Belief is the Battlefield

A conceptual art project

The Selfish Idea

How Richard Dawkins' Meme Escaped the Page and Took Over the Culture

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In 1976, a young Oxford zoologist tucked a strange, speculative idea into the final chapter of a book about genes. He was not trying to explain the internet, or political warfare, or modern occultism - none of those things existed yet in the forms we now know. He was trying to finish a thought about evolution. But the concept he named that year would go on to do something almost no other scientific idea has managed: it would prove its own theory by living it out. Richard Dawkins called it the meme, and in the decades since, the meme has copied itself, mutated, been fought over, worshipped, and weaponized - demonstrating, in the most literal way imaginable, exactly what its inventor said it would do.

The meme first appears in Chapter 11 of *The Selfish Gene*, titled "Memes: the new replicators," almost as a coda to the book's real argument. That argument had reframed evolution from the gene's perspective: living organisms, in Dawkins' phrase, are "survival machines" built by genes to propagate themselves down the generations. But near the book's close, Dawkins makes a speculative leap beyond biology altogether. Natural selection, he suggests, isn't really about genes as such - it's about replicators in general: anything that copies itself, varies slightly with each copy, and is selected for based on how well those variants survive and spread. Genes are the replicator that happened to build life on Earth. But Dawkins proposes that a second replicator has recently appeared on this planet, one that lives not in DNA but in brains, and copies itself not through reproduction but through imitation.

He coined the word by shrinking the Greek *mimeme*, meaning something imitated, into a single syllable that would rhyme with "gene" - one that also happened to echo "memory" and the French *même*, meaning "same." His chosen examples were deliberately unglamorous: a catchy tune, a turn of phrase, a fashion in dress, a technique for building an arch. A good idea, he argued, leaps from mind to mind much as a virus leaps from body to body, and the ideas that spread most successfully are not necessarily the truest or the most useful ones - merely those best suited, psychologically, to being noticed, remembered, and passed on. Some memes, he suggested, might behave almost like parasites, propagating at their host's expense rather than for the host's benefit.

For roughly two decades this remained mostly an academic curiosity: a suggestive metaphor rather than a working science. The philosopher Daniel Dennett picked up the idea in *Consciousness Explained* and later in *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, using memes to argue that the evolutionary logic Dawkins described might shape human minds themselves. The psychologist Susan Blackmore pushed the theory furthest in her 1999 book *The Meme Machine*, arguing that the sense of having a unified self is itself a kind of "memeplex" - a co-adapted bundle of ideas that has persuaded its host it is a coherent individual. A short-lived *Journal of Memetics* attempted, in the late 1990s, to formalise the whole enterprise into a genuine discipline. It never quite got there. Critics kept pointing to the one thing memetics lacked and genetics had: a discrete, stable unit of inheritance. A gene is a specific, identifiable stretch of DNA; a meme could be a tune, a slogan, or an entire religion, with no agreed way to say where one ended and another began. Without that precision, memetics drifted, through the 2000s, from laboratory ambition back toward what it may have been all along - a brilliant metaphor for how culture moves, rather than a science of it.

Then culture did something Dawkins had not scripted: it took his metaphor literally, ran off with it, and turned "meme" into one of the defining words of the twenty-first century - almost entirely stripped of its academic origins. The word migrated onto internet forums during the 2000s, initially attached to viral in-jokes and captioned images. By the 2010s, "meme" had become the ordinary term for any image, video, or format that spread rapidly online, endlessly remixed by anonymous crowds. There's a real irony here: this vernacular usage, for all that it abandoned Dawkins' theoretical vocabulary, is arguably the closest thing to a literal proof of his original idea that has ever existed. An internet meme genuinely does what Dawkins said memes do - it copies itself through screenshots, reposts, and remixes; it varies slightly with each copy, a new caption or template or degraded re-edit; and it is selected, ruthlessly and in real time, by likes, shares, and recommendation algorithms, for whatever makes it more likely to spread further. Digital culture didn't just borrow Dawkins' word. It built, without quite meaning to, the first working laboratory for his idea - one with the selection pressures made visible as a running tally of engagement.

That laboratory gave the meme properties its inventor never anticipated. Memes became modular: recognisable templates - a reaction image, a two-panel format, a particular font - that could be endlessly refilled with new content while still being legible as "the same meme," rather as a folk tune survives many different sets of lyrics. They became a dialect, a form of in-group fluency, where correctly reading a meme's layered references marked you as a member of a particular online community, and missing the joke marked you as an outsider. And they became fast, almost absurdly so. A folk song might mutate across generations; an internet meme can be born, peak, and curdle into ironic self-parody within days - evolutionary time compressed to something closer to internet time.

Something moving this quickly, replicating this efficiently, and apparently able to seize collective attention almost at will was perhaps always going to be treated as more than a scientific metaphor. This is where meme theory collided with chaos magic, a modern occult tradition - associated particularly with the writer and practitioner Peter Carroll - that treats belief itself as a tool, largely indifferent to whether any given belief is objectively true so long as it produces a desired effect. Chaos magic already possessed a concept oddly compatible with Dawkins' meme: the egregore, a symbol or idea imagined to take on a kind of autonomous life once enough minds invest belief in it. Trace a line from the 1960s absurdism of Discordianism and Robert Anton Wilson's fondness for reality-bending pranks and "operations," through the anonymous message-board cultures of the 2000s and 2010s, and you arrive at "meme magic": the half-ironic, half-sincere claim, popularised especially around the 2016 US presidential election, that memes - a cartoon frog character reframed with invented mythology around an ancient Egyptian deity, most famously - could reach out of the screen and shape real-world events. Whatever one makes of the sincerity behind such claims, they represent a striking move: taking a biologist's metaphor for how ideas spread and treating it as a literal account of how ideas act upon reality. Dawkins, a committed rationalist, had compared memes to viruses. Meme magic recast them as something closer to spirits.

That same slippage - from "memes spread because they are good at spreading" to "memes are weapons that can be deliberately built and aimed" - has proven immensely useful to political operators of every persuasion. Dawkins' original insight, that a successful meme need not be true, only psychologically sticky, turns out to be an unusually precise description of effective propaganda. Political campaigns, partisan online communities, and state-linked influence operations have all, at various points, treated the meme format - compressed, emotionally charged, endlessly remixable, built for a share button rather than a footnote - as an ideal vehicle for political messaging that bypasses argument altogether. Analysts of information warfare now write seriously about "memetic warfare" as a category of influence operations, and documented meme campaigns, ranging from grassroots partisan activity to coordinated disinformation efforts, have targeted elections and public debate in multiple countries. None of it required anyone to believe in memetics as a rigorous science. It only required noticing, as Dawkins had in 1976, that a mind is a kind of contested territory, and that whatever colonises it first, and most memorably, tends to win - regardless of whether it deserves to.

Which brings the story back to that final chapter of a book about genes. Dawkins meant "meme" as a modest, largely metaphorical extension of Darwinian logic into the realm of culture - a way of asking what else, besides DNA, might be capable of evolving. He almost certainly did not intend to help found a magical practice, arm a generation of political operatives, or supply the vocabulary for a global digital folk art. And yet the concept did precisely what Dawkins said memes do: it left its point of origin, mutated as it passed from mind to mind and medium to medium, and was selected, again and again, for whichever version proved most useful, or most viral, to whoever picked it up next. Fifty years on, remarkably little of the original academic argument survives intact in the word's popular meaning. But the underlying mechanism Dawkins described has never been easier to see at work. The meme about memes turned out to be the most successful meme of all.

About this report

This report was generated by AI for beliefisthebattlefield.com.

Belief is the Battlefield is a conceptual art project investigating how 9/11 and The Matrix framed our ‘post-truth’ century. Through podcasts, video, stories and memes, it traces the technology and history of ideas behind today’s cognitive warfare - a contested world where what we believe has become the battlefield. Will contain inaccuracies.