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“How Not to Do the Cognitive Science of Religion Today: A Reading of Daniel Dennett,” by Armin W. Geertz

“Dangerous Ideas: the Spell of Breaking the Spell,” by Lars Albinus

“Full of Sound and Fury: The Media Response to Dennett,” by Gretchen Koch

# **Dangerous Ideas: the Spell of Breaking the Spell<sup>1</sup>**

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## *1. Introduction*

In this article I aim to present, and critically comment on, the outlines of Dennett's natural theory of religion. Drawing on the Darwinian theory of natural selection, Dennett argues that religious ideas are like parasites in the human brain and advantageous only to their own survival. He is aware that religious people may be offended by what may be experienced as undue scientific reduction of their beliefs, but he deems it more important to understand religion from the firm ground of scientific investigation than to show unconditional respect for other people's religious feelings. Philosophically Dennett is a professed materialist and opposes Cartesian dualism by formulating a cognitive theory of mind that dispenses with the notion of consciousness as a central unity. Likewise, he wishes to demystify the notion of God and 'the belief in belief' by explaining religion from the point of view of Dawkin's theory of memes. The classical problem of self-reference, however, and the ungrounded attempt to argue for a moral standing on these premises are the main topic for discussion in this article, which also critically assesses Dennett's notions of science and religion. Thus, the present article provides a perspective from the sidelines of the philosophy of science and should be taken as such. This means that since I have no special knowledge of socio-biological theories, there may be some misgivings in my presentation. However, I doubt that they will be grave enough to completely undermine the point of my critical remarks.

## *2. The meme-theory in basic terms*

Daniel Dennett is an acclaimed philosopher of mind, dealing especially with evolutionary biology and cognitive science. In his book from 1992, *Consciousness Explained*, he has famously argued that human consciousness, including the notion of free will, can be understood in terms of a 'multiple drafts model' which doesn't include the level of self-conscious decision-making (1992: 111-138). In other words, what we are used to think of ourselves and our conscious actions are reducible to physical processes working behind the scenes, as it were. The notion of the 'I' is a cover name for the construct of interacting mental processes at a deeper level. The 'I' has no simple irreducible reality of its own. In a later book from 1995, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, Dennett launched another provocative thesis, namely that the scope of Darwin's groundbreaking story of evolution is not restricted to development of the species, but may explain the evolution of human culture as well. In this respect,

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Dennett drew heavily on the British sociobiologist, Richard Dawkins, and his theory of ‘memes’, that is, memorable entities or traits which spread in the culture analogous to the transmission of DNA-information through the genes (cf. Dawkins 1976). Our biological outfit, as well as our cultural inheritance, are the result of a natural selection. Again the notion of consciousness is under attack in so far as the transmission of memes is not dependent on intentional choices. When we hum a tune, we don’t even have to like it. We simply cannot keep it out of heads. It replicates itself, according to its own properties.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, memes are not just catchy tunes or phrases or jokes or the like, but also the very ideas that make up the mental design of what we are. In Dennett’s words: “The haven all memes depend on reaching is the human mind, but a human mind is itself an artefact created when memes restructure a human brain in order to make it a better habitat for memes” (1995, 365).

Hence, what is more natural for Dennett than to turn these insights into breaking even more spells as, in his latest book, the self-delusion of religious belief? Of course, this book, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, which came out earlier this year, has therefore already gained a reputation as Dennett’s new groundbreaking and provocative study. Indeed, provocative it is, in more than one sense, but let us not get ahead of ourselves. We will begin with trying to understand Dennett’s position as a philosopher.

### 3. *Philosophical materialism and the notion of religion*

As a student of the Oxford philosopher, Gilbert Ryle, Dennett was, at the outset, interested in working out a theory of the mind that did away with ‘the ghost in the machine’, the Cartesian notion of a soul considered as a reality of its own apart from the body it inhabited. What is also called Cartesian dualism ran into the problem of explaining the connection between body and soul, and Descartes’ own suggestion, namely that the pineal gland (*epiphysis*) was locus for the interaction between soul and body, has indeed long since been discredited (Dennett, 1992: 34). In Dennett’s eyes the only tenable consequence is to advocate a kind of materialism that regards everything in natural terms. In order to understand the mind, we have to understand how it works as part of the workings of nature. In this respect, he even considered himself a true heir of Wittgenstein in so far as Wittgenstein himself warned against the notion of consciousness, or more precisely: against the intuitive notion of mental states and processes which leaves the question of their nature undecided (Dennett, 1992: 462; cf. Wittgenstein, PI, § 308). We will return to this matter later on. For now, let us say that Dennett, following the dog’s tail, as it were, works his way from demystifying the illusion of consciousness to demystifying the illusion of belief in God. Here, the theory of natural selection, and in particular, the notion of memes, comes into the picture. Religious ideas are like parasites feeding on the host, in this case, the human brain, in order to survive and multiply. This is, in short, his natural theory of religion. As a working definition he understands religion to be

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<sup>2</sup> As Dawkins puts it: “a cultural trait may have evolved in the way it has simply because it is advantageous to itself,” 1976: 214.

“social systems whose participants avow belief in a supernatural agent or agents whose approval is to be sought” (2006, 9), and this is a definition which, of course, allows him to graft the theory of meme-transmission rather easily onto religion. The hierarchy of concepts in this definition is very important. The constitutive notion is not ‘belief’, but ‘social system’. In this respect Dennett draws a line between a Darwinian theory of socio-biological evolution, on the one hand, and a mind-oriented cognitive approach on the other. Although he hails contributions from Wilson, Atran, Boyer and others as important, he explicitly works from another angle himself. What is important is not so much to understand the evolutionary development of brain structures or cognitive dispositions in the mind as to understand the development of culture. What makes cultural information survive from generation to generation? What makes people believe so strongly in supernatural agents and a promised afterlife that they are willing to offer their own lives defending it? Religious ideas such as these cannot be said to benefit the individual. Dennett therefore asks the *cui bono*-question (2006: 56): who or what do these ideas benefit? The answer is simply: the religious idea, e.g., the notion of God, benefits its own survival. It can be a dangerous idea seen from the perspective of the host, but the trick of the parasite is exactly to blind the host from realizing this. It is like an ant which tries to climb a straw of grass. The attempt fails, but this does not prevent the ant from trying again and again. Why? Because a tiny worm-like parasite, a lancet fluke (*dicrocoelium dendriticum*), has entered its brain ordering the host to climb the straw. Its purpose is for the parasite to enhance its chance of entering the stomach of a ruminant, thus securing further survival and multiplication (2006: 3-5).

Dennett acknowledges that in suggesting this natural explanation of religion as a socio-biological system of meme-transmission he will provoke hostile responses from religious people who ask science to refrain from trespassing into the realm of their beliefs. Indeed it has to be noted that he speaks in an American context in which respect for other people’s beliefs plays a very important political role. Religious rhetoric is perhaps generally more prominent in the United States than in Europe, and responses to Dennett’s suggestions may therefore be more sensitive than we would expect from a European point of view. However, Dennett is not blind to the possible benefits of religion to those who believe. He is aware that he may take something valuable from people who seek comfort and meaning from a religious tradition in a world or a life situation that would otherwise be hard to bear. By weighing *pro et contra*, however, he came to the conclusion that religion is too dangerous a force to be left unquestioned. His project is therefore also a moral and political one. In the name of science he argues for an obligation to learn as much as possible of a phenomenon that may otherwise thrive dangerously well in the shadows. Although he himself admits to sacred values of democracy, justice, love, life and truth, he finds it even more important to keep an open mind, not refraining from questioning any idea whatsoever (this being identical to the value of truth – or rather a certain concept of truth).

Be that as it may, let us turn to the premises of this questioning. On what ground does Dennett set out to question the ideas that culture is made of? The ground, of course, is science. But then again, what does Dennett understand by science, that is, real, reliable and justifiable science? It seems that every theory which is able to account for itself according to empirical facts satisfies the basic conditions of science. As a philosopher, he is interested in understanding how these findings, these facts organised and explained by theory, are also in principle possible (2006: 374). Concerning meme-theory, however, the dog seems to bite its own tail. Dennett has a revealing remark in his Appendix A: "The zoologist Richard Dawkins coined the term 'meme' in a chapter of his 1976 book, *The Selfish Gene*, and the term has caught on" (2006: 345). Does this mean that the term 'meme' stands for an empirical fact? Not necessarily, the term has simply *caught on*. It works. And how are we to know whether it works? Is it because it is true or just because it is successful as a meme? The point is, we cannot know based on the premises of a natural theory of selection alone. Is this a problem? Not necessarily. If theory built around the notion of the meme leads to fruitful insights, then, of course, we may use it, realizing that this will be a story alongside other possible stories. But science has lived with realizing exactly that for centuries, and science is still about getting finances, educating students, and so on, and that's it. The problem, however, is that Dennett speaks on behalf of *the truth*. He has no problem admitting that. Indeed, he *must* speak the truth if his aim is to convince others than those who already think like him, and he explicitly states that he addresses religious people, people who will be better off, if they realized the truth. He is not going to take their ceremonies or religious values from them, he just wants them to acknowledge that what the religious ideas do to them is having them believe in an ultimate truth that simply does not hold up to scientific scrutiny. And if we ask, 'Why then do all these people around the world, perhaps even a majority, believe in supernatural agents, even offering their lives for their approval?' the answer is, 'Because certain virus-like parasites have invaded their brains, thus overtaking control of their feelings – and even more importantly their basic commitments.'

#### 4. *Naturalizing a moral standing*

Dennett's political agenda is to put basic commitments back in the right place, that is, the commitment to a free and democratic society in which dialogue is based on reasoned argument and scientific knowledge. This is a sympathetic idea, I think, but where does it come from? It is not deducible from the perspective of Dennett's own resources of scientific knowledge, that is, an empirically explainable world of natural phenomena. In this world we are hosting blind mechanisms, or rather, we are the result of mechanisms that work behind the imagined level of a free will. But how can Dennett want to work for a better world, if this world, for good or for bad, is a world of natural selection developing according to its own rules? Where does the moral choice stem from? Dennett's answer is obvious, and it is a very old answer. The moral choice stems from knowledge. When the veil of self-delusion is

removed from our eyes, when we see the world as it really is, we are at least in a better position to make the right choices than we were before. This is what provided enlightenment thinkers with optimism. This is what made positivism a moral enterprise in the name of neutral science. However, thinkers in the tradition of political philosophy have warned us again and again that moral convictions do not guarantee themselves, they are not just there as a natural resource, they have to be justified, and the only way to do so is to admit that reasons for morally informed actions are to be developed from their own resources, that is, on their own level. When Dawkins warned us against the blind workings of nature (1976: 215), and Dennett warns us against misplaced respect for other's religious feelings, they both appeal to an act of decision, an act of willing, that they both have excluded from the scientific model of understanding what we are. The repressed notion, as Derrida might have put it, returns to take its revenge by determining the discourse that brought it to silence in the first place. The notion of free will creeps in uncomfortably, but unavoidably, in a scientific discourse that threw the baby out with the bathwater.

The other possible consequence, however, is much worse. If Dennett holds on to his position and consistently denies the workings of free will and rational choice, appealing merely to the convincing force of a better story, that is, a scientific story of meme-replication, then he has no argument left for rationally preferring *his* story over against the religious one. 'Yes, I have,' Dennett may reply, 'since my story can be checked, whereas theirs cannot.' However, this checking only works on the grounds of a notion of truth based on the belief in a reality out there which can be reconstructed as it really is by science. But then it is not just a good story, rather it is a representation of reality itself that convinces us *as rational beings*, not as victims of a relative meme-invented kind of rationality, which is, in the end, not rationality at all. You cannot have your cake and eat it too.

### 5. *Notions of religion and science*

The problem with Dennett's book is that it assumes notions of science and religion that are way too narrow. Actually, the materialistic notion of science becomes a spell in itself. Although Dennett invites a multidisciplinary approach, he discards the old distinction between *Naturwissenschaft* and *Geisteswissenschaft* (2006: 71; 372f). He may be right in doing so, but still his distinction is too simplistic, for it does not mean that hermeneutics can be cast aside. Today, hermeneutics represents a way of understanding who we are on the level of self-understanding, that is, a dialogical understanding that does not try to work its way into other people's minds, but rather seeks understanding in the medium of intersubjectivity and intertextuality.

Dennett may be right to warn against misplaced respect. We can agree that nothing has a privileged right to be exempt from scientific investigation. But this should not *exempt us* from asking ourselves: what limits to our ways of asking do we have to respect in order to actually learn something about the object of investigation? If the subject matter is religion, it may be

hopelessly inadequate to reconstruct *necessary* conditions for having religious ideas, *if* these conditions are far from being *sufficient*. Dennett may certainly argue that evolutionary biology has, at least potentially, the proper resources at hand to provide us with sufficient conditions. However, I am inclined to doubt it, and the burden of proof is on his hands, anyway. It may well be that socio-biological theory catches relevant traits in the spreading of religious infections, as it were, but what about religious ethics and philosophy of religion which are committed to reasoned argument, what about the complex interrelation between ideas, myths and ritual practices? Is it possible for a whole system of actions and beliefs to replicate itself parallel to the competition of singular elements? Perhaps it is, but there remains a huge amount of proof to be produced in order to show this convincingly.

Anyway, what is the background of this preoccupation with religious ideas and notions of God that are salient in Dennett's book? Do they qualify for all instances of what we normally study as religion? Dennett seems to have missed the ongoing debate about the very notion of religion as a Christian term.<sup>3</sup> Dennett may not care, since he is obviously not interested in a dialogue with the professional study of religion, let alone theology. Who is he talking to, then, apart from those that share his views beforehand? He tries to convince the general public, so it seems, that they have to learn more about religion, not just from the point of view of various scientific disciplines, but first and foremost from the point of view of a theory of natural selection. This theory, however, cannot possibly stand alone, for if it could, it would take the word right out of its own mouth. It would have no independent criteria of truth left, and let us not forget, Dennett is above all else a disciple of truth. Yet, in order to be able to judge the truth of meme theory, the premises by which we discern 'true' from 'false' will have to be other than the premises of the meme theory itself. Otherwise, the theory is merely self-protective and cannot be falsified.

In respect of his concern for scientific truth, Dennett can no longer claim to be a supporter of Wittgenstein's basic ideas. For Wittgenstein, the possibility of judging statements to be true or false rests on a ground that cannot itself be true or false (*On Certainty* § 205; § 253). Our statements are always embedded in forms of life that are simply given. As language games, they occupy different roles in our lives. Granted: Some of the fundamentalists that Dennett has in mind may very well think that their vision of God as well as God's revealed commandments belong to a reality concordant with the physical world, and people of this conviction may indeed feel that Dennett is trying to break the spell of their vision, but can religion really be boiled down to such visions? I doubt it. Wittgenstein may at least have been partly right to stress that religious statements do not refer at all, they play the role of meaning-making in certain situations; they create images for a life to be lived. Dennett himself is not far from admitting exactly that, but still he has an almost iconoclastic drive to tear down these images, standing on the firm ground of a materialist conviction. On these premises, no dia-

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<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, the discussion in Jonathan Z. Smith 1988, T. Fitzgerald 1997 and R.T. McCutcheon 2003.

logue is possible, since people can only shout at each other from each side of an unbridgeable gap. By reducing all language games to the game of natural selection, Dennett simply exchanges one spell with another. Bound by the spell of scientistic ontology that only honours culture in order to dissolve it into the blind mechanisms of nature, he speaks from a point of view that allows no room for rational discussion.

#### 6. *A note about nature and language*

In his book, *Consciousness Explained*, Dennett responds to the charge of behaviourism by endorsing an answer Wittgenstein gave to the same question (PI § 307; § 308). It runs as follows: if the question about human behaviour is seen to explain away the notion of mental states and processes, it has to be noted that when we talk about such states and processes and, at the same time, leave their nature undecided, we may believe that a methodologically assured understanding is going to make up for that later on. But then the conjuring trick has already been made (§ 308).

From this point of view, Dennett's reading entails an unwarranted notion of consciousness. Therefore, to use Wittgenstein's own words, we have "to deny the yet uncomprehended process in the yet unexplored medium" (*ibid.*), and Dennett continues: "As 308 makes clear, if we are to avoid the conjuring trick, we have to figure out the 'nature' of mental states and processes *first*" (1992: 462). In § 309 Wittgenstein describes the goal of philosophy as to show the fly out of the bottle, and Dennett's way of doing this is to come to grips with mental processes as natural processes that can be explained without referring to objects of consciousness and the notion of consciousness as a central unity in the mind. Whatever the merits of this scientific enterprise, it is a rather strained way of understanding Wittgenstein. What Wittgenstein strives to do in the subsequent discussions is to explain what 'pain', 'thinking' and 'meaning' are, not according to conscious experience, but according to utterances of 'pain', 'thinking' and 'meaning' (§ 310 and onwards). There may indeed be naturalistic elements in Wittgenstein's thinking as when he talks about instincts as pertaining to forms of life, but it is a mistake to take his reflections as aiming at a scientific theory, let alone a natural theory of religion. The later Wittgenstein saw the philosophy of consciousness as a spell of language that makes us blind to the workings of language itself. Using the notion of 'language games' he tried to show that 'objects of consciousness' are not independent entities, but rather point to a way of using words. Various language games make up the design of our beliefs and they may criss-cross in many ways, but this is indeed not to say that the game of scientific explanations and, I might add, of religious belief, can be reduced to one another.<sup>4</sup> Talking about psychology at the end of *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein concludes that: "The existence of the experimental methods makes us think that we have the means of solving

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<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Wittgenstein 1970: 57.



the problems which trouble us; though problem and method pass one another by" (PI, XIV).<sup>5</sup> In other words, for Wittgenstein the use of language has to be solved *first*, lest natural explanations shall cast yet another spell. We may even go so far as to say that the belief in science, that is, hard, experimental science, contrary to the 'belief in belief', is itself a branch of subject-object dualism by taking as its point of departure a notion of observable reality that is ignorant of the form of life that make such a notion practically possible in the first place. One of the main contributions of Wittgenstein's pragmatic insights may very well be that the ground on which we judge statements to be true or false (as in science) cannot itself be true or false (*On Certainty* § 205; § 253), since agreement on what is true and false is an agreement in language; that is, not an agreement in opinions but in forms of life (PI § 241). In this respect it makes no great difference whether we refer to opinions as the contents of consciousness or to processes below the level of self-understanding, since it is the very reference to independent objects (be they 'real' thoughts or 'real' processes) beyond the realm of language that has to be abandoned. In § 308 Wittgenstein admits "that it looks as if we had denied mental processes", adding: "[a]nd naturally we don't want to deny them". In the same vein we can say that naturally he may not want to deny the possibility and results of science. What he is interested in is to understand how language works, to show the fly out of the bottle, and certainly not to naturalize everything we talk about, entrapping the fly once again in the bottle of nature, as it were. Dennett admits that his understanding of Wittgenstein departed from many of his fellow students in Oxford (since by his lights they missed the point), so he has given up 'being' a Wittgensteinian. This is perhaps wise enough. By my lights, Wittgenstein and Dennett seem to pass one another by.

### 7. *The problem of verification*

In *Consciousness Explained* Dennett professes to be a sort of verificationist, namely in the Wittgensteinian sense that "wheels which play no part in the mechanism" have no explanatory sense, and therefore, according to Dennett, have to be denied (1992, 461). The wheels in question are 'objects of consciousness' or consciousness as a central unity. Scientifically we should stick to empirical phenomena which have an explanatory status, that is, phenomena which can be accounted for, empirically and theoretically. However, agreement or disagreement in this form of verificationism turns on the notion of theory. Dennett does not seem to endorse the positivist hard core verificationism which does not allow for theoretical hypotheses, since they can never be verified, but at best exemplified. The question is whether Dennett's theory-oriented kind of verificationism, allowing for explanatory models of a hypothetical nature (as, for instance, the multiple drafts model), still goes with the meme-theory. Here, the facts are not, of course, the memes by themselves, but ideas, sounds, signs, and so forth, which are interpreted as memes, i.e., as mental entities (not necessarily conscious),

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<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of Wittgenstein's rejection of scientific psychology, see Williams 1999: 240-259.

transmitted and multiplied through the workings of natural selection. In this respect, it may be important to take notice of the fact that Dennett admits to an act of interpretation in the socio-biological enterprises (2006: 261f). Memes do not simply *present* themselves to us as memes. The crux of the matter is that religious ideas, among others, do not have to be interpreted as reflections of conscious meaning-making, telling us who and what we are, but can be explained as natural entities living a life of their own. However, we are very far from any kind of verificationism in this respect. It is not that empirical knowledge will never be able to verify the theory of memes (which can at best be plausible), but that the very perspective can be turned on its head. Seen from the point of view of language games, exchanging reasoned arguments in support of a certain belief, for instance, it may very well be the selective mechanisms of replication which are the superfluous wheels. It does not mean that they are not at work, however, only that they are not important for understanding what an exchange of arguments amounts to. In fact, Dennett has to acknowledge this, or else he has given up any reason for convincing us that the theory of natural selection can provide us with true knowledge. In order to acknowledge the interpretation of scientific results, however speculative they may be, we will have to trust the premises of true and false, that is, given the premises of the scientific theory, it can turn out to be wrong. Either the meme-theory can in principle prove unjustified, thereby committing itself to criteria of rational judgment which are not already accounted for by the theory itself, or the meme-theory is by its own standards merely a meme-product and thus involved in a vicious circle (*petitio principii*). By admitting an autonomous level of rational understanding, that is, an irreducible level of intersubjectivity, the meme-theory may save itself from such errors. The question is whether it is willing to acknowledge that.

It is not clear in any case, whether Dennett's criteria of verificationism, which are not, by the way, repeated in *Breaking the Spell*, holds good for the theory of memes. It goes without saying that the idea of God as a real being is not empirically verifiable, only the fact that such an idea exists. The question is whether it is reasonable, or grammatically relevant, to use a Wittgensteinian phrase, to treat this idea *only* as a meme. The ontological level of meaning-making as an intersubjective activity seems to fall out of the picture. And make no mistake about it. It does indeed exist.

#### 8. *A sidestep into political philosophy*

The *grande finale* of Dennett's book turns into moral and political considerations. There is a lot of intriguing stuff to reflect on in this part of the book, but I venture to say that these issues invite discussions within (and perhaps even better served in) the discipline of political philosophy, in which no names, by the way, are mentioned. How come? Because philosophers of political science reflect on how people's rights can be rationally defended, how an open debate is to be secured by institutional networks that in the best possible way make up a

democratic society.<sup>6</sup> This cannot be done by referring to a naturalistic understanding of the mind, let alone of culture. Dennett is left with no argument for the right decision, the rational defensible choice, since the only possible choice is the ‘choice’ of the better meme, which is no choice at all. How can it make it a moral task to defend the Darwinian theory of evolution?<sup>7</sup> Why does Dennett feel a moral obligation to spread the word of evolution, if all there is to his moral habitus stems from the workings of nature which cannot, of course, be moral in itself? According to Dennett, memes are spread according to their own criteria of success; they do not need a moral defense, and if the moral defense is just a meme, then it cannot be morally valid in any philosophical sense, that is, as part of deontology. Dennett actually faces this question, posing it himself: “What foundation, then, can we stand on as we struggle to keep our feet in the meme-storm in which we are engulfed? If replicative might does not make right, what is to be the eternal ideal relative to which ‘we’ will judge the value of memes?” And his answer is:

We should note that the memes for normative concepts – for *ought* and *good* and *truth* and *beauty* – are among the most entrenched denizens of our minds. Among the memes that constitute us, they play a central role. Our existence as us, as what we as thinkers are – not as what we as organisms are – is not independent of these memes (ibid.).

Granted that this be so, however, why is it then that religious ideas which may seem equally entrenched denizens of many people’s minds, are potentially dangerous? To a great many people, religious belief may represent or express exactly what ‘ought’, ‘good’, ‘truth’ and ‘beauty’ *is*. How come that some basic memes are beneficial to us whereas others are not? It does not make things any clearer that, on the one hand, Dennett speaks about *what we are* as dependent on memes, and, on the other, what we are *as hosts*, that is, as human beings apart from the memes which inhabit our minds. Why do some ideas constitute our mental existence whereas others only seem to endanger our mental welfare (even at suicidal risk) by being advantageous only to themselves? It is indeed interesting to take notice of the fact that Darwin’s theory of natural selection can also be taken to support the beneficial function of

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<sup>6</sup> Take, for instance, the discussions in *Multiculturalism* (edited by A. Gutmann 1994), by Taylor, Habermas, Appiah, Rockefeller, Walzer and Wolf, see also, more substantially, Habermas, 1992; 2005; Rawls, 2005; Walzer, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> He actually states this explicitly – even in a religious key – on page 268: “This is my reason for wanting people to understand and accept evolutionary theory: I believe that their salvation may depend on it! [...] So I feel a moral imperative to spread the word of evolution, but evolution is not my religion. I don’t have a religion.” Why is Dennett using a religious rhetoric here? Something similar is found in Dawkins, e.g., 1976: 215. Maybe, it is because they guess this kind of language might catch on, mimetically, so that they contribute to transposing a set of values from a context of religious mission to a context of Darwinism which is not, obviously, regarded as a religion. Still, Dennett acknowledges that also scientists “campaign with vigor and ingenuity for their pet theories”, the difference being that “they are constrained by the rules of science not to engage in practices that would tend to disable the critical faculties of potential hosts for the memes they want to spread” (2006: 365). However, if the critical faculty is itself designed by memes, which Dennett seems inclined to think (1995: 365), we are still in the grips of a natural theory that cannot at the same time be a theory of nature. The ground, on which true and false statements are made, cannot itself be true or false.

religious ideas, as, for instance, the idea (and practice) of forgiveness (Wilson, 2002: 189-215). One easily gets the impression, hopefully unjustified, that Dennett's and Dawkin's hostility against religion precedes their application of meme-theory to this field of investigation, producing results which are unduly biased.

However, what is lacking in Dennett's theory of natural selection are basic criteria for defining what it is that makes us special as human beings (1995: 265). "What makes us special," Dennett actually says, "is that we, alone among species, can rise above the imperative of our genes – thanks to the lifting cranes of our memes" (ibid.). But this is not a very satisfying answer, in so far as memes, although they express themselves in cultural forms, are part of the same selective mechanisms as are genes. And we have not come any closer to criteria for trusting that the 'right' and 'good' ideas may be victorious in the battle against the 'bad' ones. A battle, or a competition, it seems, is all there is, and all there can be, according to the theory of natural selection. In this Nietzschean vein, morality must give way to the survival of the fittest, it is as simple as that.

### 9. Conclusion

As scientists we should not commit ourselves to any untimely respect towards the feelings of religious people, and maybe Dennett is right that many of them, let alone the entire human race, would in fact be better off not believing in a dangerously zealous and commanding God, but the spell-breaking proceedings of natural science may not be the only way, nor even an adequate way, of disenchantment in this regard. Proceeding from the self-understanding of our own values, including various scientific enterprises, we may actually show quite another and very relevant kind of respect in taking people's beliefs seriously *as beliefs*, that is, understanding their internal coherence, their symbolic structure, their ways of self-reflection in theological traditions. This is also part of science, albeit a human science. This is certainly not to say that every belief has to be respected or credited as rational on its own accounts, quite the contrary, and I am not arguing that we should want to exclude contributions from cognitive, neural or socio-biological sciences. However, since the fall of metaphysics we should give up the dream of finding one closed set of criteria that enable us to own the whole package of truth. Such a dream will probably always turn out to be a dream, and people will be right to turn it down as such, choosing their own traditional stories instead. Let's try to put the theory of natural selection in its proper place. It is a theory, neither verifiable, nor falsifiable, but at best a plausible theory, a good guess, that may point to eye-opening mechanisms in the way in which certain ideas, including religious ones, transmit themselves through the medium of the culturally adapted brain. It cannot sufficiently *explain* culture, let alone religion, it cannot even explain itself as a theory. *If you really think it can*, if you are *convinced* of its all-encompassing truth, it has simply succeeded in becoming a new spellbinder, and then it will become just another dangerous idea just like those it tries to put to the test.

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