

THE SELFISH MEME & THE SELFLESS ATMA

SANGEETHA MENON

*National Institute of Advanced Studies
Indian Institute of Science Campus
Bangalore, India 560 012
smenon@nias.iisc.ernet.in*

The word 'meme' was first used by Richard Dawkins (Dawkins, 1976)¹ in the sense of a replicator to introduce the idea of cultural transmission through the process of imitation, just as genes are responsible for the evolution of organisms. Following Dawkins several writers came forth to have a closer look at 'meme'. The consensus was that this was a fascinating way of explaining cultural evolution and transmission; that meme is the basic unit of (cultural) information whose existence influences events so as to make more copies of itself (Brodie, 1996).² The book which got most attention in this line of literature was The Meme Machine (Blackmore, 1999),³ which favours the idea that culture, like biology, evolves through the process of variation, selection and replication. Something striking in Blackmore's thesis is that emotions and attitudes do not count as memes since they are subjective and never get passed on.

What Is Selfishness?

What is selfishness in the context of the selfish gene and selfish meme? An attitude or mechanism which works for self-promotion. We are back with the word 'self' which seems to be unavoidable in saying what is 'selfishness', whether it be cultural or biological. The methodology of Dawkins and Blackmore is to aim at the non-existence of any non-physical self by arguing that self is nothing but a bunch of memes, and also to locate the intelligence behind the transmission of cultural traits. Therefore, they insist, 'each of these memes has evolved in its own unique way with its own history' and also 'each of them is using your behaviour to get itself copied'.⁴ Meme, when collectively termed, is thus the 'big self', which tries to survive by all means available to it.

The Concept and the Theory

'Selfishness' is a cultural category, which itself is relative. Also, 'culture' is only a classificatory term and not a descriptive term. We might classify many expressions of human mind, attitudes, belief systems, spiritual prac-

tices and philosophies as cultural. To be classified as cultural need not be the description of something. A category which is relative and belonging to another order of reality, namely culture, is taken as a reductive standard under which not all (not emotions and attitudes) but much is classified. According to the theory of memes human enterprises are selfishness-borne. They could be repeated and perpetuated. But what about 'selfishness' *per se*? It is an interesting name borrowed from a philosophical paradigm to describe not only the varied expressions of 'selfishness' ranging between different cultures but also to characterise them by the function of genetic information such as selection and replication.

The physical, memetic self is ofcourse selfish, selfish to survive and replicate. If we keep away for sometime any analysis on 'being selfish' and focus on the nature of the self, it will be clear that 'self', in the first instance, is something to be defined. The complexity of human experiences and representations of mind points towards a self and evolution of self which need not be in the lines of biological evolution. This does not mean that there is one self called the physical, genetic, selfish self on one side and on the other a multiple number of selves which are in varying ranges of complexity. Complexity need not be the essential nature of design. Complexity appears when understanding has to happen. It is more an epistemological complexity than an ontological complexity. Therefore it might be easy for a Ramana Maharshi⁵ to be Ramana Maharshi, but difficult for us to understand his existence. The complexity of the self is not in its being but in the understanding of it by the other.

It matters what are our tools to understand something. Nevertheless, the tools are not the final judges of the subject of inquiry for the very reason that the nature of that which is inquired need not 'fit into' the tools of measurement. The characteristic and limiting factor of the tool cannot become the characteristic and limiting factor of the object of inquiry. But you can know the object of your inquiry only as far as the tool/standpoint reveals to you. A selfish meme can find only many more selfish memes.

The Happy Self

The 'selfish meme' approach to explain all of the past, present and future of human mind and creativity is a tough but hasty epistemological strategy to demystify the human race from its uniqueness. There is nothing sacrosanct about being human. All that which we do can be cited in the animal world too. The approach is a kind of unification of all existence. Definitely this method will bring about a lot of light into the untrodden darkness of human

and animal minds, but can easily lose ground because of the lack of theoretical 'depth' to integrate the creative expressions like adherence to truth, enjoyment of beauty and concept of goodness. The unifying method or principle has to be different from that which is unified. The physical self cannot account for all that history which has happened and all that development which is yet to happen in the arena of human mind. To integrate the individual and collective development of the human mind a non-rigid, acausal, non-classificatory, standard is needed. The selfish meme will die off in the process of unification. It can only trace back to the biological origins of mind. It can only be a narrative to trace a history.

Meme and Circularity

Why is the meme selfish? To survive. Why does it survive? If the answer is 'to be selfish' the circularity involved in the theory becomes clear. If the answer is 'no' it isn't understood why that relation could not be reversible. It is unclear why selfishness becomes a larger category for classification of the rest of the behaviours or expressions. Selfishness unites the self and the memes with the rest. The self in question can also be a happy self, a creative self, and a transcendental self. The transcendence of the self need not be antagonistic to other manifests of the self. On the contrary that which integrates different expressions of the self has to be beyond these expressions.

Meme and Causality

Reducing all activities to one single class of selfishness presumes a primal and final cause. A theory of causality is behind the presumption of selfishness. For whom the meme evolves and survives is a pertinent question. If survival is the primal and final cause for selfishness what is that which makes 'survival' so very interesting is also an important question. Since survival is the key word, your existence tends to be determined by or related to another event, person or object. If your existence and the existence of the rest are interrelated, then the latter evolves for the former and vice versa. This being conceded, the physical self cannot be an ontological real of a substantive nature (the gene) to which everything is reduced.

If the meme is surviving and competing for itself, then it seems to have an extra edge of intelligence, which is primary. What is the nature of that primary intelligence, what is the cause and to whom does it belong also become topics for thinking. This contention would also stand against the basic theo-

ry of causality that survival is the primal and final cause. The cause of survival is survival, and the effect too is survival. Survival cannot be both cause and effect.

The meme needs culture to be influenced, to select, survive and replicate. If meme is influenced by culture, culture is causal and primary. How can something which is influenced, changed and modified by something else can be a reality or category to which everything else could be reduced to?

The Surviving Self

The selfish gene survives. The surviving self goes beyond selfishness. There is a selfishness for the survival of the self, a self which need not be disappearing with the death of the body, but which might have a different kind of posthumous existence. Whether that kind of a continuing self could be known or attained only after death of the physical self or while one is living is a question debated by many classical thinkers of Indian thought. The selfless *Atma* is not 'worried' about the preservation of the physical identity for eternity, since there could be other dimensions of (non-physical) its existence. The selfishness is not for *just* survival but for a *continuing* survival which is unconditioned. The only way to survive is to be selfless. The existence of the selfish meme is determined by many other selfish memes around. In order for the self to survive and exist it has to co-exist. Existence is not ensured by competition alone but by interaction which involves exploration and innovativeness.

The Experiencing Self

Human mind has a tendency to see a unity in diverse enterprises and to thread together discordant events, experiences etc. Our minds integrate simple and separate events and experiences. This process of integration goes beyond the physical self since it weaves an identity, out of the process, which is trans-physical and even trans-cultural in the case of spiritual practice. In philosophy we speak about 'transcendence'. In science we have technology. And there are philosophical/spiritual systems of thinking asking fundamental questions about human conduct, metaphysics, study of meanings, interpretation of life, world views etc. so as to see life in a holistic and dynamic fashion.

We have profound experiences the cause of which need not be less complex such as deep silence, uncaused happiness, clarity of mind, sense of

freedom and variety of spiritual experiences. We have experiences that are spontaneous and hence non-replicable. We also have a tendency to search and see hidden patterns within apparent chaos, and that too patterns which reveal only to particular seers. They are all trans-self, collective enterprises. You cannot innovate unless through the trial and error method of your responses to situations. Unless you 'see' the other, you cannot have a situation. It is a process of self-giving and taking in a mutually nourishing manner. The physical determinism which presumes all experiences that we had, we are having and will be having under the category of 'survival' will not lead to innovativeness and development of the mind.

Scriptures of Indian thought speak about values and value systems. A case from the *Bhagavad Gita* could be cited. There is a set of values enlisted in the thirteenth chapter of the *Gita*.⁶ These values which are essentially sustained attitudes and related physical manifests help us to go beyond the rigid and separatist identities we inhere. It is not a question of *mere survival*, but a question of *sustainable survival* which the Indian scriptures address to as 'moksha'.

It is accepted that there are manifestations of such dominant attitudes like hatred and selfishness. But one has to go beyond that to bring out the best in oneself and in the other. Concern for the other is the greatest discipline in classical systems of Indian thought, whether it be the *ratna-treya* of Jainism, eight-fold path of Buddhism, *ananya bhakti* of *Bhakti* traditions or *kevala jnana* of *Advaita Vedanta*. It is not to say that selfishness is all absent and all that which is 'altruism'. Selfishness is there, but in a realm which is clearly marked. Hence it could also be transcended.

What is Selflessness?

Selflessness is not holding on to the authorship of a response which you make to a situation, that is characterised as self-giving, but transcending the authorship of selflessness and moving ahead. Selflessness is a continuous exploration and renewal of your self along with the wisdom for co-existence. Notions about 'selfishness' or 'altruism' are abstractions and subjective/objective reporting of our experiences. They help us to theorise and classify human natures, and construct world-views based on them which in turn might influence to re-define the theories. Both the notions are epistemological necessities and not ontological realities. They are not rigid and closed states of being but only responses to situations. Therefore somebody could be more selfish today and less selfish tomorrow or vice versa.

The Selfless *Atma*

Selflessness is not just a philosophical ideal. It is a unique way of responding to situations and to innovate. It is a sacred space for further exploration of one's self and identity; to ask about and re-define our 'intentionalities' and world-views. Selfishness is best served in increasing degrees of selflessness. To survive one has to share and sacrifice.

Acknowledgements:

The first draft of this paper was written in connection with a debate organised at a discussion meeting, on the same title, at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore, India. I am thankful to my colleague Anindya Sinha who led the debate on 'selfish meme' and helped me conceive my counter-arguments.

Endnotes

1. Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).
2. R. Brodie, *Virus of the Mind: The New Science of the Meme* (Seattle: Integral Press, 1996).
3. Susan Blackmore, *The Meme Machine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
4. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
5. Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950) was a saint who lived in Tiruvannamalai, in southern India, whose philosophy emphasized the inquiry into the question 'who am I?' (*nan ar*).
6. *The Bhagavad Gita*, Ch. 13, verses 7–11.