

Who Drives the Big Car?

A Theoretical Exploration of the Meme-Driven Self

Owen Kellyⁱ

Abstract

This paper brings together research in the fields of consciousness studies, meme theory and neuroscience to suggest that the self is historically and socially constructed in ways that profoundly affect what we mean by media research. We think much less than we believe, we misunderstand the relationship between our thoughts and actions, and we lack the unified consciousness that we usually take for granted. We do not have ideas; rather we might claim that ideas have us. In Daniel Dennett's term, we exist primarily as "centres of narrative gravity".

Keywords: body, consciousness, culture, genes, learning, media, memes, self, phenomenology, triadic

1 INTRODUCTION

In 1644, Rene Descartes published *Principles of Philosophy*, in which he proposed that an "I" consists of a "thinking, non-extended thing" housed in a body that operates as "simply an extended non-thinking thing". Today nobody accepts Descartes' hypothesis that the mind and body exist separately and communicate through the pineal gland. Many people, though, continue to believe that the mind and body count as separate entities and therefore must join *somewhere and somehow*. They continue to act as though the mind behaves like a driver using the body as its vehicle. However, much current research suggests that our feeling that we possess a single, unified consciousness acting as the controller of a surrounding body offers us nothing more than a benign illusion.

ⁱ Arcada University of Applied Sciences, Finland, Department of Culture and Communication, [owen.kelly@arcada.fi]

This paper draws from elements of my doctoral studies to describe several different strands of current research and to locate them historically. In doing this I intend to provide a short outline of a framework that understands media research as necessarily hermeneutical; that is, as *the interpretation of texts* (using that word in the widest possible sense). From this perspective I suggest that we might regard all cultural production as a method of producing embodied knowledge (cf Lakoff & Johnson, 1999) and thus see the acts of film-making and design as acts of research in their own right.

I believe that what follows can provide a starting point for developing a coherent approach that unites theory and practice around a view of the social nature of consciousness and the media ecology within which consciousness arises.

2 THE SELF HAS NOT ALWAYS EXISTED

The self has not always existed. It appeared as a consequence of the invention of writing. As Ivan Illich and Barry Sanders observe, “most epochs got along without a self. There was no self in epic times... In oral cultures, one may retain an image of what has been - yesterday, at the time of the full moon, or last Spring, but the person then or now exists only in the doing or the telling, as the suffix comes to life only when it modifies a verb” (Illich & Sanders, 1988, p 72). In the same vein Marshall McLuhan notes that one “of the strange implications of the phonetic alphabet is private identity. Before phonetic literacy, there had been no private identity. There had only been the tribal group. Homer knows nothing about private identity” (McLuhan, 2003, p229).

Our current feeling of selfhood arises out of language because every time we ask the question “am I thinking?” we will find that, at that moment, we can answer “yes”; and because every time we ask the question “what am I thinking about?” we will come up with an answer that satisfies us. However, it now seems that the very process of asking the questions causes us to make up the answers, and that when we do not ask “what am I thinking about now?” then we may not in fact think about anything. We might conclude from this that we do not ‘have’ a consciousness that interacts mysteriously with a body. Rather, humans have evolved so that we can have higher order thought activities: we can think about thinking, we can reflect on our reflections, and we can feel something about the feelings we have, and about the feelings that others tell us that they have.

Our conscious activities enable us to have higher-order thoughts, whenever we need to reflect and make judgements. We do this when our immediate perceptions provide us with a dilemma; when, for example, we do not receive enough information to tell whether we can see a large the object in the distance or a much smaller object much closer to us. We can then use these judgements to settle our doubts and provide ourselves with a provisional framework for action. The American logician Charles Sanders Peirce put forward a similar argument in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, suggesting that the purpose of thought hinged upon the creation and maintenance of habit. Thought, in Peirce’s terms, has the purpose of creating effects in the world, often (but not always) in the form of bodily activity. This activity may seem large or

small, important or trivial. I feel hungry, for example. I think briefly about this, walk to the fridge and open it. The process begins and ends with the body, but my thinking informs the specific outcome. Opening the fridge, I become conscious of the various possibilities available, and the need to make a choice. After a suitable pause, I opt for the fudge ice-cream rather than the cold pizza slices.

The body, as Shaun Gallagher has pointed out, sets the stage for action. Perhaps the claim should be a stronger one. Your body is already acting 'before you know it'. Certainly there is evidence that indicates one's body anticipates one's conscious experience. I reach to pick up a glass. Before I am aware of it - if I ever do become explicitly aware of it - my hand shapes itself in the best way possible for purposes of picking up the glass. If I had reached for some differently shaped object, I would find that my hand had already shaped itself accordingly. This is a general rule followed by the sensory-motor body. It anticipates its encounters in both instrumental and expressive contexts. Even in my encounters with others, prenoetically before I know it, I have a sense of how it is with them (Gallagher, 2005, p237).

Knowing this we have to take only a small step to realise that our mental processes play only one (albeit very important) part in what we do, rather than dictatorially ordering our actions. Our reflections on what we have done serve to guide future activity by establishing mental habits. We could view human awareness as comprising three levels.

Firstly, we possess a range of instincts that all mammals possess in some degree. If we put our hand into a flame accidentally we withdraw it without any conscious will. If we hear a sudden noise behind us, our heart beats and we look round. Cats and dogs, foxes and mice, also behave in this way. Secondly, we have what Guy Claxton has termed an "undermind". (Claxton, 1998) that forms the perceptual system that does most of our mental work. It drives the car while we engage in an animated conversation with the passenger. It controls the movements of the tennis player during a match. It makes intuitive decisions, and makes them successfully on the basis of percepts not concepts. Thirdly, relating these two systems and arriving at judgements on the basis of their input, we have a narrative consciousness.

3 BENJAMIN LIBET

To see why we should arrive at such an image of consciousness, we may observe the work of Benjamin Libet and his colleagues who, in the early 1980s, collected some of the most important and challenging consciousness-related data. Libet's experiments followed up work by Kornhuber and Deecke, who had researched self-initiated actions in the brain, and had discovered in 1964 that an electrical potential becomes visible in the brain long before the subject initiates an action such as flexing a finger. They called this a "Bereitschaftspotential" or readiness potential. In trying to make sense of their results other researchers had speculated that somebody willing themselves to perform a physical action must proceed through three stages: firstly she must consciously will her action, or become conscious of her intention to act; secondly her brain must ready itself and thus the Bereitschaftspotential becomes visible; and thirdly, at the end of the se-

quence, the finger must obey the command and flex. Libet set out to find out the truth of this hypothesis.

In a series of cunningly designed experiments, Libet told patients, deliberately left conscious during invasive brain surgery, to flex their finger while looking carefully at a specially designed clock face. They were asked to say where on the dial the clock hand pointed to at the exact moment that they decided to initiate their action. In each case, Libet determined that the patient became aware of their decision to act approximately 300 milliseconds after the Bereitschaftspotential became visible, and thus the action had effectively begun in the brain.

Very few researchers question these results although they disagree about what they might actually mean. Some have used the results to suggest free will does not exist and that, in effect, our conscious mind sits in the passenger seat watching while our body steers us along predefined routes. Others have suggested that the results, while accurate in themselves, do not measure what Libet intended to measure. Libet himself produced two explanations for what he observed. At first he suggested that the brain relocated the decision back in time with the result that, although the objective measurable order of events began with the movement and ended the subject's report that they had initiated it, the decision appeared to happen first at a subjective and experiential level. He subsequently argued that the conscious will (W) does appear 150 msec before the motor act, even though it follows the onset of the cerebral action (1W) by at least 400 msec. That allows it, potentially, to affect or control the final outcome of the volitional process. An interval 150 msec before a muscle is activated is the time for the primary motor cortex to activate the spinal motor nerve cells, and through them, the muscles. During this final 50 msec, the act goes to completion with no possibility of its being stopped by the rest of the cerebral cortex.) The conscious will could decide to allow the volitional process to go to completion, resulting in the motor act itself. Or, the conscious will could block or "veto" the process, so that no motor act occurs. (Libet, 2004, p137-138)

For Libet then, our consciousness consists of our ability to decide not to do something that our body has already started doing. (This hypothesis become known, with various degrees of sarcasm as a belief in *free won't*.)

4 THE CUTANEOUS RABBIT

The philosopher Daniel Dennett proposes a simpler solution (Dennett, 1991). He begins by suggesting that almost all of our current models of consciousness follow from the central duality proposed by Descartes, and almost all offer a version of what he terms the Cartesian Theater. These models imply the existence of a real or conceptual time and place at which something "enters consciousness"; they imply that we can in principle time the exact moment when you become aware of something happening, and then locate an exact place in your brain where this awareness manifests.

A wide range of experiments other than Libet's have raised both logical and practical difficulties with this model, or any model resembling it. Psychologists Paul Kolers and

Michael von Grünau created one such test, the so-called *color phi* experiment in which subjects view two images in quick succession. The first image displays a blue dot near the top left of the screen and the second shows a red dot near the bottom right of the screen. When the subjects view the two images in succession for 150 milliseconds each, with a 50 millisecond gap between them, they report that they see a single dot moving from the top left to the bottom right of the screen. Moreover they see the spot changing colour when it reaches the centre of the screen.

Like Libet's alleged time-shifting this experiment raises important questions about the relationship between perception and consciousness. The subjects report the dot moving diagonally down to the right and changing colour in the centre of the screen - which means, in effect, that they claim to have observed the colour of the dot changing before they have seen the second dot.

The "cutaneous rabbit" experiment, reported in 1972 by psychologists Frank Geldard and Carl Sherrick, produced a set of similarly counter-intuitive results. In this experiment the arm of the subject rests on a table, underneath synchronized mechanical "tappers". When a sequence is initiated, the machines deliver a series of taps in rhythm on certain points on the subject's arm - for example, three at one point on the wrist, then two at the elbow, and then two on a single point on the upper arm. Intervals between the stimuli could be anywhere between 50 and 200 milliseconds, so that any one sequence might last from less than one second to two or three seconds.

The effect as reported by the subject is astonishing: rather than "feeling" each of the taps where they occurred, subjects report an equidistant series of taps "hopping" up their arm in regular sequence, like a tiny rabbit bounding gleefully upon their nervous system. That is, they felt taps in between the areas that were actually being stimulated that altered the sequence in their brains (Everything2.com, 2012).

Dennett explains the results of all of these experiments by proposing a model of consciousness that he terms the Multiple Drafts model, basing the name on the practice of academic communities in circulating drafts of papers among many scholars, and then modifying the paper in light of comments, with the consequence that multiple drafts of a paper may circulate through a community at any time, right up until the final publication of the paper in an academic journal.

Dennett points to evidence suggesting that processes in the brain operate in a localised manner, and do not take place under the control of a central scrutiniser. He suggests that I will experience an event in many different ways, and my brain will interpret these parallel experiences over multiple time spans. During these processes, different neural activities will assert more or less control at different times, and the resulting consciousness simply reflects the fact of some (but not all) activity resulting in actions, and thus becoming facts in the world available to memory. In other words, consciousness does not consist of presentations (in the Cartesian Theater) but judgments about how it seems to the subject, judgments that the subject himself can go on to interpret, act upon, remember... These events fix interpretations of what the subject experiences, and thus provide fixed points in the subjective sequence (Dennett, 1991, p169-70).

When I observe an event my brain will generate many internal actions and produce many internal interpretations and reactions which will compete for attention until one of them finally gets "published" in the form of a verbal response or a physical action. At a moment when I become angry I become too all-absorbed in generating my anger to have any capacity (or any need) to become conscious that I feel angry. I will do that later (moments, seconds or milliseconds later), when my anger has peaked, and I can step back from my absorption to make a retrospective judgement about what just happened.

5 CONSCIOUSNESS AS AN ABSTRACTION

We can best view consciousness, then, as an abstraction and not as a "thing" that scientists can identify and locate. Dennett offers an analogy that likens consciousness to the human voice. We say 'I hear a voice', 'he has a tenor voice', 'you will strain your voice', and 'I have lost my voice'. Now is a voice a thing? If so, just what thing is a voice? The voice we strain may seem as unproblematic a physical part of the body as the back or eyes we strain, perhaps the vocal cords; but surely one does not have tenor vocal cords... or lose one's vocal cords (Dennett, 1969, p27). We can better view consciousness, in Dennett's phrase, as "a centre of narrative gravity": an abstraction that we can use to describe the ongoing story that we tell ourselves about our experiences.

The Multiple Drafts model, then, tells us that what we have traditionally called consciousness equates to a benign user illusion: a useful abstraction that enables us to bundle together our memories of our experiences and our experiences of our memories. The model also implies that consciousness has a gappy nature, and that we misjudge how often, and when, we have an awareness of feeling conscious. We can, in truth, say no more than we have behaviours, that we can observe ourselves having these behaviours, that we observe others apparently exhibiting similar behaviours, that these behaviours include the abilities to think and to think about thinking, that we compose life-narratives from self-observing and observing others; and that for the sake of simplifying (internal and external) discourse we conventionally refer to the totality of this experience as "being conscious".

6 CHARLES DARWIN

In 1859 Charles Darwin published his book *On the Origin of Species*. In this he laid out a theory of evolution that others have fine-tuned and tweaked since, but never disproved or overturned. As Charles Darwin described it, evolution requires three factors: variation, selection, and retention. It requires something copyable, with a process for copying that permits the making of less-than-perfect copies. This provides the mechanism through which mutation occurs. It requires an environment in which not everything can survive, and therefore not all variations will have an equal chance to survive. This provides the mechanism through which some variations achieve dominance over time. It requires some mechanism of inheritance which allows the passing on of successful vari-

ations. This provides the means through which adaptations and mutations can evolve over more than one generation.

7 UNIVERSAL DARWINISM

In 1976, Richard Dawkins published *The Selfish Gene* in which he proposed that evolution did not exist to benefit the insects, fish, birds and animals that evolved successfully, but rather to benefit those creatures' genes. Dawkins suggested that we should see genes as replicators, concerned only with copying themselves. From this perspective, living creatures merely form the vehicles which genes have used and developed to do this.

When Dawkins uses the word 'selfish' to describe the actions of genes he does not mean to imply that they have intelligence or make moral (or any other) choices. He simply intends the phrase to serve as shorthand for a process that we might describe as self-interested if we adopted what Daniel Dennett has termed the "intentional stance" (Dennett, 1987). He says that "we must not think of genes as conscious, purposeful agents. Blind natural selection, however, makes them behave rather 'as if' they were purposeful, and it has been convenient, as a shorthand, to refer to genes in the language of purpose. For example, when we say 'genes are trying to increase their numbers in future gene pools', what we really mean is 'those genes that behave in such a way as to increase their numbers in future gene pools tend to be the genes whose effects we see in the world'" (Dawkins, 1976, p194).

As a consequence of genes 'trying to increase their numbers in future gene pools', the interests of the genes and the interests of the host creature may not always align themselves, and indeed the self-interests of the gene might sometimes conflict with the self-interests of the host creature. The importance of this observation lies in the fact that we cannot now make any assertion that animals evolve towards anything. Animals do not get "better" since evolution has no goal and so no yardstick against which anyone can define a creature as better or worse. Instead living organisms and their environment change and adapt in tandem.

Richard Dawkins pointed out that we need not limit the mechanisms that Darwin described to an analysis of the way that biological creatures change and grow more complex over time. He suggested that Darwin had outlined a much more general principle that delineates the three aspects necessary for any replicators to flourish. Once we have acknowledged the concept at the root of the selfish gene theory - the idea of replicators and host vehicles - then we might usefully posit a Universal Darwinism, in which the evolution of life on Earth serves as just one specific example of a much more general principle.

8 MEMES AS REPLICATORS

Dawkins suggested that memes provided another example of such a replicator, and that scientists could usefully explore memes using approaches drawn from Universal Darwinism. "Just as we have found it convenient to think of genes as active agents, working purposefully for their own survival, perhaps it might be convenient to think of memes in the same way. In neither case must we get mystical about it. In both cases the idea of purpose is only a metaphor, but we have already seen what a fruitful metaphor it is in the case of genes" (Dawkins, 1976, p195).

Describing what he meant by memes, Dawkins argued that examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes' fashions, and ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. If a scientist hears, or reads about, a good idea, he passes it on to his colleagues and students. He mentions it in his articles and his lectures. If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain (Dawkins, 1976, Chap 11).

Dawkins made it clear from the beginning that he regarded the idea that memes acted as replicators literally. He did not suggest that we could look at memes "as if" they functioned in the same way as genes; he said that *they actually did function in the same way*. Susan Blackmore has explored the question of how memes replicate in great detail. She suggests that one of the primary characteristics that differentiate human beings from other animals hinges on our apparently innate ability to imitate, and to take delight in doing so; although we tend to mask these differences by the fact that we use the word "learning" in many different ways.

We use the word 'learning' for simple association or 'classical conditioning' (which almost all animals can do), for learning by trial or error or 'operant conditioning' (which many animals can do), and for learning by imitation (which almost none can do) (Blackmore, 1999, p4).

Once we stop to reflect, it becomes clear that imitation lies at the heart of most aspects of human life. Wanting to know "how it is done", so that we gain the ability to do it ourselves, forms a large part of "what it is like to be" us, in part because we, in contrast to most other animals, all possess a theory of mind: a sense of another person as an intentional agent, and an ability to imagine, however imperfectly, that agent's motivations and thought patterns. Imitation, in the sense Blackmore uses it, means more than mere copying of an artefact or effect. It involves an attempt to copy the intentions behind the making process. A baby does not learn to say hello in the same way as a budgerigar. The bird learns to make the noise whereas the baby learns the intentions behind the noise and so, even though the baby may initially reproduce the sounds less accurately than the bird, she learns to produce them at appropriate times and in the correct contexts. She learns the actions that the sounds evoke in her life-world and thus learns their meaning.

We can characterise almost everything that we learn socially as memetically driven. Memes do not just appear in small fragments of verbal communication, such as songs and jokes. They include the larger learned environment: the language in which the jokes get expressed, and the musical structures within which the tunes take form. Indeed, memes need not take verbal form at all. They may also appear in identifiable patterns of behaviour, such as a characteristic way of walking or gesturing ("He walks just like his father"), a predictable response to unexpected happenings ("He's always so pessimistic"), or the social games that Eric Berne has described. People learn these and other behaviours during childhood, from parents, and from other role models and peers; and all of them may then get passed on from parent to child.

9 MEMES DEFINED

Robert Aunger has argued that Dawkins has defined memes far too vaguely, and suggested that we need a clear and testable definition. He has produced a complex argument to demonstrate that memes live in the form of *replicable states* in cells in the human cortex, and have a virus-like ability to spread by infection. He suggests that this definition of what he terms *neuromemes* "provides us with a testable mechanism of replication that is consistent both with other sciences and with the expectation that culture evolves through the descent of replicators" (Aunger, 2002, p330). This provides a clear and describable model of both meme transmission, and meme evolution. Aunger claims that memes must require a habitat, that their habitat must have restrictions, and that the human brain not only offers an ideal habitat but stands as the only viable candidate. In saying this, he argues against treating symphonies, libraries or cathedrals as memes, and suggests instead that we view them as artefacts created by memes as part of a strategy to replicate.

Artefacts and behaviours fail the replicator test. Only brain states have the necessary qualities to replicate: they can cause similar entities to arise through information transfer. So memes should be in the brain. Does the brain have the qualities to harbor replicators like memes? Yes. It's an isolated, energy-rich environment housed inside the braincase, holding a soup of cells and chemicals (Aunger, 2002, p324).

In this view, memes began as brain viruses replicating inside individual brains. They evolved means of infecting other brains through the use of signals and signs. Firstly this happened through the development of language and intentional imitation. Later they evolved the means to spread at a distance, both geographically and temporally, through the evolution of more, and more complex, tools and artefacts. "Signals began as neural communicators, then social ones. Most recently, however, they have learned to involve artefacts in their travels. Artefacts are abiotic substrates for signals located in the macroenvironment" (Aunger, 2002, p328). We should therefore define artefacts such as books, churches, popular tunes and statues not as memes, but as something more like the extended phenotypes generated by memes.

Aunger suggests that human history and human culture has thus developed upon a triadic model that required the simultaneous evolution of genes, memes and tools. Tools

have evolved as part of the extended replication cycle of memes, to which they remain tightly bound in a symbiotic relationship. Memes in turn have evolved in a symbiotic relationship with genes. Any discussion of memes must therefore include artefacts, media and tools, as a central focus, although they do not themselves constitute memes, as Dawkins, Dennett and Blackmore would have us believe.

10 LANGUAGE AND NARRATIVE GRAVITY

We have seen that consciousness always operates socially and that when we imagine that we start as individuals and then later become social, we have everything the wrong way round. We do not have single unified consciousnesses that operate in the ways that thinkers from Descartes to Freud imagined they did. Instead we have only our bodies and their organs, including our brains. Much of what we do occurs without us thinking about it; not because it happens 'pre-consciously', nor because it happens 'unconsciously', but because consciousness simply never enters into it. Some of the information that our brains receive gets dealt with by hard-wired, genetically imprinted instincts. The processes in our brains that Guy Chilton terms the 'undermind' deal with much of the rest of the information we receive without any need for consciousness. We become conscious in the act of judging our actions (often within milliseconds of performing them), in telling the story of what we have done, and in fitting that story into the ongoing narrative that forms "what it is like to be" us. As noted earlier, Daniel Dennett describes people, not as solid objects, but as abstractions; as "centres of narrative gravity".

Many disparate stories comprise each centre of narrative gravity. Usually they have become subsumed under one major narrative arc, although we carry with us a recognition that this may become subject to rewriting at any point. We do not, for example, usually register surprise when someone reinterprets earlier events in the light of what has just happened. Indeed, when somebody (in real life or in fiction) tells us that "I can see now how everything was leading up to this moment", we get ready to hear a story in which an unfortunate event in the past, viewed earlier as a life-destroying tragedy, now gets recast as a painful but necessary step on a journey to triumph. This process of rewriting does not just occur when we face traumatic events, it operates all the time.

Susan Blackmore suggests that our ability to imitate, and to learn by imitating, and the pleasure that we take in imitation, stands at the heart of "what it is like to be" us. Imitation distinguishes human beings from all other animals. She argues that initially imitation offered evolutionary advantages in that imitation offered the possibility of faster adaptation through learning by observation. This, in turn, gave the genes for imitation advantages for survival that would lead to their spreading through the gene pool. Complex imitation, proving to have even more survival advantages than simple imitation, would then also spread. Once imitative skills spread and became more complex, imitation could advance from observation alone to the development of language.

The development of language brings with it a second replicator: a unit of cultural imitation, the meme. Memes get spread from person to person by imitation, and most of them die out very quickly. Someone says something to a group of people and nobody else in

the group finds it either interesting or amusing. Five minutes later everyone has forgotten it and the meme has died. Someone else says something to a group of people and half of them burst into prolonged laughter. They repeat it to their friends later and half of them burst into prolonged laughter. Their friends then repeat it, a replicable pattern gets imprinted in their brains, and the meme has burst into life. How long it will last, and how widely it will spread, depends on many factors. Urban legends provide one example of memes that have taken on lives of their own. Allegedly historical figures (such as King Arthur or Robin Hood), whose stories have accumulated a neat moral framework, provide another.

We receive information from others and pass some of it on. This information wants to get passed on, not for our sake but for its own. It has parallel selfish needs to the gene: it needs to spread to stay alive. However, as with genes, not all memes have the same power, the same ability to spread from brain to brain. We should note in passing that it makes little sense to picture this process as human agents choosing to pass on their opinions in a lifeless environment. Rather we should see figure and ground shifting, with the memes themselves often playing the role of the figure, while their human vehicles form shifting parts of a (very alive and very lively) ground.

Remembering that thinking and talking designate two forms of the same phenomenon, we can hypothesise that memes form the framework for almost all of our mental lives. We perpetuate memes especially, as Berne reminds us, those we absorb uncritically as children, and we tell and retell our story to others. The story we tell ourselves about "what it is like to be" us lives on in our minds as bundles of memes, chanted silently in our heads like mantras. We communicate with others and, by this route, memes may spread geographically. In spinning our personal narratives, rewriting and editing them to give them the kind of consistency we currently prize, we also communicate with our past selves. By this means memes may spread temporally. We look back at our past and remember selected parts of it, keeping those memes alive and nurturing them, and giving them the potential to replicate, and possibly mutate, with each internal retelling, until one day we may give voice to them in conversation and they get a chance to spread. It goes without saying that the many memes that we draw from our past and pass onto our future will die with us unless they become vocalised in ways that allow them to spread successfully to other brains.

We can recognise memes as the mental habits which Charles Sanders Peirce pointed out formed the desired resting points for our thinking.

11 MEMES AND CONSCIOUSNESS

We possess several different layers of action and response, and the narratives we spin about ourselves form only one layer. We think much less than we think we do, for if we thought as much as we think we do then we would never get anything done. We have two separate kinds of brain-process-leading-to-action, one fast and one slow (Kahneman, 2001). We call the slow one "consciousness", and that process involves what Dennett terms judgement. We analyse and ponder, and turn things over in our mind until we

reach a conclusion. The fast one occurs in the undermind before we become aware of it. Sometimes we describe it as a reflex action, and sometimes we call it intuition. This process does not only occur during unusually dramatic or heightened events. It happens to us all the time, whether we notice or not. A tennis player does not think during her game. She enters 'the zone' and acts and reacts faster than the speed of thought. Her thinking occurs before the match when she plans her strategy and after the match when she tells herself how the game went. At these moments she might think about the game; but while playing, she simply plays (Kramer, 2011).

Only in formal situations, or situations in which we feel under stress, do we consciously think before talking, and this almost always results in slow and stilted conversation in which the participants use meaningless placeholder expressions to buy themselves time to think. People start their contributions in such situations with a formula of the sort "I do understand what you are saying, and I do take your point, but I think perhaps we might also..." We learn to make these phrases predictably long-winded and clichéd because they serve to enable the speaker to keep noise coming out of his mouth while his brain attempts to process what he actually intends to say, and they need to last as long as the speaker needs for this processing.

Thinking can serve to undermine smooth interaction. Most of the time, we walk down the street or across a hall without thinking for even an instant about how we do it. If we think at all while we walk, we think about something else. The actual business of walking just happens. However, if we notice somebody watching us, or if we have to walk across a hall to make a speech, or to meet someone important and influential, and especially if we do this with a crowd watching, we become self-conscious - and once we become self-conscious, we *do* think about walking, and once we do that we can no longer walk the way we usually do. In these circumstances we can find ourselves trying to do a kind of self-impersonation. Exactly the same thing happens if we ever find ourselves thinking about riding a bicycle while actually riding a bicycle. We get caught up in thinking about how to do what we should just do, with the result that the usually simple task gets harder and harder.

Contrary to what we may think, we do not live by thinking but rather we bring our thinking abilities to bear on problems when our undermind finds a problem it cannot cope with, or when we need to reach a judgement, or when we wish to erase doubt. The contents of the minds we use to perform these thought-actions reach us, in large part, through socially transmitted memes which we arrange and manipulate like building blocks. Memes form the essential toolkit without which we could not function as human beings. Memes gave humanity its first tools for the simple reason that mankind used the memes it gained from language to construct its first tools. Mankind never experienced any unmediated golden age of "direct communication", because all communication takes place within language (within which we include body language), and all language gets composed from mediated and memetic processes.

If we want to know "what it is like to be" us: we could do no better than to acknowledge that "we are stories all the way down".

12 THE SELF AS STORIES

As we have seen, consciousness plays a far smaller role in human life than Western culture has tended to believe. Historical research shows that the phenomenon of consciousness as we know it is probably no more than three thousand years old. The concept of a central "experiencer" and decisions-maker, a conscious I, has prevailed for only a hundred generations (Nørretranders, 1991, pIX).

However, behind this realisation, the harder problem is that we are not the authors of ourselves. That we are not is a religious perspective, but also a biological and a social one. Each of us has had many authors, and each of us is engaged, for better or worse, in that same authorship. We could say that the human race is a great co-authorship in which we are collaborating with god and nature in the making of ourselves and one another. From this there is no escape... This is by way of saying that by ourselves we have no meaning and no dignity; by ourselves we are outside the human definition, outside our identity. "More and more", Mary Catharine Bateson wrote in *With A Daughter's Eye*, "it has seemed to me that the idea of an individual, the idea that there is someone to be known, separate from the relationships, is simply an error" (Berry, 2002, p138).

This accords with the observations of Peirce, McLuhan, Watts and others that we cannot know objects, only the relationships between objects. If memes form the fuel that powers our reflective thinking, then our apparently private worlds of thought and emotion have their origins in the social world. The memes we get infected with from the moment of birth (Blackmore, 2005) arise from interactions between people, and our personal role in this continuous dance involves receiving memes, ingesting them, and then sometimes transmitting them to others in the same form we received them or slightly mutated. We do this directly, or through signals embedded in artefacts. According to Bruce Hood the "self illusion depends on stored information that has been acquired during a lifetime. These are our memories that are constructed as we interpret the world. That interpretation is guided by mechanisms that seek out certain information in the world but also by those around us who help to make sense of it all. In this way we are continually shaped by those around us" (Hood, 2011, p214).

Jerome Bruner explained that as "our experience of the natural world tends to imitate the categories of familiar science, so our experience of human affairs comes to take the forms of the narratives we use in telling about them (Bruner, 1996, p133). The "we" that we imagine "we are" consists, then, nothing but stories: stories that we received uncritically as children; stories we tell about ourselves and each other; stories we receive from others about us; and stories we receive from others about others. In the words of Daniel Dennett, we occupy "centres of narrative gravity".

We consist of stories all the way down. We have no self to call our own; even though we find, on many occasions, that it simplifies our lives to pretend that we do. The production of narrative, and the study of narrative, forms the most intimate kind of research that we can conduct into "what it is like to be" us. Everything that we seek to know about ourselves and our society (culturally, politically, psychologically, sociologically, theologically) resolves itself into the study and production of stories.

Knowing that we consist of stories all the way down carries serious implications for cultural theory, cultural studies and cultural practices; not just in terms of how we think about them but also in terms of how we participate in them, and come to embody them.

REFERENCES

- Robert Aunger, 2002. *The Electric Meme: a new theory of how we think*. NY: The Free Press
- Eric Berne, 1964. *Games People Play*. New York: Simon & Schuster
- Eric Berne, 1972. *What Do You Do After You Say Hello?* London:
- Wendell Berry, 2002. *The Art of the Commonplace*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint LLC
- Susan Blackmore, 1999. *The Meme Machine*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Susan Blackmore, 2003. *Consciousness: an introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Jerome Bruner, 1996. *The Culture of Education*. Harvard: Harvard University Press
- Justus Buchler, 1939. *Charles Peirce's Empiricism* London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co
- Justus Buchler, 1940. *The Philosophy of Peirce: selected writings*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul
- Richard Dawkins, 1976. *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Daniel C Dennett, 1969. *Content & Consciousness* London: Routledge, Kegan & Paul
- Daniel C Dennett, 1987. *The Intentional Stance*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press / A Bradford Book
- Daniel C Dennett, 1991. *Consciousness Explained*. New York: Little, Brown & Co
- Daniel C Dennett, 1995. *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*. New York: Little, Brown & Co
- Shaun Gallagher, 2005. *How The Body Shapes The Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Bruce Hood, 2011. *The Self Illusion*. London: Constable & Robinson
- Ivan Illich & Barry Sanders, 1988. *The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind*. London: Marion Boyars.
- Daniel Kahneman, 2011. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux
- Garret Kramer, 2011. *Stillpower*. New York: Atria Books
- George Lakoff & Mark Johnson, 1999. *Philosophy in the Flesh*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Benjamin Libet, 2004. *Mindtime: the temporal factor in consciousness*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press
- Marshall McLuhan, 2003. *Understanding Me*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press
- Tor Nørretranders, 1991. *The User Illusion: Cutting Consciousness Down to Size*. New York: Penguin
- Frederick S. Perls, Ralph Hefferline & Paul Goodman, 1951. *Gestalt Therapy*. New York: The Julian Press

From the web:

Cutaneous Rabbit. <http://everything2.com/title/cutaneous+rabbit> Retrieved 02/02/2012