

The Selfish Gene
Richard Dawkins

The Selfish Meme

"The Selfish Gene" created a huge splash when it was published 35 years ago. It explained how species succeed under Darwinian evolution. But it doesn't apply to modern man! We are dying out. You can attribute it to "The Unselfish Gene" or more aptly "The Selfish Phenotype."

Richard Dawkins theorizes that evolution is a matter of genes passing themselves on. The phenotypes – the animals and plants that we see, like us, are irrelevant except to the extent that they are successful in propagating their genes. There is ample evidence in the animal world that the individual doesn't matter. The black widow spider eats her mate after mating. Salmon swim upstream and die after leaving and fertilizing their eggs.

Among human beings, however, the phenotype is all that matters. We are vastly more concerned with living people than with future generations. Educated, intelligent people are especially indifferent to passing on their own genes. Dawkins and his brilliant and beautiful wife had no children.

Humankind long ago overcame predators and disease. Other tribes are our most significant competition. Human societies excel at outbreeding and killing off rival societies. Over history those Homo sapiens cultures that did not go extinct had to evolve continually to maintain their competitiveness. Since the Renaissance, European cultures have dominated in the realm of ideas, and not done too badly in population, while the Asian cultures have dominated in sheer numbers of people.

Altruism was essential in building large societies. Orientals and northern Europeans especially evolved to look out for others in the tribe. To empathize with them. These tribes coalesced into nations with a high level of trust, and low levels of crime. Intelligence was a necessary ingredient. People had to understand that helping others was in their own long term interest – or rather, that of their genes.

Culture spread like peacock feathers once people started living in large groups. Individuals could prosper exploiting talents like management, bookkeeping, singing and acting... anything to set oneself apart from ordinary farmers and yeomen. Of course the pretty girls liked this kind of talent, and women developed their own flirtatious wiles to catch the most attractive guys. Anybody who could do so formed himself into a distinctive individual, if possible an intellectual. A philosopher.

Europeans incorporated various degrees of altruism into their philosophy. Rousseau was a wild optimist, Locke and Burke less so. They had a sense that Europe had a better model for living than the rest of the world, and by persuasion or conquest they were going to share it. Western culture reached most of the rest of the world through Christianity, the military and business. We called it the "mission civilatrice" or "white man's burden." We might've been wrong but we were never in doubt. We promiscuously spread

our culture, believing that everybody else would benefit from it whether or not they asked for or wanted it.

We convinced ourselves that the whole world was one people; that mankind had transcended tribalism. We were kidding ourselves, of course. The rest of the world didn't comprehend why we would believe that, and didn't trust our motives. Did we fight in Vietnam or Iraq for the benefit of those people? C'mon, get serious. Even our supposed allies thought it was all about oil – even though Vietnam didn't have any.

Western societies have been swept up in altruistic movements for the last century. Workers of the world, unite! Civil rights! Ban the bomb! End overpopulation! Save the whales! Save the environment! End global warming! Ban genetically modified organisms! Ethical treatment for animals! Adherents support these causes with the evangelical zeal with which their ancestors embraced Christianity. Also, a cynic would add, the same unexamined faith.

Like the Christian crusaders of 100 years ago, we are generous in sharing our convictions with the rest of the world. They in turn look at us much the way they looked at Christians. Weirdoes, but rich weirdoes, good for a handout if you pretend to agree with them. African strongmen, for instance, take a European stand on GMOs because they benefit from European aid. Whether or not GMOs would benefit the people is hardly considered.

Westerners are smug about having exchanged a belief in cloudy religious myths which emerged 4000 years ago from the Levantine desert for the grab bag of above-named modern cloudy myths. Our new myths offer a balm for the soul as we pursue our sensual and material delights: Jacuzzis, gourmet foods, huge homes and cars, and so on. Just as we moderns delight in pointing out the obvious contradictions inherent in Christianity, we are marvelously blind to the contradictions in our own belief systems, such as between saving the whales and taking cruise vacations.

In this seminal "Selfish Gene" Dawkins introduced the idea of a meme, an idea, behavior or style that spreads from person to person within a culture. Religion is clearly a meme. Dawkins, a stout atheist, rails against it constantly. However, all the other above-named cultural detritus amounts to nothing more than memes. We are in the thrall of the half-baked products of our own fantasies and hubris.

Our brains and altruism have gotten us ahead of evolution. We believe that having children imposes an almost immoral burden on the Earth's resources, and self-indulgence memes seduce us into spending whatever energy we might have invested in children in satisfying an ephemeral, artificially induced drive for consumption. Nobody needs a Toyota Tundra or an Apple iPad, but some eerie compulsion drives us into their showrooms. We indulge our lhasa apsos instead of children.

For us, the selfish gene is a thing of the past. It has been replaced by the selfish meme. Memes, however, can only infect other minds, and with fewer births there are fewer hosts. The genius of religious memes is that they reproduce both bodies and minds. Evolution would predict that selfish

memes eventually die out. The nature of the religious memes which will survive, those which drive people to procreate, is an interesting speculation. I'm sure it would drive Dawkins crazy.

The Selfish Meme: corollary one, politics

Our generation is free! After we freed ourselves from the chains of religion it took only a couple of generations to realize the full implications. Without religion, we were not under any obligation to fulfill the biblical command to "be fruitful and multiply." That has meant we do not need to marry.

The consequences of feeling no obligation to marry are immense. It puts sex in a whole new light – something available for our enjoyment, rather than an occasional small reward to offset the immense burden of raising children. If the aim is no longer to reproduce ourselves, any kind of sex is acceptable. This is exactly what we've seen. Promiscuous sexuality, both homosexual and heterosexual, is widespread in our society.

People ask today why it would ever have been otherwise. Why shouldn't people be free to do whatever they want with their bodies? Even the question seems absurd: why would an individual not have complete sovereignty over his own body? One does not have to look very far back into history, or too far for contemporary cultures in which it is not the case. Our individualism is a historical anomaly.

In many parts of the Muslim world and in Africa today homosexuality and adultery, at least by women, this punishable by death. Though such executions are rare, they set the tone. These countries did not have sexual liberation. These countries also practice female genital mutilation and arranged marriages, another to extreme forms of denying a woman control over her own body. Men suffer from curtailed freedoms, but to a lesser degree. The young man is told who he can and cannot marry, and when he must and must not fight. Tribal elders will remind him that he owes a debt to society, and they are there to collect.