence as well as that from biological and cultural anthropology and related disciplines. Doubtless, future studies will fill in many details and modify the picture in some ways—but the Africa-to-Eurasia-to-the-Americas story will remain the same.

The simplest way to characterize human biological diversity is in terms not of races but of regions of variability. There is maximum biological variability in Africa (where we have been the longest), an intermediate amount in Eurasia (reflecting our intermediate length of stay there), and relatively little in the indigenous populations of the Americas (as a result of our recent arrival). If the human species did have biological races, they would all be in Africa. This is easy to see, as the examples in Chapter 1 illustrated—the very short Pygmies, the very tall and lanky Masai, and the Bushmen of the Kalahari with steatopygous buttocks and peppercorn hair. (It is only the Western cultural focus on nonwhite skin color that enables us to relegate these variations to lesser importance, and view all three as members of the same “black race.”)

As we saw in Chapter 1, different physical features (e.g., skin color, nose and lip forms, and hair texture) and genes (e.g., for A-B-O blood types) do not vary together in “racial” syndromes. In order to understand why this is the case, we need to briefly consider two relevant concepts—breeding populations and clines.

A breeding population consists of members of a species that breed among themselves more frequently than they do with other members of the species. Over time, the breeding population comes to differ from other populations of the species in the frequencies of certain genes. In general, this distinctiveness arises through the mechanisms of mutation, natural selection, and genetic drift.

We can compare the biological concept of breeding population with the concept of race. First of all, breeding populations are merely statistical subgroups of species, which may be defined in whatever way is useful for research purposes. For example, one might wish to examine populations characterized by 99% inbreeding over 20 generations (there are no such human populations) or one might investigate populations characterized by 51% inbreeding over 2 generations (there are millions of such human groups). Second, it is important to remember that all breeding populations belong to a given species. Humans from anywhere in the world, regardless of visible characteristics, are capable of producing fertile offspring with other humans from anywhere else. Finally, even when a group qualifies as a breeding population according to some statistical criterion, it can merge with other groups and cease being a breeding population in a single generation. Modern transportation has increased

gene flow around the world, so that the number of breeding populations according to any given statistical criterion is rapidly declining.

It is easy to see that the biological concept of breeding population is different from the social concept of race to which we are accustomed. In particular, social judgments of race frequently include visible characteristics, such as skin color. Clearly, one cannot tell a person's breeding population from phenotypic information. Neither, however, can a person's breeding population be determined by a knowledge of genotype. Suppose, for example, that 40% of the members of a purported race have the gene R, while 20% of other humans have that gene. The fact that a given individual does or does not carry the gene is of no help in deciding whether or not the person belongs to the breeding population in question.

Given the distinction between a breeding population and the social classification of race, it is worthwhile pointing out that neither whites nor blacks constitutes a breeding population. Whites are not a worldwide breeding population because whites in America breed with blacks in America more frequently than they do with whites in Australia or Russia. And blacks are not a worldwide breeding population because blacks in America breed with whites in America more frequently than they do with blacks in Ghana or Tanzania.

In contrast to blacks and whites, residents of an isolated small town are a good example of a breeding population because they do breed among themselves more frequently than with others. On a larger scale, all North Americans—including our entire diversity of visible characteristics—constitute a huge breeding population, since we do breed among ourselves more than with non-North Americans; moreover, all Africans, including all of their diversity of visible characteristics, also constitute a giant breeding population for the same reason.

In examining the global distribution of different human physical features or genes, one discovers an interesting pattern. Not only do the different features vary independently, but each does so gradually and in different directions along lines known as clines. The reason for this pattern of gradual variation is easy to understand. Suppose that several breeding populations are geographically situated along a line, where the members of A have some contact (including sexual contact) with those of B, B with C, and so forth. If the population of A begins with a high frequency of some gene that is absent in the other populations, then it is likely that some of the offspring of their contacts with B will carry the gene. Since A and B are separate breeding populations, the frequency of the gene among the members of B will never reach its level among A. Some of the carriers in B will transmit it to the offspring of their matings with people of C, though the frequency of the gene among the members of C will never reach its level among B, and so forth. In this way, over many generations, the trait will spread out in declining frequencies the further one is from A.

The hodgepodge of clines, running every which way all over the globe, does not suggest that humans consist of a small number of distinct "racial" entities that developed separately. Rather, the data are more what one would expect from a species in which different groups migrated to all corners of the earth in differing numbers and at different times, splitting apart, becoming isolated, merging with new groups, and

generally combining and recombining in myriad ways across time and space. The model of evolution that best explains human variation is not a branching tree, but rather a tangled lattice.

In summary, human physical variation is clinal, not racial. Because human variation around the planet is gradual, the more distant two populations are, the more different they appear. Even when populations look quite different from one another—for example, Swedes, Nigerians, and Japanese—if you look at all the populations in between them the pattern of gradual variation becomes evident. (Many people in India, for example, have dark skins like Africans, black straight hair like East Asians, and European facial features. Witherspoon et al. (2007) discuss issues involved in quantifying the overlap among populations.) In addition, if you travel in different directions you encounter different kinds of variations.³

Out of Europe

In contrast to the origin of the human species in Africa, the race meme began in Europe. Humans spread around the globe—throughout Africa, and from there to Eurasia, and then to the Americas and elsewhere, diversifying along the way—over many tens of thousands of years. The race meme spread from the European colonial powers to their colonies around the globe and eventually to most humans, diversifying along the way—over a few centuries.

The Age of Discovery in the fifteenth century put Europeans in contact with others who differed from them in many ways, including visible characteristics. At first these differences were explained by references to the Bible, furthering the spread of religious memes. The Enlightenment brought the beginnings of modern science and offered “scientific” explanations—a new set of memes—as a rational alternative. These early explanations were, to modern eyes, embarrassingly ethnocentric, subjective, and arbitrary. The cultural anthropologist Audrey Smedley pointed this out as follows:

In the 10th edition of his work, published in 1758–1759, Linneaus expanded on the characteristics of the varieties within the human species and added such features as dress and body decorations, differences of behavior, and personality characteristics. He described indigenous Americans as obstinate, merry, free, and regulated by customs. Europeans were gentle, acute, inventive, and governed by laws. Africans were crafty, indolent, negligent, and governed by caprice, whereas Asians were severe, haughty, miserly, and ruled by opinions (Slotkin, 1965). . . Blumenbach used the term *Caucasian* for all Europeans because

³This point was illustrated nicely several decades ago by the anthropologist Marvin Harris (1971), who had the bright idea of getting pictures of United Nations delegates and arranging them in an array corresponding to the geographic locations of their countries. The gradual shift in visible characteristics from northern Europe to tropical Africa and the different gradual shift in visible characteristics from Western Europe to East Asia were easy to see.

he thought the skull of a woman of the Caucasus area of southern Russia was the most beautiful⁴ (Smedley, 2002, pp. 156–157).

As discovery turned to conquest and slavery, the difference in visible characteristics of the subjugated populations from their masters provided a handy ideological justification for inequality. Hence, political utility presented a powerful force for the spread of the nascent race meme.

England, France, Spain, and Portugal (not to mention other imperial powers) had differing governments and legal systems; colonized different places with different indigenous populations, ecologies, climates, and natural resources; and spoke different languages. Once the race meme entered the culture of a colonial power, linguistic barriers limited memetic interchange with other powers parallel to the way geographic barriers have always limited genetic interchange.

This linguistic separation (accompanied by the geographical separation of colonies within a particular empire) enabled the proliferation of racial folk taxonomies illustrated in Chapter 1 to take place in response to local conditions. At the same time, a combination of linguistic separation, ethnocentrism, and a lack of cross-cultural experience prevented the development around the world of an awareness that the terms used to refer to race vary widely in meaning from one place to another. That is, words like “race” and “type” along with their cognates and related terminology have wildly different meanings (denotations, connotations, rules for social usage, and sociocultural implications) in different places—but few people, except for social scientists who study the issue (and immigrants who confront it), are aware of this significant reality.

Slavery was above all an economic system—enforced by a legal system that was backed up by the power of the state. For this reason, differing local issues, especially economic and political ones in the differing empires and their colonies, led to differing legal solutions; and their various codifications brought with them self-perpetuating legal systems of “racial” classification. These *de jure* taxonomies then played a significant role in the evolving folk taxonomies of everyday life.

Consider, for example, the common occurrence of masters who impregnated their female slaves. What was the status of the children? Were they slaves or free? Could they marry? Own or inherit property—including slaves? Answers—which varied widely—to questions such as these required the creation of legally defined categories according to which people could be classified.

There were also cultural and demographic differences. For example, eight centuries of Moorish control of the Iberian Peninsula led to a greater familiarity with

⁴The demographic section of a questionnaire from *American Men and Women of Science*, a few years ago, asked me to classify myself within the category “Race/Ethnicity”; the option designed for me was “Caucasian.” I wrote a brief note with my response, indicating that the use of the terms “race” and “Caucasian” with clear biological intent was an embarrassment for a purportedly scientific publication. The cultural nature of “racial” designations was also illustrated in a cross-cultural psychology class, when a student from the former Soviet Union (which included the Caucasus) said that Russians refer to Caucasians as “black.” You can imagine her perplexity at discovering that they were “white” in the United States and our scientific publications.

a range of skin tones in Portugal and Spain than in England; also, the much higher ratio of Africans to Europeans in Portuguese Brazil as compared to British North America led to differing issues in the regulation of slavery and differing classificatory solutions (Degler, 1971; Telles, 2004).

Since people of African descent are a minority in the United States, “the one drop rule” has the effect of excluding them from membership in the more prestigious white classification and facilitates their exploitation. Since people of African descent are a majority in Brazil, a vague, diffuse system of classification, with lots of possibilities other than just black or white, protects the powerful minority (with more money and less melanin) by preventing the development of a unifying black racial identity. If the one drop rule were to exist in Brazil it would be political dynamite—defining into existence a *de facto* oppressed black majority in many ways parallel to the *de jure* situation under apartheid in South Africa.⁵

Racism is a meme that is related to the race meme (and only incidentally to actual physical appearance). As a result, since the race meme differs in different cultures, we would expect racial discrimination and stereotypes to vary from one culture to another as well. This is in fact the case. For example, racism tends to increase as one descends the social class hierarchy in the United States, while the opposite is the case in Brazil, with a remarkable degree of “racial democracy” (as Brazilians refer to it) among the poor. Also, in American sexual stereotypes blondes are the most beautiful and sexy, while in the northeastern part of Brazil *morenas* are the most beautiful and *mulatas* are the sexiest.

We can also better understand why it is that racism persists decades after scientists have shown that there are no races in the human species. You don’t need races. All you need is the race meme.

The Race Meme in Twenty-First Century Europe

The fascinating variety of race meme mutations found in former European colonies, discussed in Chapter 1, led to curiosity about the varieties of the meme in Europe today. The reasoning was as follows. The race meme, which began in Europe, proliferated and evolved over a few centuries because of its cultural utility. It was of only limited usefulness in making and enforcing social distinctions in Europe, where other observable memes like speech or dress were more striking. The race meme was most efficacious in the colonies, where slavery was widespread and where indigenous peoples and imported Africans looked physically different from Europeans. Consequently, a reasonable reconstruction would be to view a relatively limited

⁵Class discrimination in Brazil is stronger than racial discrimination in the United States, though Brazilian racial discrimination is milder than ours. Brazilians like to portray the strong correlation between darker skin color and poverty as a by-product of social class differences. To those at the bottom, the question of whether their misery stems from racial or class discrimination is not of great moment.

range of race memes in Europe as having been acted on by natural selection in the various colonies, leading to a greater variety there.

As a result of this reasoning, the initial hypothesis was fairly simple. Because people in Western European countries today are less diverse than in their former colonies (e.g., along the dimensions mentioned above—governmental and legal systems; indigenous populations; ecologies, climates, and natural resources; and languages), it would be expected that their racial folk taxonomies would also be less variegated. Specifically, less variation in the race meme was to be expected among England, France, Portugal, and Spain than had been found among their former colonial possessions—the United States, Jamaica, Haiti, Martinique, Brazil, Cape Verde, Puerto Rico, and Ecuador. In other words, since Europe began with less variety—and since there has been a more limited variety of pressures from the social and physical environment in Europe over the last few centuries selecting for meme mutations—there should be a lesser variety of post-Linneaus forms of the race meme there.

Interviews with Europeans from England, France, Spain, and Portugal were initiated with the intent of producing four folk taxonomies of race that could be compared to the eight in Chapter 1. In addition, some people from Germany were also interviewed with the aim of producing a fifth folk taxonomy. (Given the centrality of a racist ideology to that country's Nazi past, there was a desire to explore the form[s] the race meme might have taken several generations after the end of the war.)

Complications soon developed, stemming from the greater time depth of Western cultures in Europe as compared to Western cultures in the New World. For example, while Europe has nothing to compare with the hundreds of indigenous languages found in the Americas, within the majority population of each European country one finds a longstanding regional diversity of languages. Here are a couple of illustrative examples from each country (though many languages cross contemporary borders): France—Breton and Gascon; Germany—Bavarian and Frisian; Portugal—Galician and Mirandese; Spain—Basque and Catalan; the United Kingdom—Gaelic and Welsh. Thus, the degree to which information could be generalized—always a central issue with cultural data—was a real problem.

As work on the project progressed, and in recognition of the continually growing literature on memes (Aunger, 2004, 2007; Greenberg, 2005; Heylighen & Chielens, 2009), the focus began to shift from a static comparison of folk taxonomies to the idea of a dynamic process of Darwinian selection as a description for the spread of the race meme.

Here is an example from an informal interview with a Bavarian man on a Long Island beach. Sitting on a blanket and watching the variety of New Yorkers surrounding him, he was asked what word Germans would use to describe people who look like one person or another. Time after time (e.g., for people who look South Asian ["Indian"] or Southwest Asian ["Iranian"] to New Yorkers) he would say he had no idea, or that he rarely saw people who look like that in Munich.⁶ On the other

⁶This was also his answer to questions like "What would you call someone with one parent of African ancestry and the other of East Asian ancestry (e.g., Tiger Woods)."

hand, when asked about the “white folks,” his vocabulary suddenly became quite variegated—using words like *holländisch* (Dutch), *italienisch* (Italian), *englisch* (English), and similar ones.

One interpretation of such responses is that the way that race memes mutate to make relevant distinctions within a given culture can be understood as a parallel to the way species evolve to fill ecological niches (e.g., mammal species may have proliferated following the extinction of the dinosaurs), and the protection against extinction offered by memetic diversity can also be seen as a parallel to the protection offered by genetic diversity. Thus, it may be useful to think of race memes as having mutated (and continuing to mutate) to fill social niches.

Here is an American example: the increase in black–white intermarriages following enactment of the 1964 Civil Rights Act has led to a shift in the folk classification of the offspring of such unions from *black* to a new *mixed* category.⁷ The *mixed* category has also continued to grow because of the upsurge of immigration (and intermarriages of immigrants and their children) from countries whose folk taxonomies are incommensurate with ours. As a result, “Other” has become the fastest-growing Census category—including 42% of self-classified “Hispanics” (USDA, 2006).⁸ Interviews with Europeans led to a more specific hypothesis than the initial one—that is, of less-varied racial folk taxonomies in the four countries of the Old World than in their eight former colonies. It began to seem not only as if the Old World race memes were less varied but also that they were more similar to the memes of their former colonies—in that ancestry was a more important principle than visible characteristics in England, with the opposite being the case in the countries of Latin Europe. (For example, it was interesting to learn—from an interviewee from Toulouse, France—that an intermarried couple might have three children of different physical appearance who would be considered *blanc* [white], *métis* [half-caste, or mixed], and *noir* [black].) Naturally, more detailed research would be needed to confirm this impression of a more specific relationship between the racial folk taxonomies of the former colonial powers and their former possessions—but it does make cultural sense.

Americans tend to see three areas—North America, Latin America, and Europe. In contrast, Brazilians have a different (and culturally more accurate) view consisting of only two parts—North America⁹ + Northern Europe, and Latin America + Latin Europe. For this reason, it would be interesting in a future comparative study of the race meme in Europe to add Italy to the Latin countries investigated and the Netherlands to the Northern ones.

It should also be mentioned that—despite the stereotype of Germans as a rational/logical people—Germany was the only country whose interviewees

⁷For example, nearly all Americans in the pre-World War II generation would consider Barack Obama black, while a substantial majority of today’s college students would view him as mixed.

⁸While the government and census have been slow to participate in the evolution of the American race meme, the news media as leading meme replicators have taken note of the changes. See, for example, the *Time Magazine* (2000) special report on *Redefining Race in America*.

⁹Mexico, Puerto Rico, and the Francophone regions of Canada are included with “Latin America” in this cultural view.

provided internally inconsistent information. This occurred regarding the use of terms such as *Rasse* (race—a taboo word), *ethnische Gruppe* (ethnic group), *Farbige(r)* (a colored person), and *Mischling* (a half-caste, or “mixed” person).

The reason for this difficulty is not hard to understand. Because of the country’s Nazi past and people’s desire to overcome it, race is a taboo subject.¹⁰ Thus, while Germans feel a special responsibility to be sensitive about the issue, their defensiveness has the effect of walling them off from the clarifications that could be provided by open discussion (e.g., of findings from biological and cultural anthropology, and evolutionary biology).

As the European Union continues to expand, cultural interchange—including intermarriage—is bound to increase. It also seems that national identities are beginning to be at least partially displaced by a European identity. These trends inevitably point to increasing contact and competition among race memes from different cultures, a process that should be accelerated as English increasingly serves as a *lingua franca*. Whatever the meanings of *race* in Europe today, they are sure to change.

The Race Meme and the Selfplex

Raising the question of national identity (another meme) leads to the broader issue of the selfplex and of the race meme within it. Blackmore (1999) discussed the selfplex as follows:

The selfplex permeates all our experience and all our thinking so that we are unable to see it for what it is—a bunch of memes. . . . The memes inside a memeplex survive better as part of the group than they would on their own. Once they have got together they form a self-organizing, self-protecting structure that welcomes and protects other memes that are compatible with the group and repels memes that are not. In a purely informational sense a memeplex can be imagined as having a kind of boundary or filter that divides it from the outside world. We have already seen how religions, cults, and ideologies work as memeplexes; we can now see how the selfplex works (p. 231).

Researchers are often perplexed by the tenacity of the race meme in the face of contradictory evidence. In 1941, the anthropologist Ashley Montagu presented evidence that the human species has no races in the biological sense; by the early 1960s, this had become the dominant view within anthropology. Why has there been only a minimal spillover of this knowledge from science to everyday life?

Thinking in terms of memes as replicators helps to understand the phenomenon. For example, astrology memes are more widespread in our culture than astronomy memes, just as race memes are more widespread than cline memes. However, astrology memes rarely play a significant role in people’s selfplexes (though some people’s behavior is influenced by reading a daily astrology column). In contrast, the race meme is intimately tied to many other memeplexes that make up the selfplex.

¹⁰In addition, to American eyes, the German population seems largely white. This means that, even in most large cities, Germans are not exposed to the range of physical variation that is common in the United States—or for that matter in England or France.

(Social psychologist Harry Triandis (1989, 1994) has studied the self[plex] cross-culturally and finds major differences, especially between individualistic and collectivistic cultures. Western cultures are individualistic (to differing degrees and in differing way) and they understand people as independent actors. Most other cultures [to differing degrees and in differing ways] view groups such as the extended family or tribe as the primary entities, and the self is defined by relationships with others in the group. Thus, the export of the race meme from the individualistic West to the rest of the world implies that natural selection will favor mutations that are better adapted to the more collectivist selfplexes it encounters.)

The following are some of the memeplexes of the selfplex that include the race meme; they hint at the pervasiveness of the meme and help us to understand its refractiveness to competing scientific memes (e.g., gradual variation around the planet of people's physical characteristics). Body image includes the race meme, as do aesthetic and sexual reactions to one's own physical appearance and that of others. The race meme is part of ethnic identity. People believe or have heard that they are similar to members of their social group not merely because they have learned similar beliefs and behaviors, but because they share some biological essence transmitted through their blood or linked in some way to their visible characteristics. The race meme plays an important role in the autobiographical self. We all have implicit or explicit stories; we tell ourselves about how we got to be who we are—made up of bits of memories, things we have heard about ourselves from parents and others, fantasy, and other sources—and the race meme is prominent in these stories. We have behavioral expectancies of ourselves that become at least partially self-fulfilling prophesies (e.g., regarding ability in academic areas, music, sports, or the visual arts) and the race meme is active in these expectancies.

Given these multiple entanglements of the race meme with the selfplex—not to mention with other replicators in the media and throughout societies around the world—we can see why the race meme is complex, multifarious, pervasive, and as a result tenacious, despite scientific evidence to the contrary.

In summary, humans migrated out of Africa and spread around the globe over many tens of thousands of years, with more distant populations generally appearing more different from one another than closer ones. The race meme migrated out of Europe a few hundred years ago and spread around the globe, with race memes from different languages generally making different distinctions. The race meme flourishes despite contradictory scientific evidence both because of its pervasiveness and variety in cultures around the world and because of its linkages to multiple memeplexes within the selfplex.



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