



## **THE REALITY CLUB**

### The Value of Memes: A Powerful Paradigm or a Poor Metaphor?

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Mike Godwin and Jaron Lanier debate the value of memes following [Science, Delusion and the Appetite for Wonder](#), a talk by [Richard Dawkins](#)

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From: [Mike Godwin](#)  
Date 12-20-96

Dawkins's powerfully explanatory notion of memes seemed to me at first to have almost casually tossed off in a larger discussion of the dynamics of genetic evolution. Only later did I realize he'd given us a paradigm for understanding how ideas work in cultures, in mass media, and in the growth of knowledge.

It's also a paradigm that gives free-speech advocates some serious social questions to think about. Dawkins's concept of the meme -- that discrete thought that propagates itself, sometimes virulently, through minds and cultures -- forces us to abandon any defense of free speech based on the principle that "words can never hurt you." (Hint: they can hurt you.) Instead, we must defend freedom of expression even though it sometimes allows the spread of \*harmful\* ideas, because freedom is the only environment that consistently promotes the discovery or creation of the \*beneficial\* ones.

Together with Karl Popper and Gregory Bateson, whose thinking complements his, Dawkins has done much to shape how I think about the world. He's one scientist who reminds us why we used to call scientists "natural philosophers."

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From: [Jaron Lanier](#)  
To: Mike Godwin  
Date: 12-20-96

Hey there Mike,

I just debated Richard Dawkins (it'll appear in *Psychology Today*, of all places). I'm no fan of memes, though I like Richard, and enjoy other aspects of his thinking. Here's a small part of an article I'm working on that concerns memes and many other ways that evolution is applied outside of genetics.

All the best,

Jaron

Spare me your memes

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