

Philosophy 3334: Philosophy of Biology
Fall 2023
Homework 3

Your essays should be uploaded into Blackboard by 11:59pm on Monday, Oct 16th.

1) Write a short essay on the subject of memes. At minimum, you should explain what Dawkins means by a “meme”, explain why Dawkins thinks that memes might be subject to natural selection just like genes are, and discuss the extent to which you think that Dawkins is right about memes and how important you think they are for understanding cultural evolution.

Here are some questions you may want to consider:

- 1) Can memes be subject to natural selection in the same way that genes are?
- 2) Does the science of “memetics” just look like the theory of biological evolution?
- 3) What are some important differences between biology and culture which might undermine the analogy? Do they actually undermine it? How could Dawkins respond?

In discussing the importance of memes for culture, it is probably helpful to keep a few different kinds of cases in mind for discussion. For example, various kinds of entertainment (songs, movies, websites), ideas such as religious ideas as well as scientific ones, and behaviors such as etiquette and manners are part of our culture and change over time. Does thinking about memes prove useful in these cases? Or misleading?

I would expect a good essay to be something like 400-600 words here.

2) Compose a long message to an actual family member or a friend who is not in the class and who has not read *The Selfish Gene* describing the book and how you feel about it. You might want to imagine the conversation started, “So what are you doing in your Philosophy of Biology class?” and you said, “We are reading a book called *The Selfish Gene*” and they said “Oh—what is that about?” In writing this note, you should describe what *The Selfish Gene* is about and describe some of its main conclusions. Then you should evaluate whether you think it is a good book and what ways it is good or bad. What is the most interesting thing you learned? What is the most important? Has the book achieved its goal? Do you think it is flawed in any important ways? Would you recommend that they read the book? Why or why not?

I am not sure how long something like this could take. I expect it could be as short as 400 words (if it is much shorter, I am sure you could and should say more) but it could be much longer if you want.

-- NOTE: I would encourage you to actually send your email, but this is not actually required for the assignment.