

Why Ask Why?

I recently attended the American Atheists 35th National Convention. During the convention we heard from many interesting and enlightening speakers. The format of the presentations included a time for questions and discussion after each speaker.

There was a question posed to one of the speakers which was of particular interest to me. In my opinion, the answer was entirely insufficient and therefore quite unsatisfying. So I here endeavor to give the question the proper answer it deserves.

The question concerned how those thus assembled had escaped control by religions. This was relevant to the speaker's topic which had included discussion of some of the great many mechanisms of the mind which might be leveraged by religions functioning within those minds.

So why weren't people gathered for the atheists convention controlled by religion - as appears to be a "normal" part of the human condition? The answer could have been that "quality of parenthood" aspects of religious memplexes had failed in the case of people assembled for the convention. This would have been a very condensed version of a more complete answer. If one is familiar with the work *Thought Contagion: How Belief Spreads Through Society* by Aaron Lynch, then "quality of parenthood" as it applies to "thought contagion" is not a new concept. For those not familiar with the concept, we will include a crash course. Because "quality of parenthood" is most easily understood in terms of memetics - or the study of memes - we will cover that first. The term "meme" was coined by Richard Dawkins in his work *The Selfish Gene*. Susan Blackmore expanded upon the concept in her work, *The Meme Machine* and used the term "memplex" to describe a group of compatible memes which worked in concert. For our purposes a meme should be considered as the smallest unit of transmissible culture. There are other, perhaps more accurate, definitions. For now just think of a meme as behavior which one human may observe in another and then copy - but that behavior can't be broken down to simpler units of behavior.

Gathering rocks might be considered as a meme. Striking predators with rocks might be another meme. Striking rocks together might be yet another meme. Using the resulting sharp edged rocks against predators might be yet considered as yet another meme. Gathering the right kind of rocks, then striking them together to fashion a sharp pointy object and then lashing the sharp pointy object to a suitably prepared stick is a memplex - a memplex for manufacture of spears. A different memplex might chain together memes for gathering the right kind rocks, gathering some really dry leaves and twigs,

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and then striking the rocks together for sparks near the dry leaves and twigs. The memplexes for manufacture of spears and this particular method of starting a fire shared some memes - gathering the right kind of rocks and then striking them together. All these memes and memes like them are really the basic building blocks of human culture.

Language may be considered as a memplex. There is the concept of linking particular sequences of sounds with particular meanings. This is a common meme. In many languages letters are linked to glyphs and this allows the language to be written as it is here. Collectively all the memes of grammar, memes of “parts of speech”, memes of tense, and all the other bits that make up a language may be considered as a memplex. All the pieces of a language memplex work together and are transmitted from one generation to the next.

Every religion should be considered primarily as a memplex. Unlike memplexes of language, these memplexes of religion have “viral” qualities. That is to say they include memes which cause the memplex to be copied or replicated in susceptible minds.

Biological viruses invade tiny chemical machines which we call cells. After the invasion, the virus reprograms the chemical machine to create copies of the viral code and assemble them in infectious packets before spewing them into the environment to repeat the cycle.

Computer viruses invade electronic machines which we call computers. After the invasion, the virus reprograms the electronic machine to create copies of the viral code and assemble the copies in infectious packets before spewing them across cyberspace to repeat the cycle.

Memplexes of religion invade the biological machinery which we call minds. After the invasion, the memplex reprograms the biological machinery to attempt copying the memplex into as many additional minds as possible to repeat the cycle.

One must conclude that computer viruses, religions, and biological viruses are at least somewhat analogous to one another. So it must be time to employ that “compare and contrast” meme with which English teachers have so long labored to equip us.

One obvious feature of memplexes of religion and computer viruses which contrasts with biological viruses is the way in which they evolve.

If one analyzes an “evolve” function from a mathematical perspective, then it is reasonable to say it is composed of two functions - the output of each being

the input to the other. One of the two functions which make up the “evolve” function could be described as “copy, but not exactly.” If the copying were exact then there could be no evolution. The other function in the endless loop is to sort the inexact copies based on “fitness” where “fitness” means best at surviving the sorting environment. When acting upon DNA - the blueprints for life - this second function is the ruthless punisher which eventually causes Dawkins' blind watch makers to produce the perfect timepiece.

The “copy, but not exactly” function is different for non-biological viruses. The biological viruses must rely solely on “natural” variations. In contrast, the memplexes of religion and computer viruses have designers which act upon the “copy, but not exactly” function. The designers do not normally introduce random variations, but instead introduce refinements which they believe will improve their version of the computer virus or memplex of religion.

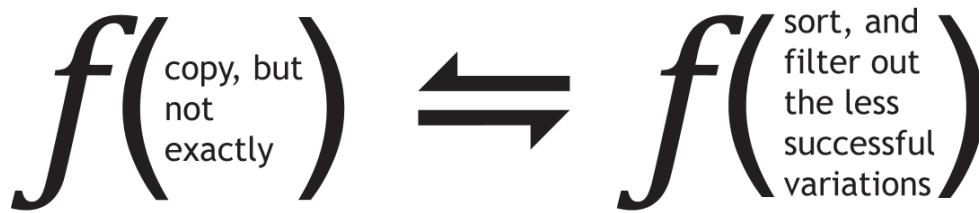
So memplexes of religion evolve - not quite after the fashion of computer viruses and not quite after the fashion of biological viruses - but it is evolution. This means there is competition for resources.

The primary resource for the viral memplexes of religion is the human brain.

Hang onto your hats because things are about to become really complicated. The viral memplexes of religion are not only analogous to biological viruses, but are even more analogous to viruses like those which cause warts. A typical virus destroys the host cell through a process called lysis - thus releasing all the new viral particles created after the cell was reprogrammed as a virus factory. Human Papillomaviruses (HPV) cause problems ranging from warts to cervical cancer. HPV interferes with the normal regulation of cellular reproduction to cause infected cells to multiply - thereby creating additional virus factories. Warts and cervical cancer can both be thought of as the result of HPV taking the brakes off of cell growth and division. The advantage to the virus should be evident. A single successful exploit can result in a far larger number of new infectious particles than with ordinary viruses.

The memplexes of religion behave in an analogous fashion for exactly the same reason. A single successful exploit can be leveraged to create more infected brains and more potential proselytes and evangelists. The significance of this characteristic is far greater than it might first seem.

Let us go back and consider the evolve function. It might be illustrated this way:



Now consider the parallel evolve functions in a classic symbiosis. Lichen is composed of a fungus and a photobiont - usually a “primitive” algae. The fungus provides nutrients and shelter while preventing desiccation of the algae. The algae uses photosynthesis to capture energy from sunlight and thereby powers itself and the fungus. It is fairly easy to imagine how this relationship might have developed as regular fungus accidentally kept algae alive instead of decomposing it near some ancient seashore.

Within lichen, the fungus has its gene pool or “geneplex” which is acted upon by the evolve function. The algae has its own geneplex and that geneplex is also acted upon by the evolve function. The interesting thing is that the fungus alters the sorting function for the algae. The algae in turn alters the sorting function for the fungus. Specifically, the algae gives fungus which is best able to coexist with the algae an advantage. Likewise, the fungus alters the sorting environment and gives advantage to those algae which are the best at coexisting with the fungus. The algae “blueprinted” by algal DNA affects the sorting of the fungal DNA and the fungus “blueprinted” by fungal DNA affects the sorting of the algal DNA. The regenerative feedback between the two has resulted in a remarkable example of life. Lichen is a “pioneer” able to exist where plants cannot gain a foothold. Lichen is one of the first living things seen on new rock crated by lava flows in the island of Hawaii. Lichen is also among the first living things to colonize rock uncovered by retreating glaciers in Alaska.

Now consider the parallel evolve functions as they act upon the memepool of a religion and the human geneplex. There are many interactions between the two.

Religion obviously affects the sorting function for humans. Humans controlled by religious edicts to be extra fruitful in their multiplying are an example. Another example is humans protected from disease because of behaviors sanctioned by the memepool of their religion. Consider memes related to “kosher” and “halal” with protection from disease in mind. One must conclude that religion affects the sorting function of the human geneplex in much the same way as the algae in lichen affects the geneplex of its fungal symbiont - religion favors the DNA which describes brains best adapted to coexist with the religion.

The pool of human brains is obviously the sorting environment for religions. This means the memepools of religion which are best able to survive in that environment are the ones which will then be “copied, but not exactly.” Again this is analogous to the parallel evolve functions of the lichen. There is one important difference - there is an additional path for regenerative feedback in the human-religion symbiosis. This is because brains described by human DNA can and do directly affect the “copy, but not exactly” function for memepools of religion.

It may seem as if we have strayed very very far from the original question as to why the people at the atheist convention were not controlled by any religion. The short answer which I proposed was “that ‘quality of parenthood’ aspects of religious memplexes had failed in the case of people assembled for the convention.” There are just a few more puzzle pieces to examine before beginning to understand how all the pieces fit together.

Earlier we examined some biological viruses which tricked infected cells into creating not only copies of the virus, but additional copies of the infected factory. The mechanisms for creating additional copies of the infected factory causes problems ranging from warts to cervical cancer. These additional copies could be considered to be caused by “Quantity of Parenthood” genes within the geneplex of viruses like HPV.

Religion has to deal with a problem which does not seem to have an analog among biological viruses. We do not see cases where HPV has caused warts and then some other virus invades the extra cells and repurposes them to create viral particles for a virus other than HPV. In contrast a religion must deal effectively with retaining control over its extra religion-propagating factories once it causes them to be created. It does not help a religion to cause all those extra infants if their brains become infected with a competing memplex of religion. So a common feature of memplexes of religion is a set of characteristics which tend to limit opportunities for exposure to competing memplexes.

As usual, the extreme cases are instructive and once these are understood then one may more easily understand less extreme cases. One extreme example is contained within the contemporary “Quiverfull Movement.” The Quiverfull movement demands that every woman have as many children as possible - with each additional child being accepted as “a blessing from God” as well as “an arrow in the quiver of God’s army.” This is obviously a “quantity of parenthood” memplex. The “quiverfull” memplex is frequently manifested in conjunction with memes for “home schooling.” I intentionally use quotation marks because in this context “home schooling” means to replace actual

schooling with religious indoctrination. This indoctrination takes place in an environment rigorously free of science, rigorously free of practice with critical thinking, and rigorously free of any other memes which might represent a threat to the controlling memplex. This is an example of what Lynch called “Quality of Parenthood” - a measure of the ability of a thought contagion to dominate the minds created by “Quantity of Parenthood” aspects of the thought contagion.

More examples of “quality of parenthood” memes may be readily observed within some strains of the Islamic memplex. Sharia - Islamic law as is typically enforced by agents such as the Taliban - demands the death penalty for any person attempting to spread competing religious memplexes. Sharia also limits educational opportunities - particularly for women - as a means to combat encroachment by other memplexes.

If one now considers other cases, then it is easy to understand what it means to say that “Quality of Parenthood” memes have failed for those in attendance at the atheist convention.

But the answer is far more complicated than that. We’ve come this far, and it is only a few extra steps toward a more complete understanding, so we will continue looking at the puzzle pieces.

A recurring topic at the atheists’ convention was the ongoing and contentious debate between people of science and adherents of various theologies as to the origin of it all.

The important question is not whether we were created by an intelligent designer or natural processes. The important question is not whether or not those natural processes might have been created by an intelligent designer. The important question is not even whether or not the universe was created by an intelligent designer or the origins of the supposed intelligent designer. Likewise all discussions and debates of things such as Big Bang Theories and the exact nature of primordial soup never get to the one truly important question. However, if one identifies the important question and then perceives the answer to the important question, then all those other discussions and debates become much much simpler to deal with.

So just what is the important question? It is simply this: why are we humans so obsessed with those other questions? If one convincingly answers that, then the war is won.

The short answer to the important question is “because of religion.” Now obviously one will have to expand upon that answer just a bit.

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Religion has been acting upon the human gene pool for generations. It has done so by affecting one of the two functions which together form the evolve function. Recall that religions are able to improve the reproductive outcomes for variations within the human geneplex which make the human brain more susceptible to control by the religion.

Before continuing, we should examine the considerable power of iteration. Referring again to Lynch, we find that if a characteristic arises within a gene pool and that new characteristic gives a mere one percent advantage, then that new characteristic will dominate the gene pool to the virtual exclusion of other alleles within one hundred generations. Religions have been able to achieve tens and even hundreds of percent advantages for adherents. The “quiverfull movement” might be considered as a modern day extreme example. A typical American woman might have two children in her lifetime. A “quiverfull” mother will have eight to ten or even eleven children in her lifetime. This represents a 400 to 500 percent advantage for her genes - genes which described a brain more susceptible to accepting tenets of the “Quiverfull movement.” This obviously dramatically decreases the number of generations required for religion-friendly alleles to dominate the gene pool.

So for what religion-friendly alleles might we be searching? The extreme curiosity of humans for one. The ability to attribute agency to unseen actors and generally think in abstract terms is another. Before continuing it is critical to note that science as we know it did not exist for the vast majority of human evolution. It was not until 1665 that Robert Hooke used an early microscope to figure out that some living things were made of little things which he called cells. We were still hanging people for “practicing witchcraft” as late as 1692. The very young United States of America is actually older than our scientific explanation of thunderstorms.

Now consider the imperative for religion to download itself from one generation to the next. A child could not very well approach a parent and state “it is time to install the religious memeplex - please commence download immediately.” But if the young brain were programmed to demand explanations for everything then parents would unwittingly download the religious memeplex and its explanation of the origins of everything.

Thus a regenerative feedback loop would be established between the memepool of religion and the geneplex of humans. Specifically the DNA for brains which demanded answers would better coexist with religion and would be passed on more often because the religion could better gain control over those brains. Religions with the most convincing explanations were favored and more likely to be passed along. There is a similar regenerative feedback loop

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for hyper-guilt and probably many of the other characteristics which are in our brains but not in the brains of our near relatives. The inescapable conclusion is that religion - and not any deity - is the final architect of humanity.

But religion overshot the mark. After some number of iterations the regenerative feedback loop between the parallel evolve functions of religion and humankind created humans who were so inquisitive and so skilled in abstract thought that some of those humans began to figure out the real answers as opposed to simply propagating the memplexes of religion. These humans would frequently escape “quality of parenthood” aspects of the memplex - or force adaptations of the memplex. Religion would have to adapt to a round Earth which was not at the center of anything. Religion would have to explain dinosaur bones. But religion adapted quickly.

“Home schooling” is obviously one such adaptation. But there is another important factor to consider. Recall that religion influences the “sort and toss out the less favored variations” portion of the continuously iterated evolve function. Minds which are most likely to be controlled by religion are those lacking the mental faculties to correctly perceive religion as thought contagion. Minds which are less inquisitive are most likely to be controlled by religion. And minds which are more susceptible to errors such as circular logic are more susceptible to control by religion. In turn, minds controlled by religion are more likely to produce large families. So the regenerative feedback loop which once favored curiosity has been reversed. It now favors limited mental faculties and perhaps even a biologically-based hostility toward education.

So now let us once again consider the atheists assembled for their convention. Ironically they are sufficiently inquisitive to question the religions of their parents because religion made them very inquisitive. Religion overshot the mark. Once a critical mass of collective curiosity was reached then the memes of science began to displace those of religion. Questioning the religion of their parents would ultimately lead to these people escaping from the “quality of parenthood” aspects of the religions of their parents.

Please again consider the question “why are we humans so obsessed with those other questions?” You should now understand that we are biologically predisposed to know our origins and indeed the origins of everything because in the days before science it was advantageous to memplexes of religion for us to be so. There was a regenerative feedback loop between memplexes of religions which could improve the reproductive success of controlled minds and DNA which described brains most compatible with the memplexes of religion. The more inquisitive a mind was regarding its origins, the more likely it was to be controlled by religion and thus pass along the DNA which had described it. Apply this same logic to “the God shaped hole” which most people want to fill

with some form of “spirituality” and you are one step closer to fully understanding what it really means to be human.

By this point you should also understand why humanity keeps asking all those questions and perhaps become more content with knowing there are likely limits to how accurately we can understand very tiny things such as the nature of light, limits to how accurately we can understand very large things such as the structure of the universe, and limits to how accurately we can understand the minutiae of the distant past. With a little further exploration you can conclude we were not created by any deity. You will instead conclude that we - in co-evolution with our symbiotic memplexes of religion - created our deities.