



## 'Mind Viruses and Memes' - thinking errors in a freethinker

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### Refuting Attacks Against Our Faith: An Example

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Version: June 14, 2005

My focus in this essay is to illustrate, through a detailed analysis of one particular article, the range of fallacious tactics that are used in attacks against religious faith. This article espouses a characterization of faith as a 'mind virus', more technically called a 'meme'. Before analyzing this article, some brief background on memes seems appropriate.

The term 'meme' was first introduced by renowned zoologist Richard Dawkins in his first book, *The Selfish Gene*, in 1976.<sup>1</sup> Memes are ideas that spread through human culture and across human generations, much like genes in the biological world.<sup>2</sup> To quote Richard Dawkins:

I think that a new kind of replicator has recently emerged on this very planet. It is staring us in the face. It is in its infancy, still drifting clumsily about in its primeval soup, but already it is achieving evolutionary change at a rate that leaves the old gene panting far behind.

The new soup is the soup of human culture. We need a name for the new replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation. 'Mimeme' comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like 'gene.' I hope my classicist friends will forgive me if I abbreviate mimeme to

*meme*. If it is any consolation, it could alternatively be thought of as being related to 'memory,' or to the French word *mjme*. It should be pronounced to rhyme with 'cream'.

Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, 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 and 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.

It does not take much to see that the notion of a meme can be used to theorize about religious faith much like genetic processes are used to theorize about the origins of life through evolution. Indeed, memetic conceptualization of faith is sometimes considered a 'scientific explanation' for religion.<sup>3</sup> The concept of a meme is not exclusively the domain of detractors of faith; the concept is also used by Christian writers.<sup>4</sup> But the characterization of faith as a meme remains primarily to marginalize faith-based traditions.

With this brief introduction to memes, we now turn to an article by Phil Stahl, 'Mind Viruses and Memes'.<sup>5</sup> This article is part of the literature of a group called the *Freethinkers of Colorado Springs*. My approach here is to list the contents of this article and systematically analyze it, exposing fallacious tactics I have found within it. The analysis may seem pedantic at places, but I believe it to be a worthwhile exercise nonetheless.

Stahl's article begins with a paragraph introducing the idea of a meme. My analysis will start at the second paragraph, where his main point takes shape. Stahl opens his main theme with the statement:

Amongst the most powerful and insidious memes are those dedicated to the spread of religious beliefs or faith.

Here we find the first of many instances of propagandist tactics, that of planting negative

thoughts by using the derogative word 'insidious'. Note that this word is introduced into the discussion *before* any supporting arguments are advanced. Indeed, as we shall see, nothing in this article establishes in a rational way the 'insidious' nature of 'religious beliefs or faith' *per se*. The tactic being used here is sometimes known as poisoning the well.<sup>6</sup> This strategem weaves its way throughout the entire article.

Continuing with Stahl's article:

Their infectious power can be assessed on the basis of three main attributes:

- 1) Performance value: What change does the meme or meme complex bring about in behaviours? (For the person or group that adopts it.)
- 2) Propagation value: How far and wide is the meme spread, and what means are employed to achieve this? (i.e., Islam in the past has used beheading of infidels and other punishments; Christians have burned heretics.)
- 3) Infectious value: How easy is it to infect other brains? What attributes of the meme facilitate this infection?

Again, we see the introduction of a derogative word, 'infectious'. Of course, the word itself need not be derogative; for example, 'You have an infectious laugh'. However, in this context, the word reinforces the image portrayed in the title of this article, that of a 'mind virus'.

Looking down the list of attributes to be used to assess the 'infectious power' of the faith meme, we see the next fallacy, notably in item 2. Notice his examples for the 'means employed' in the spreading of faith: 'beheading' and 'burning'. This is a clear case of propaganda by associating faith groups with offensive acts. Several fallacies are involved here. First, this is an *ad hominem* attack on people of faith. Second, this argument involves *hasty generalization*; burning of heretics by Christians is surely an exception to the means of 'propagating' Christianity. Third, this accusation involves an *appeal to fear* (*argumentum ad baculum*). Fourth, the attack commits the fallacy of *guilt by association*.

Stahl's article then proceeds to argue:

In the case of the faith meme, part of its appeal resides in automatically warding off too close rational scrutiny. It achieves this by either insisting reason is 'inferior to faith' or that any scintilla of doubt must emanate 'from Satan – the ultimate unbeliever.'

The tactic used here is the *straw-man* fallacy. Specifically, Stahl constructs a 'straw man', a supposed proponent of faith who rejects all rational scrutiny, resorting instead to characterizing rational scrutiny as 'emanating from Satan'. This is clearly a *false* characterization of faith-based traditions as a whole. We could also describe this characterization as committing the fallacy of *biased sampling*.

Next, Stahl proceeds to point out that:

Having debated Christian ministers (in Barbados) I can attest to encounters with the faith meme.

Here, an appeal is made to his alleged authority on the subject. He also provides personal testimonial support. These are common propagandist interjections. He goes on to describe:

I recall one particularly memorable debate when my opponent actually asked the audience: 'How can we be certain that he isn't possessed by Lucifer and doing Lucifer's bidding? I am supposed to be here to debate a human lecturer – but of course I can have no chance against an agent of Satan.' Another referred to me as 'arrogant' because I was prepared to argue vigorously against his delusions. (I believe I had referred to calculations disclosing the number of demons that would have to be created per second to tempt each human in an ever burgeoning human population.) He warned the audience that he could not 'be responsible for their immortal souls' if they listened to me.

Here again we see multiple cases of fallacious and propagandist devices. He continues to construct his straw man, uses *ad hominem* attacks, and poisons the well by calling his opponent's views 'delusions'. Having manipulated his readers, Stahl then states the assertion:

In each instance, of course, what we behold is the operation of a mind virus that has efficiently parasitized a brain.

This claim is made without support whatsoever. How can we conclude that what we behold is, 'of course,' the result of a mind virus 'parasitizing' a brain? This is an instance of the *irrelevant conclusion (ignoratio elenchi)* fallacy.

Continuing with the article:

Now, while it can't be scientifically proven that god doesn't exist, the burden of proof is on the believer to support his insistence on adding to physical reality.

This is Stahl's first appearance of reasonableness – he concedes that no scientific proof that God does not exist can be advanced. But it may well be that this is a case of false reasonableness, aiming to disarm his audience. At this point he also advances what appears to be a reasonable (and common) claim, that the burden of proof lies with the believer. This claim is not without controversy.<sup>7</sup> But what is significant is that the burden of proof here is not on a truth claim on the part of the believer, like the existence of God, but on 'his insistence on addition to physical reality.' First, this is again a straw man argument – 'adding to physical reality' is not the primary goal of believers. Second, note the subtle manipulation afforded by the term 'physical reality.' This manipulation exploits the common philosophical presumption of naturalism – that physical reality is the only reality.<sup>8</sup> Granted, if we assume that naturalism is true, then belief in God, a supernatural being, involves 'adding' to (physical) reality. But naturalism is a philosophical position, not something that is necessary. Hence, this argument can be said to commit the *fallacy of presumption*.

Stahl proceeds by supporting his presumption of naturalism:

Since we already have relatively satisfying naturalistic hypotheses – on everything from the origin of the cosmos to the origin of life to whatever order we see – all supernatural hypotheses become redundant. It is incumbent upon the religious believer to demonstrate why

his particular version merits being an exception.

This support for naturalism is far from satisfactory – but a counterpoint is beyond the scope of this essay. What is significant here is that support for the presumption of naturalism is necessary for his rhetoric to make sense. For it is only if naturalism is true that 'all supernatural hypotheses become redundant.'

We now come to Stahl's concluding paragraph:

In light of its mind-virus origins, religion cannot be regarded as a wholly beneficent phenomenon based on some non-linear 'reason' or insight. If all religion is ultimately based upon a god meme, then it is totally subject to rational scrutiny and criticism. The sooner that we recognize this, the sooner we can liberate humanity from its superstitious baggage.

Stahl ends with the tactic he began with, that of poisoning the well. It does not at all follow from his discussion that faith is the same as 'superstitious baggage' from which humans need to be 'liberated'. This statement is propagandist to the core, exploiting the fallacy of irrelevant conclusion (*ignoratio elenchi*).

Stahl's article began with what appeared to be a goal to describe memes and their relation to faith. But, in the end, what have we learned from the article about memetic models of faith and its spreading? Not much, I'm afraid. It is evident that Stahl's article is not meant to be expository at all – it is propagandist in nature, employing a myriad of tactics in achieving a specific agenda of public persuasion. I should stress that I take issue not with the idea of a meme *per se*, but with Stahl's use of the idea as a pseudo-technical prop to support an anti-faith program.

Phil Stahl is an avid writer for the *Freethinkers of Colorado Springs*. Their literature defines a freethinker as one 'who uses freethought to evaluate the likelihood that a claim is true', where freethought is defined as 'the use of logic and reason to evaluate the credibility of a claim or statement.'<sup>9</sup> This notion of freethought here is evidently indistinguishable from 'critical thinking.'<sup>10</sup> It is all the more egregious that a professed proponent of critical thinking would commit fallacies of reasoning to the extent that I

have demonstrated here.<sup>11</sup>

## References

- 1 Most recent edition as of this writing: R. Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, Second Edition, Oxford University Press, 1990.
- 2 See M. J. Willett, 'Memes: Memes are ideas that spread'. <http://mwillett.org/memes.htm>.
- 3 See, for example, the essay by Aaron Davidson, "Science as a Belief System," available at <http://spaz.ca/aaron/school/science.html>.
- 4 See, e.g., L. Sweet, "The Jesus Meme," *Youthworker*, March/April 2000, [http://www.youthspecialties.com/articles/topics/theology/Jesus\\_meme.php](http://www.youthspecialties.com/articles/topics/theology/Jesus_meme.php).
- 5 P. Stahl, "Mind Viruses and Memes," *Freethinkers of Colorado Springs*, freely available at <http://www.freethinkerscs.com/articles/memes.html>.
- 6 See <http://www.nizkor.org/features/fallacies/poisoning-the-well.html>. Unfortunately, the use of the term 'poisoning' in the name of this fallacy runs the risk of itself committing the fallacy!
- 7 See, e.g., R. McInerny, "Why the Burden of Proof is on the Atheist," *Truth Journal*, available at <http://www.leaderu.com/truth/1truth11.html>.
- 8 See P. E. Johnson, *Reason in the Balance: The Case Against Naturalism in Science, Law & Education*, InterVarsity Press, 1998.
- 9 See <http://www.freethinkerscs.com/basics.html>.
- 10 This is not the standard definition of the term. A more standard definition is, 'thought that rejects authority and dogma, especially in religion; freethinking' (from *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, Fourth Edition, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000).
- 11 Perhaps this should not be so surprising – professing upfront to support critical thinking can itself be nothing but a case of the red-herring fallacy.