



Meme's struggle for existence. The case of the category mistake in memetics

„Teksty z Ulicy. Zeszyt memetyczny” 2016, nr 17

Summary

Memetics is simultaneously a very promising and controversial perspective. Its flagship and the best acknowledged idea is the “selfish meme” concept. This concept claims that there are units of cultural evolution (memes) whose main aim is to, analogously to Dawkins’ selfish genes, maximize their replication, i.e. memes have fitness interests of their own. However, opponents of memetics indicate some problematic issues. One of the numerous problems of memetics is the so-called boundary problem. This problem pertains to the ontological question of the meme's delimitation. The paper discusses one of the variations of this problem, namely a category mistake which occurs in the works of well known memeticists, e.g. R. Dawkins, D. C. Dennett and S. Blackmore. Surprisingly, those famous advocates of the memetic standpoint, as the paper shows, confuse propositional attitudes and propositional contents in their attempts to demarcate the meme concept.

Keywords

memetics, category mistake, propositional attitudes and contents, Mary Midgley

Memów walka o przetrwanie. Przypadek błędu kategoryjnego w memetyce

Streszczenie

Memetyka jest zarówno bardzo obiecującą, jak i wzbudzającą wielkie kontrowersje perspektywą badawczą. Jej sztandarową ideą jest koncepcja „samolubnego memu”. W ramach tej koncepcji przyjmuje się, że istnieją jednostki ewolucji kulturowej (memy), których głównym celem jest, analogicznie

do samolubnych genów Dawkinsa, maksymalizacja ich replikacji. Innymi słowy, memy posiadają własny interes dostosowawczy. Niemniej jednak przeciwnicy memetyki wskazują na kilka problematycznych kwestii odnoszących się do fundamentalnych zagadnień koncepcyjnych. Jedną z takich kwestii jest tak zwany problem granicy. Kwestia ta dotyczy ontologicznego zagadnienia delimitacji memu. W niniejszym artykule zostaje podjęta jedna z odsłon tego zagadnienia, a mianowicie błąd kategoryalny, który pojawia się w pracach dobrze znanych memetyków, tj. R. Dawkinsa, D.C. Dennetta oraz S. Blackmore. Co zaskakujące, wymienieni zwolennicy perspektywy memetycznej w swych próbach stworzenia bardziej klarownej demarkacji memu, jak to zostanie wykazane w artykule, myślą postawy propozycyjalne z treściami propozycjonalnymi.

Słowa kluczowe

memetyka, błąd kategoryalny, postawy propozycyjalne, treści propozycjonalne, Mary Midgley

Introduction

Memetics is a very controversial branch of the evolutionary study of culture. According to its opponents, memetic explanations of culture are obscure and simplistic. Whereas for its enthusiasts, viewing culture as an amalgam of memes competing with each other could provide a novel insight into complex and multifaceted issue of the cultural change. Nonetheless, even researches who remain skeptical about the explanatory utility of memetics indicate some of its advantages. For instance, French anthropologist Scott Atran states that: "Dawkins' proposal has an original response to the key evolutionary question *Cui bono?* Who benefits? The answer: not brains, individuals, or societies but memes themselves"¹. Therefore, memetics' flagship and the best acknowledged idea is the "selfish meme" concept. This concept claims that there are units of cultural evolution (memes) whose main aim is to, analogously to Dawkins' selfish genes, maximize their replication, i.e. memes have fitness interests of their own.

Theoretically speaking, the attractiveness of the "selfish meme" concept lies mainly in its potential to incorporate many ambiguous and cumbersome (of course from the Darwinian perspective) phenomena into the evolutionary framework. Contraception and celibacy are good examples of this potential. Those phenomena due to their, so to speak, anti-procreative character, at least *prima facie*, are hard to conform to the central evolutionary imperative, i.e. to multiply descendants. However, from the memetic standpoint, the above-mentioned phenomena are conceptualized simply as memes which compete for replication in the so-called noosphere (*resp.* sphere of cultural ideas, concepts, instructions, patterns of behavior, *etc.*). Thus, to take one example, for memeticists celibacy, despite its highly questionable biological value, is a meme which spreads in some societies due to its cultural fitness². In a word, memes' fitness is essentially independent of human

¹ S. Atran, *In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion*, Oxford-New York 2002, p. 238.

² *Vide* S. Blackmore, *The Meme Machine*, Oxford-New York 2000, p. 143.

well-being. As a consequence, the positive impact of memes on the biological fitness has a purely contingent nature.

Though the “selfish meme” concept is very interesting and should be explored further, memetics meets with a number of objections. Above all, critics of memetics state that this perspective neglects the importance of the developmental and cognitive processes. Cultural ideas are not simply transmitted from one head to another, as memeticists assert, but they are rather actively reconstructed by people³. As a corollary of this, it is claimed that culture cannot be viewed as a collection of distinct memes (replicators). This objection is associated with the so-called boundary problem (or the criteria of individuation). The problem pertains to the ontological question of meme's delimitation. As philosopher Maria Kronfeldner claims:

How can we, to use a frequent example, parcel out Beethoven's Seventh Symphony into single memes? [...] The splitting up of a whole into parts is even harder if we look at other cultural items, for instance, a theory. Thus, it is indeed not easy to find the boundaries of a single meme, that is, to identify a single meme out of a complex of memes⁴.

So, in other words, memeticists, at least so far, have not formulated satisfying criteria for meme's delimitation. What is more, the so-called boundary problem comes in many varieties in memetic investigations. The present paper will focus on one of the variations of this problem, namely a category mistake which occurs in the works of well known memeticists.

The category mistake in memetics

In this part of the paper, the issue of the category mistake in memetic considerations regarding culture will be presented and discussed. Generally, as it was mentioned above, memes are considered to be ideas, concepts, or instructions. In a nutshell, memes are some kind of cultural information. The founding father of memetics, Richard Dawkins, indicates among others, the following instances of memes: hell fire, celibacy, Darwin's theory, the idea of God, tunes and clothes fashion⁵. However, consider the following excerpt from the book which is a cornerstone of memetics, i.e. Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene*:

Another member of the religious meme complex is called *faith*. It means *blind trust, in the absence of evidence*, even in the teeth of evidence. The story of Doubting Thomas is told, not so that we shall admire Thomas, but so that we can admire the other apostles in comparison. [...]

³ Vide E. Jablonka, M.J. Lamb, *Evolution in Four Dimensions. Genetic, Epigenetic, Behavioral, and Symbolic Variation in the History of Life*, Cambridge-London 2014, pp. 204-205.

⁴ M. Kronfeldner, *Darwinian Creativity and Memetics*, Durham 2011, pp. 84-85.

⁵ Vide R. Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford-New York 2006, pp. 192-197.

The meme for blind faith secures its own perpetuation by the simple unconscious expedient of discouraging rational inquiry. *Blind faith* can justify anything. *Memes for blind faith* have their own ruthless ways of propagating themselves. This is true of patriotic and political as well as religious blind faith⁶.

Although the word *faith* can be understood in many ways, the above quote clearly indicates that Dawkins meant *faith* as a certain attitude, not a set of beliefs. In the quoted passage of the text, he stated explicitly that he understands belief as a *blind trust, in the absence of evidence*.

It is quite surprising as well as it evokes confusion to note that Dawkins classified faith (and more precisely blind faith) as a meme. Yet, faith is a canonical example of a propositional attitude. Theoretically speaking, philosophers distinguish between *propositional attitudes* and *propositional contents*. Among the most common examples of propositional attitudes are: beliefs, intentions, wishes and hopes. In contrast, propositional contents are most often expressed by such phrases as *that the window is open* or *that the room is chilly*. As a consequence, in human communication it is very common to have a variety of propositional attitudes toward one particular propositional content. For example, one could hope that the window is open or be convinced that the window is open⁷.

Accordingly, in the above quotation from *The Selfish Gene*, it is stated that the meme for blind faith discourages rational thinking. In Dawkins' opinion, a prime example of such influence is the biblical story of 'Doubting Thomas'. However, memes, from what has been said so far, are usually understood as ideas, concepts, or certain beliefs, and not as a leap of faith *per se*, which is just a sort of attitude to a particular cultural content⁸. Hence, it follows that in his argumentation Dawkins committed a typical category mistake by regarding an act of faith as a meme. From the memetic point of view, one's blind faith in religious doctrines should rather be understood as a consequence of religious memes' power of persuasion, and not meme *per se*. By the way of analogy, the idea of hell fire could be viewed as a meme, because it is a cultural idea, however, fear, which might be evoked by this particular idea, cannot be understood as a cultural replicator. Again, it is simply due to the fact that fear is not a propositional content, but a propositional attitude.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 198 (emphasis added).

⁷ Vide J. Heil, *Philosophy of Mind. A Contemporary Introduction*, New York-London 2013, pp. 107-108; T. Ciecierski, *Postawy propozycyjonalne*, In M. Miłkowski and R. Poczobut (Eds.), *Przewodnik po filozofii umysłu*. Cracow 2012, pp. 311-346.

⁸The author of this short discussions is aware that there are many approaches towards understanding of memes. For instance, Kronfeldner distinguishes three different concepts of memes: ideational (a meme is an abstract idea), neuronal (memes have a physical substrate) and behavioral (memes are the observable behaviors or artefacts) (Vide M. Kronfeldner, *op. cit.*, p. 78). In a word, there is a big disagreement between adherents of memetic perspective on what is and what is not a meme. This current state of affairs, i.e. the pluralism of understanding memes, indicates that the concept of meme is very vague and hard to be applicable. Though the issue of meme's conceptualization is very complex and nuanced, because of space limitations, this topic will not be pursued further here.

And with respect to theoretical consistency of memetics, it is very doubtful that propositional attitudes can be considered as a memes, i.e. faithfully copied cultural replicators. Just like emotions, such attitudes cannot be copied or imitated: "Emotional behaviors do not imitate well or at all. True, actors can learn to control some outward manifestations of emotional signaling, such as crying, but even the best actor cannot, by imitation, fall in love, become honest or hateful [...]"⁹. By the same token, it is hard to imagine that propositional attitudes, such as wishes and hopes, can be viewed as a faithfully copied memes.

In this connection, it is important to emphasize that the above-described logical mistake appears also in the works of other prominent memeticists. For example, philosopher Daniel C. Dennett wrote in his famous book *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*: "the meme for *faith*, which discourages the exercise of the sort of critical judgment that might decide that the idea of faith was, all things considered, a dangerous idea"¹⁰.

Additionally, Susan Blackmore, the author of a book that is crucial for memetics *The Meme Machine*, writes about faith in a similar vein¹¹. Of course, qualifying propositional attitudes as a meme by above-mentioned researchers does not affect the solution of the problem of meme's delimitation.

The next thing which should be clarified in this paper is Mary Midgley's analogous notion of the category mistake in memetics. According to this British philosopher, thoughts and culture should not be conceptualized as separate units, because they are rather like patterns. In a word, culture does not consist of stuffs. In order to better illustrate her line of argument, Midgley refers to the following comparison:

They do not have a granular structure [thoughts] for the same reason that ocean currents do not have ones – namely, because they are not stuffs but patterns. [...] the currents themselves are patterns of movements [...] and they form part of a wider system of such patterns, which surrounds them. To understand the currents one must first investigate these wider patterns. [...] But thought and culture too are moving and developing patterns in human behavior, ways in which people think, feel, and act. They are not entities distinct from those people¹².

As it can be seen from the above quotation, Midgley's critique of committing a category mistake by the proponents of the memetic perspective is different from the critique which was earlier introduced in this paper. For one thing, Midgley's critique is more general, because it pertains to memetic fundamental idea of conceptualizing culture as discrete units. Whereas the category mistake discussed above pertains only to, as one might say,

⁹S. Atran, *op. cit.*, p. 260.

¹⁰D.C. Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea. Evolution and the Meaning of Life*, London-New York 1996, p. 49 (Dennett's emphasis). Interestingly, Dennett described also tolerance as a meme, which is, so to speak, a controversial conceptualization of this attitude (*Vide ibidem*, p. 349).

¹¹*Vide* S. Blackmore, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

¹²M. Midgley, *The Myths We Live By*, New York-London 2011, pp. 82–83.

sloppy usage of the notion of meme. And for another thing, Midgley's critique refers to the basic ontological distinction between material items (culture consisting of material or quasi-material particles) and patterns (which is a typical abstract notion), while the analysis of operationalizing meme presented in this work employs a distinction that is very important for philosophy of mind and philosophy of language, i.e. the distinction between propositional attitudes and propositional contents.

Conclusions

To sum up: the main aim of this paper was to reveal another problem regarding meme's delimitation than those previously known. As it was shown in the present work, prominent memeticists neglect the significance of the distinction which is crucial for modern philosophy of mind and language, i.e. propositional attitudes and propositional contents. Prominent memeticists tend to confuse memes (cultural ideas) with propositional attitudes, which should rather be viewed as a consequence of particular concepts (memes). It is worth to stress that this state of affairs is quite surprising, especially in the view of the fact that memetics is considered to be one of the branches of cognitive science¹³. Therefore, one can venture to say that memetic line of argument (at least for now), due to a number of issues, has merely a rhetorical value, yet not explanatory. Thus, without solving the boundary problem, memetics cannot be considered as a scientific theory worth taking literally.

In addition, considerations presented in the article show that the case of the category mistake discussed in this paper differs significantly from the objection formulated by Midgley. Roughly speaking, Midgley's critique pertains to a different aspect of memetics.

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¹³ Vide T. Sikora, *Zagadnienia kognitywizmu religioznawczego*, in S. Atran *Ewolucyjny krajobraz religii*, Cracow 2013, p. XI.

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Nota o autorze

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