

Genes, Memes, and Biases

Genes pass on biological characteristics to future generations. Memes are concise statements of concepts that also can be passed on to future generations. Biases (a tendency to favor one thing over another) can be contained in each.

Genes contain the biological tendencies toward, let's say, having long limbs, preferring salty tastes, or having sensitive hearing. If you have the biological tendency to have long limbs, you may favor basketball over bowling. If you have the biological tendency like salty tastes, you may have a preference for potato chips over fruits as your favorite snack. If you have the biological tendency to have sensitive hearing, you may have a bias for quiet sessions with Mozart over raucous sessions with Led Zeppelin or Kiss.

What about memes? Should the meme "If you think education is expensive, try ignorance" seem both clever and relevant to you, and you constantly see it in daily life, you may develop a bias toward public education no matter the cost to state or national budget. You may put no further thought into the matter. The meme is so powerful that it convinces without research or discussion. However, often memes are not well-formed arguments but clever partial arguments. Stop for a moment and think: is education really the opposite of ignorance? Isn't intelligence the opposite of ignorance? Does education guarantee intelligence? Does the acquiring of intelligence have to be expensive?

Counterarguments seldom take the form of a counter meme. They often have to be spelled out to be effective. This spelling out does not comport to the preferred speed of the current culture and thus these counterarguments tend not to become as popular or as convincing as the original memes.

The difference is this: genes pass on tendencies (biases) without bias; i.e., your biology doesn't really care if you favor basketball, chips, or Mozart. On the other hand, memes (actually, the creators and users of memes) have a *bias* they wish to pass on. They want you to accept *their* biases. In other words, the meme-creators' end goal is not biological diversity, but conversion to their cause.

You may remember the martial arts memes of the 1970s: "Legs are longer and stronger than punches, therefore TKD is the most powerful martial art", or Bruce Lee's "It's not daily increase but daily decrease. Hack away at the unessential."

Let's take the TKD argument. Yes, in muscular tests, legs are certainly stronger than arms. Obviously they are longer, as well. But what does that have to do with a powerful (i.e. effective) martial art? Are legs as versatile as hand strikes? Are kicks functional when the opponent is close or when he attempts a takedown? Going from "longer and stronger legs" to

“the most powerful martial art” is too facile a conclusion, yet it was an accepted martial truth for at least a decade. Ironically, although Bruce Lee was a good kicker, he did not employ TKD-type kicks in fighting, but reserved them for movie scenes. However, even *his* meme is suspect. At what point in one’s martial development does one constantly decrease what one has learned? By what standard does one determine what is “unessential”? Does not constant increase allow one more choices about what to eventually eliminate? Wouldn’t we be better off accumulating as well as refining?

In my humble opinion, bias (a preferred slant on things) isn’t necessarily bad. Being convinced by a half-baked argument in a well-worded meme is.