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Stream B: Cultural Change and Evolutionary Theory

Title: Why is the human psyche such a mess? The answer from meme theory.

Abstract: Whereas other animals have definite and consistent instincts to pursue the evolutionary objective of maximizing their reproductive success, the behavior of humans is often uncertain and inconsistent. Sometimes it is even self-destructive, in which case it is considered to be the symptom of a “mental illness.” The branches of science that seek to explain and remedy such illnesses—psychiatry, psychology, psychoanalysis—have had to develop increasingly complex models of the human psyche in order to account for this inconsistency in behavior.

From the viewpoint of biology, this situation appears puzzling. Why has the propensity toward inconsistent and self-destructive behavior not been eradicated by natural selection? Asked differently, why is the human psyche such an overly complicated, messy thing? The aim of this paper is to present and develop the answer to this question that meme theory offers us, which is that *the human psyche is a battlefield—a battlefield of memes*. The human psyche has been designed by memetic evolution as a machine to produce and reproduce memes. And the existing memes are competing for control over—or memory space on—this machine. That is, they are struggling against each other to be taken up and passed on by the psyche. Hence the messiness and inconsistency. This conception of the human psyche provides a new perspective on the question of the unconscious. Given that we are capable of consciousness, why is it that we sometimes unconsciously do things that are inconsistent with our conscious goals and values? The memetheoretic conception suggests that unconsciousness might be *an evolutionary strategy of memes* to “fly under the radar” of the self and thus get themselves passed on despite their inconsistency or self-destructiveness.

Bio: I am an assistant professor in the Instituto de Filosofía of the Universidad Diego Portales in Santiago, Chile. I received a Ph.D. degree from Northwestern University, USA, and a Master’s degree from the University of Vienna, Austria.