The Poverty of Memes

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This essay critiques David Deutsch's explanation of the "Evolution of Culture and Creativity" contained in *The Beginning of Infinity* (*BoI; 2011*).

My critique is based in the social science methodological argument advanced by Karl Popper in *The Poverty of Historicism* in 1957.

I dissect the explanation to argue that:

1. it is nothing but a modern exposition of the historicist doctrine — ***sheer mythology***, as Popper put it; and

2. failure to recognize it as such — despite its Popperian overcoat — may result in tacit solidarity with the very situations Deutsch genuinely seems to want to avoid.

By extension, the essay is critical of any derivations and/or extensions and/or applications of Deutsch's explanation, including but not limited

to those proposed by [Taking Children Seriously](#) and *The Sovereign Child* (2025).

Popper's Universal Discovery

While *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (*OSAIE*) is one of Popper's most well-known works and solidified his place as a champion of democratic forms of social organization, *The Poverty of Historicism (PoH)* is arguably his most severely critical argument against the logic of tyranny.

It is primarily a treatise on social science methodology. Popper skillfully crafted steelman expositions of both 'pro-naturalistic' and 'anti-naturalistic' grand historical theorizing. The brilliance of Popper's treatment was realized in his discovery that these two traditionally antithetical perspectives actually share a common doctrine, which he called historicism.

Popper's targets, especially Marxism, facism, and relativism, are now well-known, as he continued his attack in *OSAIE*. But the *universality* of his attack has largely been forgotten. His critique spoke with equal force to the *left* and the *right*: the materialists and technocrats, relativists and radicals, the hardliners and the soft-sellers.

His attack was against historicism as an approach to understanding human behavior and social life, and against the prescriptions that historicists derive from their understandings.

The amnesia — whether neglectful or purposeful — appears to have continued to this day. While the critique remains as important as when Popper lodged it, many of Popper's most vocal proponents seem wholly unaware of its content and severity, or that it applies in equal force to their own programs.

Historicism in Popper's Day

Popper posited the following as the key features of historicism:

[s]ocial science is nothing but *history: this is the thesis. Not, however, history in the traditional sense of a mere chronicle of historical facts. The kind of history with which historicists wish to identify sociology looks not only* backwards to the past but also forwards to the future. *It is the study of the* operative forces and, above all, of the laws of social development. *Accordingly, it could be described as historical theory, or as theoretical history, since the only universally valid social laws have been identified as historical laws. They must be* laws of process, of change, of development — *not the pseudo-laws of apparent constancies or uniformities. According to historicists, sociologists must try to get a general idea of the* broad trends in accordance with which social structures change. *But besides this, they should try to*

understand the causes of this process, *the working of the forces responsible for change. They should try to formulate hypotheses about general trends underlying social development,* in order that men may adjust themselves to impending changes by deducing prophecies from these laws *(PoH, Section 16).*

To these features he added a set of explanatory strategies that frequently accompany historicist theorizing:
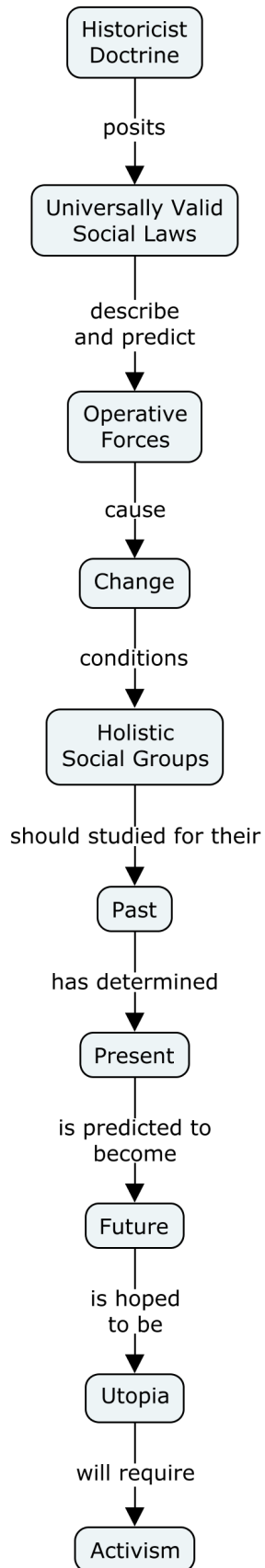
Holism — [the position that] the social group is more *than the* mere *sum total of its members, and it is also more than the mere sum total of the merely personal relationships existing at any moment between any of its members (PoH, Section 7),*

*Utopianism — the exposition and/or pursuit of an ideal-, full-, complete-, perfect-, end-*state or situation *(standard definition); Utopia: coined in 1516 from Ancient Greek by the Englishman Sir Thomas More for his Latin text Utopia. It literally translates as "no place", coming from the Greek: οὐ ("not") and τόπος ("place"), and meant any non-existent society, when 'described in considerable detail' (Wikipedia).*

Activism — the tendency towards activity and against complacency of any kind; specifically to interfere, especially with human affairs, refusing to accept the existing state of things as inevitable (PoH,

*Section 1). Activism can be justified only so long as it acquiesces in impending changes and helps them along (*PoH, *Section 17).*

I can formulate the historicist doctrine and show it as a diagram to more clearly see its structure. And so that any objections to the present critique can be more readily raised.

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Popper's formulation of the historicist doctrine

The historicist doctrine posits that universally valid (social) laws describe and predict operative forces that cause change. Change conditions holistic social groups. Such groups should be studied for their past, which has determined their present, in order to predict their future. The future is hoped to be Utopian, but activism will be required to realize this future.

Popper contrasted historicism with his own view of social science, both methodologically and in its aims. His methodological approach emphasized situational logic and individualism — i.e., the position that:

all collective phenomena [are] due to the actions, interactions, aims, hopes, and thoughts of individual men, and ... due to traditions created and preserved by individual men (PoH, *Section 32*).

Notably, he did *not* place psychology at the core of his methodology:

psychology cannot be the basis of social science (PoH, *Section 32*),

we can be individualists without accepting psychologism (PoH, *Section 32*).

Regarding purpose, he viewed social science as an enabler of piecemeal social engineering:

The social sciences have developed very largely through the criticism of proposals for social improvements or, more precisely, through attempts to find out whether or not some particular economic or political action is likely to produce an expected, or desired, result. This approach...is what I have in mind when I refer to the technological approach to social science, or to 'piecemeal social technology' (PoH, Section 20).

Historicism for Infinity

The collective works of David Deutsch have sought to promote and extend parts of Popper's philosophical program, in particular Popper's epistemology. In both publications (books) and social discussions (social media, podcasts, debates), Deutsch has provided elegant and forceful defense of the requirements of creativity and criticism in the growth all knowledge, including scientific, moral, aesthetic, and political. His two books, *The Fabric of Reality* (*FoR; 1997*) and *The Beginning of Infinity* (*BoI; 2011*), have not only exposed a new generation of readers to Popper's core ideas, but presented them with an appreciation for fallibility and the critical attitude and with strokes of humility.

Which makes his explanation of the "Evolution of Culture and Creativity" all the more ironic.

The remainder of this essay dissects and examines Deutsch's explanation to argue that 1) it is *nothing but* a modern exposition of the historicist doctrine and 2) failure to recognize it as such — *despite its Popperian overcoat* — may result in tacit solidarity with the very situations Deutsch genuinely seems to want to avoid.

Readers are strongly encouraged to review Deutsch's works for themselves, especially *BoI* Chapters 15–18.[1] I suspect that most readers with interest in this essay already have.

Deutsch's Explanation

I can formulate Deutsch's explanation of the evolution of culture and creativity (hereafter: "Deutsch's Explanation"), and show it as a diagram to more clearly see its structure. And so that any objections to the present critique can be more readily raised.

Deutsch's
Explanation

posits

Genetic
Evolution

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Memes
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Human
Beings

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with

Creativity

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Knowledge

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produced

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Change

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or changing
too slowly
to be noticed,
then

conditions

if rapid,
then

All Societies

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Static

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observed in

Choice

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Present,
transitional era

Dynamic

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Future

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to be for

Infinity

Deutsch's explanation of the evolution of culture and creativity

Deutsch's explanation posits that genetic evolution produced human beings, memes and creativity, which was also partially produced by memes. Memes contain knowledge and are replicated by, and casually affect, human beings. Human beings are endowed with creativity, which enables choice. Memes and creativity cause change, which conditions all societies. Change, if unchanging or changing too slowly to be noticed, is static; if rapid, is dynamic. All societies must have been, in the past, static. Static societies were historically followed by dynamic societies, and both can be observed in the present. Static societies might, if not eliminated, exist in the future. Dynamic societies encourage choice. Choice determines the future, which is hoped to be infinite; but infinity will require choice.

Just as was necessary for Popper's argument, it is imperative for this critique that a Deutsch's case be outlined with care and accuracy. The following excerpts from *BoI* provide a fuller rendition of Deutsch's explanation, reorganized in parallel with the basic formulation and diagram just given.

All quotations from BoI begin with *, unless otherwise cited. Text **not** in italics is emphasized, per Medium's quotation function. Again, the reader is strongly encouraged to review the original text in *BoI* to find faults in the logic presented here or inappropriate extraction and/or reorganization.

1. Genetic evolution produced human beings, memes and creativity, which was also partially produced by memes.

* *The whole of biological evolution* was but a preface to the main story of evolution, *the evolution of memes.*

* memes necessarily become embodied in two different physical forms alternately: as memories in a brain, and as behaviour

* *significant* co-evolution between genes and memes

* *they evolve…to this extent the same logic holds as for genes:* memes are 'selfish'

* *by the time creativity was evolving, there would already have been significant co-evolution between genes and memes: genes evolving hardware to support more and better memes, and* memes evolving to take over *ever more of what had previously been genetic functions such as choice of mate, and methods of eating, fighting and so on. Therefore, my speculation is that the creativity program is not entirely inborn. It is a* combination of genes and memes

Sidenote: The phrasing *evolving to take over* requires attention. Popper used similar phrasing in regards to objective knowledge, that is, knowledge created by people and used by other people. Popper proposed that "subjective knowledge is objective knowledge *taken*

over by some subject" (Popper, 1994; p. 13). Directionality and the origins of objective knowledge matters greatly in the relationship.

2. Memes contain knowledge and are replicated by, and causally affect, human beings.

* memes — ideas that are replicators.

* *Like genes, all* memes contain knowledge (often inexplicit) of how to cause their own replication.

* *Each meme has to be* expressed as behaviour every time it is replicated. *For it is that behaviour, and* only that behaviour *(given the environment created by all the other memes), that effects the replication.*

* *A culture is a set of* **ideas that cause their holders to behave alike in some ways**. *By 'ideas' I mean any information that can be stored in people's brains and can affect their behaviour.*

* …complex, reproducible effects on the ideas and behaviour of human beings

3. Human beings are endowed with creativity.

* *creating explanations is second nature (or, rather,* first nature*) to us*

* creating knowledge is itself a natural human need and desire

* general human objective *of explaining the world*

* humans *do not especially copy any behaviour. They* use conjecture, criticism and experiment *to create good explanations of the meaning of things*

4. Memes and creativity cause change, which conditions all societies.

Memes as variable

* …sometimes they pass on the modified versions. Inevitably, there are unintentional modifications *as well, partly because of* straightforward error*, and partly because inexplicit ideas are* hard to convey accurately…

* Memes are subject to all sorts of random and intentional variation *in addition to all that selection…*

Creativity as causal

* Human choice — itself a product of creativity — determines…

* People modify cultural ideas *in their minds…*

people think and try to improve upon *their ideas*

people are choosing, they will choose, in part, according to their individual circumstances and ideas

Conditioning societies

just as gene evolution can create long-lasting organisms and confer some benefits on them, so it is not surprising that meme evolution can sometimes create static societies, cooperate to keep them static, and help them to function by embodying truths.

[memes] would generally evolve towards greater fidelity of replication*, as usual with evolution, and* hence to greater staticity *of the society.*

5. Change, if unchanging or changing too slowly to be noticed, is static; if rapid, is dynamic.

For a society to be static, all its memes must be unchanging or changing too slowly to be noticed.

Static societies...are not perfectly unchanging. They are static on the timescale that humans can notice; but memes cannot prevent changes that are slower than that. So meme evolution still occurs in static

societies, but too slowly for most members of the society to notice, most of the time.

* the only known instance of a long-lived dynamic (rapidly changing) *society. It is* unique *in history for its ability to mediate long-term,* rapid*, peaceful change and improvement*

6. All societies must have been, in the past, static. Static societies were historically followed by dynamic societies, and both can be observed in the present.

* …every society on Earth before the current Western civilization has either been static or has been destroyed within a few generations.

* …primitive societies (including tribes of hunter-gatherers) must all have been static societies*, because if ever one ceased to be static it would soon cease to be primitive, or else destroy itself by losing its distinctive knowledge*

* Before *we can understand our unusual, dynamic sort of society, we must understand the usual, static sort.*

7. Dynamic societies encourage choice. Choice determines the future, which is hoped to be infinite. Infinity will require choice.

* This rational self-image is itself a recent development of our (dynamic) society, many of whose memes explicitly promote, and implicitly give effect to, values such as reason, freedom of thought, and the inherent value of individual human beings.

* dynamic society — more or less any dynamic society — because there [is] the tradition of criticism

* All we can choose is whether it is an infinity of ignorance or of knowledge, wrong or right, death or life.

Three Problems

P*roblem 1: The Causality of Memes*

It is important to note that Deutsch is not alone in proposing causal memes. Indeed, a great deal of social and psychological science conjectures the existence of any number of *reified things that cause people to behave, alike or differently.*

A robust critique against the use of causal memes or similar things / variables / factors that *cause* human behavior is out of scope for this essay. [I have written about it elsewhere](#) and will continue to do so. Herbert Blumer articulated the most eloquent methodological

argument against the approach in 1969, and yet it remains the prevalent perspective today:

This dominant view…ascribes human action to an initiating factor or a combination of such factors. Action is traced back to such matters as motives, attitudes, need-dispositions, unconscious complexes, stimuli configurations, status demands, role requirements, and situational demands. **To link the action to one or more of such initiating agents is regarded as fulfilling the scientific task.** *Yet, such an approach ignores and makes no place for the process of self-interaction through which the individual handles his world and constructs his action (Blumer, 1969; p. 15).*

Bluntly: by granting causality for human behavior to anything other than one's *determination* of their action is to, by definition, deny full agency to people. Of course, we rightly allow for just this sort of thing in courts of law and in medical explanations of behavior. But to invoke the strategy to account for *all* behavior is to deny complete human choice in and responsibility for personal behavior.

Putting this *fundamental* criticism aside, though, I can note two points about Deutsch's dependency on the causality of memes in his explanation. First, the entire explanation is *wholly* dependent on them. They are, to borrow Deutsch's own terminology, hard to vary (Deutsch, 2011). They play a functional role and cannot be simply swapped out for different things / factors / variables that can play the same

functional role or roles. They account for all of the visible and invisible details of the slice of reality he purports to be explaining.

Secondly, Deutsch not only recognizes but promotes the autonomy of human beings. He suggests that such autonomy is present at birth and remains available to us throughout life:

* in the main we consider our behaviour to be determined by our own decisions.

* We do not begin with 'white paper' at birth, but with inborn expectations and intentions and an innate ability to improve upon them using thought and experience.

The 'white paper' phrasing is especially appropriate, as Deutsch has in many places conveyed the dangers of what Popper called the *bucket theory of knowledge*, which [I have also discussed elsewhere in the context of memes](#).

P*roblem 2: Rate of change as causal*

Explaining any social change *requires* observations about (and ideally, measurements of) the degree and rate of the change. Popper summarizes the historicist approach to understanding the rate of change:

[Historicists] have discovered the problem of change — one of the oldest problems of speculative metaphysics. Contrasting their 'dynamic' *thinking with the* 'static' *thinking of all previous generations, they believe that their own advance has been made possible by the fact that we are now* 'living in a revolution' *which has so much accelerated the speed of our development that* social change can be now directly experienced within a single lifetime *(Popper, 1956; Section 33)*

For Deutsch, the experience of the rate of change is causal. The evolutionary rate of the memes, which is limited only by the potential speed of their human-based replication, combined with creativity, *cause the rate to change.* Which in turn accelerates both the evolutionary rate of the memes and the rate of creativity. It is not just that change sets the conditions of societies; societies set the conditions for the rate of change.

Deutsch creates an amplifying loop of causality, which is to be expected in any evolutionary explanation. But accounting for the changes in the rate of any feedback loop requires regulators that can adequately account for variance.

P*roblem 3: Emergence*

A general critique can be put against Deutsch's use of emergence. In *FoR*, Deutsch offered an elegant definition of emergence:

* emergence*: high-level simplicity 'emerges' from low-level complexity. High-level phenomena about which there are comprehensible facts that are not simply deducible from lower-level theories are called* emergent phenomena.

A robust argument against his use of emergent phenomena in *BoI* is out of scope for this essay. For now, two points about his use of emergence are important.

First, it is entirely appropriate. Deutsch defers deeper explanation about the emergence of several observed phenomena, including the origins of proto-humans, memes, and status within societies. He had to: books have to be completed and all analyses must take certain phenomena as given. He cannot be faulted for using emergence.

But he can be criticized for *how* he uses it. In explaining the emergence of dynamic societies, Deutsch 1) uses strategies common in historicist theorizing and 2) introduces a paradox.

Emergence strategy

Popper called attention to how historicists define emergent periods, as evident in the degree of change:

Historicism claims that nothing is of greater moment *than the* emergence *of a really new period...one must expect that events of an intrinsically new character will* emerge...*social newness, like biological newness, is an* intrinsic sort of newness, *historicism insists. It is* real newness, *irreducible to the novelty of arrangements...Where nothing can repeat itself precisely,* real novelty must always be emerging. *This is held to be significant for the consideration of the development of new stages or periods of history, each of which* differs intrinsically *from any other (PoH, Section 3).*

Popper's comment above about 'living in a revolution' sufficiently states the historicist perspective on the present: "We are now in the midst of the transition!"

Deutsch views the present day as a continuation of the period of emergence that started with the Enlightenment. He offers both descriptions of how emergence has played out in the past and present, and a *prediction* about how it will play once a transition is complete:

Past and Present

* what we should expect to happen when a static society is gradually switching from anti-rational to rational memes. *Such a transition is* necessarily gradual...

Our society in the West became dynamic *not through the sudden failure of a static society, but through* generations of static-society-type evolution

* once the stasis has broken down

* ceased to be static

* *formation within the dynamic society of anti-rational subcultures*

Future

* [Static] cultures [once transitioned to dynamic cultures] cannot become static again.

Paradox

The emergence of dynamic societies from static societies — which included *every society on Earth before the current Western civilization* — presents a paradox. Given only the operative forces and the initial conditions (which were caused by the operative forces), and a rate of change that accelerates change once change initiates, the emergence paradox can be simply stated by asking:

If all societies were static, then how did the dynamism initiate?

To solve this paradox, Deutsch needs a conjuring trick.

Deutsch's Conjuring Trick

Deutsch's conjuring trick is committed to solving a dilemma inherent in the operative forces. In order to account for the historic emergence of dynamic societies — that is, *after* the emergence of static societies — the explanation must provide some sort of *mechanism or process* that is either *inherent* in the operative forces and/or *produced by their interaction.* And to account for *rates of change* that lead to a *unidirectional* qualitative change in state, the mechanisms or process must include some sort of *regulatory mechanism or process*.

The only operative forces available in Deutsch's explanations are memes and creativity. While memes partially produced creativity, they are also capable of *causing human behavior*. Two forces that are causal for some state can either cooperate ('join forces') or oppose to bring about the state. Deutsch can choose one or the other and/or describe their interaction.

Deutsch chose the memes to do the heavy lifting in his conjuring trick.

He uses them in two ways.

First, he uses them account for the emergence of dynamic societies. Deutsch again deploys the emergence explanatory strategy to account for a new kind of meme appearing on the scene:

emergence of a radically different class of memes

The meme-emergence strategy alone could explain the emergence of dynamic societies, though doing so would only beg the question of their origin: where did the new memes come from?

While they could also solve the regulator problem, the new memes would need *something more* than just their arrival on the scene to become a regulator. All memes rely on random and intentional variation to cause change, so they can only accumulate and propagate so quickly through the human replicators. Thus, the new memes need something more, something *radically different* from the old memes to explain their emergence.

To account for both the emergence of this new class of memes and to account for their regulatory capacity to affect the feedback loop, Deutsch introduces a feature *inherent* in all memes: utility, comprising three components.

1. All memes comprise *varying* volumes of knowledge:

successive versions of the meme accumulated knowledge

That some memes can replicate themselves with great fidelity for many generations is a token of how much knowledge they contain.

2. But volume variations alone may not ensure a regulatory effect — *precision* is also necessary, as it reinforces replicability:

If ever a variant happened to be a little better at inducing behaviour with those self-replicating properties, it soon became prevalent.

3. But volume and precision together may still be insufficient to initiate a state transition. Another — indeed the most important — property provides the most deterministic accelerant: *truth*.

To be transferred to a single person, a meme need seem useful only to that person. To be transferred to a group of similar people under unchanging circumstances, it need be only a parochial truth. But what sort of idea is best suited to getting itself adopted many times in succession by many people who have diverse, unpredictable objectives? A true idea is a good candidate. *But not just any truth will do.* It must seem useful to all those people, for it is they who will be choosing whether to enact it or not. *'Useful' in this context does not necessarily mean functionally useful: it refers to any property that can* make people want to adopt an idea and enact it, *such as being interesting, funny, elegant, easily remembered, morally right and so on. And the best way to seem useful to diverse people under diverse, unpredictable circumstances is to be useful. Such an idea is, or*

embodies, a truth in the broadest sense: factually true if it is an assertion of fact, beautiful it is an artistic value or behaviour, objectively right if it is a moral value, funny if it is a joke, and so on. The ideas with the best chance of surviving through many generations of change are truths with reach — deep truths...*Under changed circumstances, a specious falsehood or parochial truth can survive only by luck. But a true, deep idea has an objective reason to be considered useful by people with diverse purposes over long periods.*

With these three regulators — volume, precision and truth — Deutsch makes the case for inherent properties of memes that enable the emergence of a new class of memes that have the regulatory capacity to initiate and affect change and its rates. As more, sharper, truer knowledge accumulates, old memes become new memes, and the new memes initiate a state change and modulate its rate of change.

It is a very strong case indeed. So strong, in fact, that one of the three regulators — precision — may not actually even needed. Truth alone could aid replication. Arguably, volume is also not necessary. It can be the case that truer and deeper ideas may contain very little knowledge — e.g., all life is problem solving — though Deutsch makes a convincing case that even such apparently low volume memes contain significant inexplicit knowledge. In any event, his case is weighty.

And yet... The case seems to not be strong enough. It is not enough that utility can account for the emergence of the new memes or the changes in rate. For memes, like genes, always *compete* for the prospect of replication. The emergence strategy invites *any* meme to emerge, and thus introduces another selection pressure. Even the deepest, truest memes:

* can deteriorate or be superseded.

Deutsch recognizes that the new class of memes necessarily means competition with the old class of memes. But the new memes should, given their universal appeal and utility, outcompete the old memes in relatively short order.

Historically, however, the competition has not produced the expected situation — that is, the emergence of an:

(as yet hypothetical) fully dynamic society.

Deutsch reviews three eras in which the new memes, in concert with creativity, *should have* won the competition:

Failure to accelerate

* during the period when creativity was evolving, the ability to replicate memes was evolving too.

creativity that humans use to improve ideas is what pre-eminently sets us apart from other species. Yet for most of the time that humans have existed it was not noticeably in use.

Failures to sustain

Mini-enlightenment A short-lived tradition of criticism. (Chapter 1)

...mini-enlightenment: a tradition of criticism resulting in an efflorescence of many of the patterns of human progress with which we are familiar, such as art, literature, philosophy, science, technology and the institutions of an open society.

...best-known mini-enlightenment was the intellectual and political tradition of criticism in ancient Greece which culminated in the so-called 'Golden Age' of the city-state of Athens in the fifth century BCE... mini-enlightenment was never quite extinguished. It continued to smoulder in Florence and several other Italian city-states...(Chapter 9)

Current era

Even in the West, the Enlightenment today is nowhere near complete.

To account for these eras, Deutsch needs something more in his explanation. Since both memes and creativity are functional in the

explanation, and since creativity is inherent in human beings, varying the memes is the *only option that works*.

So Deutsch introduces his second use of memes in his conjuring trick: disabling creativity.

Two Memes

I can formulate Deutsch's conjuring trick and show it as a diagram to more clearly see its structure and to bring the necessity of disabling creativity into high relief.
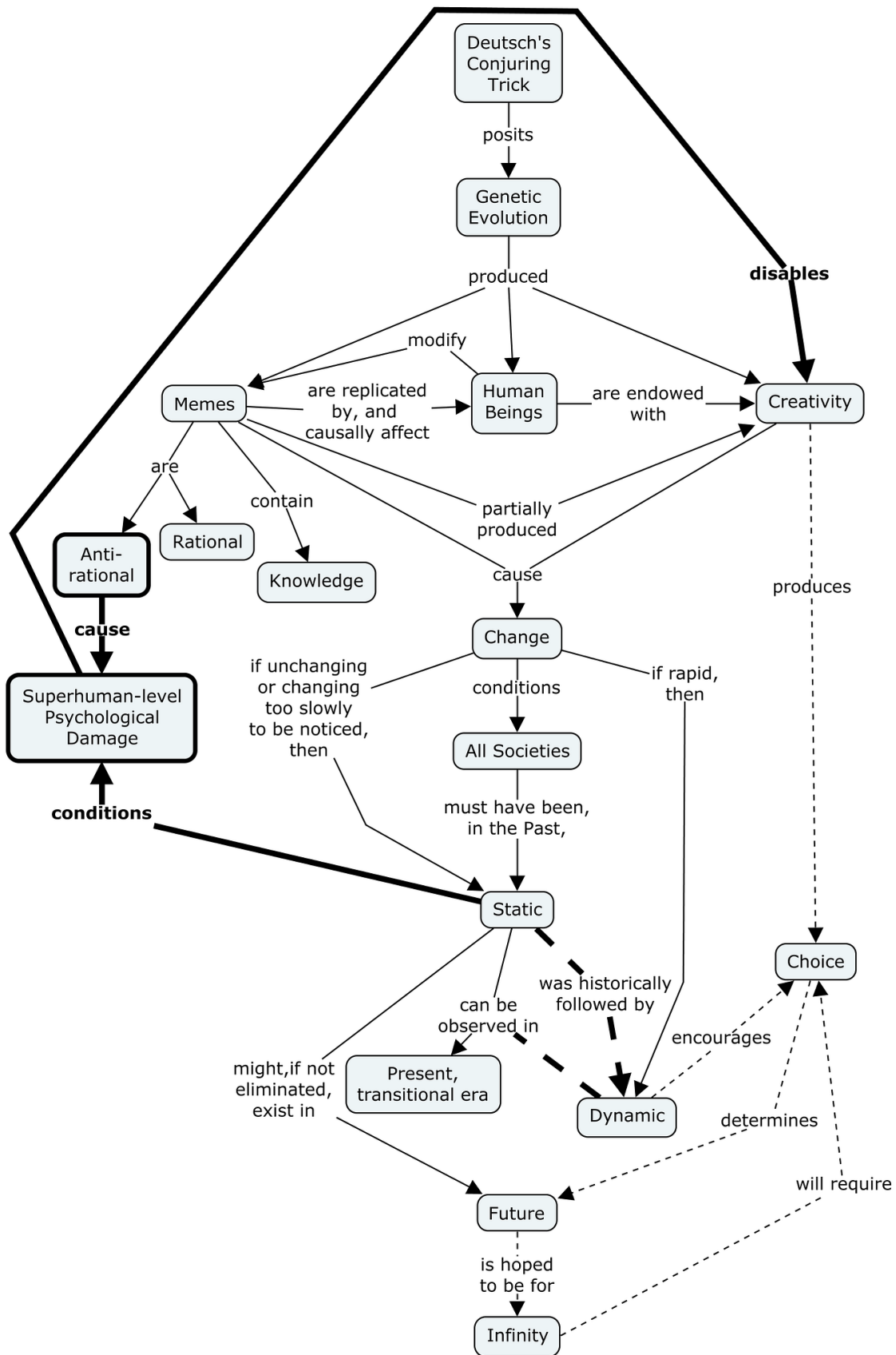
Deutsch's conjuring trick

The core structure of the explanation remains intact, except that with the historical record now in consideration, the proposition *static was historically followed by dynamic* is now only partially true (represented by the dotted lines) — we have only seen partially dynamic societies emerge.

Memes are now of two types: rational (the emergent, radically different class of memes) and anti-rational. They are categorized by the:

all-important distinction between the rational and anti-rational modes of replication.

Specifically, anti-rational memes cause superhuman-level psychological damage, which is also conditioned by static culture/societies. Superhuman-level psychological damage disables creativity.

If memes do the heavy-lifting of the conjuring trick, anti-rational memes are the metahumans in this *Justice League*. Their capabilities are plainly stated…:

* primary method is always — and can only be — to disable the source of new ideas, namely human creativity

* *...remain unchanged by* effectively eliminating all the individuals' choices*: people choose neither which ideas to acquire nor which to enact*

...as is their effectiveness:

* *The* spirit of creativity *with which we are all born is* systematically extinguished *in them* before it can ever create anything new.

* no escape *from [the psychological] effect*

* *From the point of view of* every individual in such a society, its creativity-suppressing mechanisms are catastrophically harmful.

Their regulatory effects on the feedback loop are the same as those for all memes, and quite encompassing:

* *static societies, however primitive,* 'unnaturally' *suppress it*

* *...static societies always have* traditions of bringing up children in ways that disable their creativity and critical faculties. *That* ensures that most of the new ideas that would have been capable of changing the society are never thought of in the first place.

* *Static societies have* customs and laws — taboos — that prevent their memes from changing.

An anti-rational meme's natural home is a static society — not any static society, but preferably the one in which it evolved...

To account for how the anti-rational memes achieve such significant effects, Deutsch endows the anti-rational memes with three superhuman features: he elevates their causality to full autonomy, and gives them superior knowledge, skill, and overwhelming power.

Autonomy

...part of our behaviour is caused by autonomous entities whose content we do not know

This variant may well benefit its holders, or their culture, or the species as a whole. But if it harms them, or destroys them, it will spread anyway.

Sidenote: Deutsch offers an explanation of how this particular situation can happen, *contrasting* memes to viruses:

Other viruses destroy their host cell — just as some memes destroy their holders: when someone commits suicide in a newsworthy *way, there is often a spate of 'copycat suicides'.*

Note the sleight of hand here. Deutsch injects a third party — reporters — to enable meme replication. This requires that the meme: a) be

received by the reporter, either directly through witnessing the behavior or from some other source (only on-the-scene reporters witness the behavior they report about), b) not kill the reporter, at least not before they can make their report, c) *be embodied in something other than a brain or a behavior* — i.e., in whatever media the news is instantiated, and d) be received into the brain via its non-behavior form (i.e., the news) by another person, who then enacts it. There are at least three other ways copycat suicides might happen. Another person may find a note left by suicider — but this, again, requires the meme be embodied in something other than a brain or behavior. Another person may discover the deceased, assume they committed suicide, then commit the behavior. But this requires that the meme be in some sort of dormant state until the discovery happens, and that it include knowledge that enables the discoverer to correctly make the inference. Or another person, or persons, could witness the suicide enacted in the behavior — the suicidal behavior, in the moment — then kill themselves. In all cases, it is important to remember, given all of the people who may discover notes and bodies and read newspapers, the *exceedingly low numbers* of presumed copycat suicides that follow.

Superior Knowledge and Skill

* Just as genes for the eye implicitly 'know' the laws of optics, *so the long-lived memes of a static society* implicitly possess knowledge of the human condition

the evolutionary pressure is for the psychological damage *to be* confined to a relatively narrow area of the recipients' thinking, but to be deeply entrenched

Overwhelming power

* ...*when there is no escape from [the psychological] effect:* all significant behaviour, all relationships between people, and all thoughts are subordinated to causing faithful replication of the memes. *In all areas* controlled by *the memes,* no critical faculties are exercised. *No innovation is tolerated, and* almost none *is attempted.*

Given such superhuman capabilities, anti-rational memes do not require that their replication / behavioral host be weaker. But it is rarely ineffective strategy for the bully predator to target weaklings:

* *mercilessly to evade the defences and exploit the* weaknesses of the human minds *that they* enslave

* *inflict their characteristic style of damage on their* human victims

* *individuals are* used by memes

* to replicate faithfully, *anti-rational memes* need people to avoid thinking critically about their choices

consider an isolated, primitive society *that has, for whatever reason, remained almost unchanged for many generations. Why? Quite possibly no one in the society even wants it to change, because* they can conceive of no other way of life.

recipients find themselves facing a large emotional cost if *they subsequently consider deviating from the meme's prescribed behaviours*

People are fallible; they often have preferences for false, shallow, useless or morally wrong ideas. *But which false ideas they prefer differs from one person to another, and changes with time.*

Deutsch is careful to walk a very fine line. He knows inborn creativity cannot be *utterly* extinguished in human beings, for then the door would be shut forever on dynamic societies. His *brilliant* solution — given the overwhelming power of the anti-rational memes — is to focus what miniscule amount of the inborn creativity remains on the static society itself:

So how does one gain status, specifically by exercising more creativity than anyone else, without becoming noticeable as a taboo-violator? I think there is only one way: it is to enact that society's memes more faithfully than the norm. To display exceptional conformity and obedience. To refrain exceptionally well from innovation...Status in such a society is reduced by transgressing

people's expectations of proper behaviour, and is improved by meeting them.

Deutsch walks a second tight rope, though his solution to the explanatory damage that would be rendered if he fell off this one is much less elegant than his creativity solution. A close reader will notice his use of other-wordly and superhuman language throughout *BoI*.

* 'unnaturally'

* implicitly 'know' the laws

* spirit *of creativity*

While Deutsch dips his toe in the supernatural pool, he is careful to wear the buoyant safety of quotation marks, or only dip in the shallow end where swim the things whose workings we do not understand, like creativity itself.

* we do not understand how creativity works *(Chapter 7)*.

It could be argued that Deutsch simply uses these literary strategies allegorically. He knows memes have their limits:

* *[memes] are* not *sentient beings*

While organisms are nothing but *the slaves of all their genes, memes* only ever control part *of a person's thinking…*

And yet… Deutsch is all too aware of the potential for forces beyond man to trick foolish human beings:

The horror of static societies…can now be seen as a hideous practical joke that the universe played on the human species.

As though writing *The Wizard of Oz* in reverse, Deutsch summarizes his intended explanation and reveals the true force at work:

The strivings of individuals to better themselves were, from the outset, perverted by a **superhumanly evil mechanism** *that turned their efforts to exactly the opposite end: to thwart all attempts at improvement; to keep sentient beings locked in a crude, suffering state for eternity.*

Superhumanly.

Evil.

Mechanism.

Popper was no prophet, but his prediction of Deutsch's (*extremely* easy to vary) explanatory strategy — 50ish years before Deutsch dreamt it up — would have impressed even Nostradamus:

Although this **divination** *of hidden purposes is far removed from the scientific way of thinking, it has left unmistakable traces upon even the most modern historicist theories (PoH, Section 33).*

Deutsch's Conjuring Trick: The Addendum

In the years since publication of *BoI*, Deutsch has in many places doubled down on his trick. Recently, he has added one new feature to the creativity operative force, presumably to bolster the weakened, victimized humans.

The term obedience appears multiple times throughout BoI:

* blind obedience *to authority (Chapter 5)*

* absolute obedience *to his superiors (Chapter 9)*

* *[static] societies enforce qualities such as* obedience*, piety and devotion to duty, their members' sense of their own selves is invested in the same standards. People know no others. So they feel pride and*

shame, and form all their aspirations and opinions, by the criterion of how thoroughly they subordinate themselves to the society's memes.

* the degree to which a person's life was controlled by duty, obedience to authority, *piety, faith and so on was the very measure by which people judged themselves and others.*

* To display exceptional conformity and obedience.

While the term disobedience *does not appear* in BoI, adding it as an addendum to Deutsch's Conjuring Trick shows how taking such action can restore choice and usher in the new future.
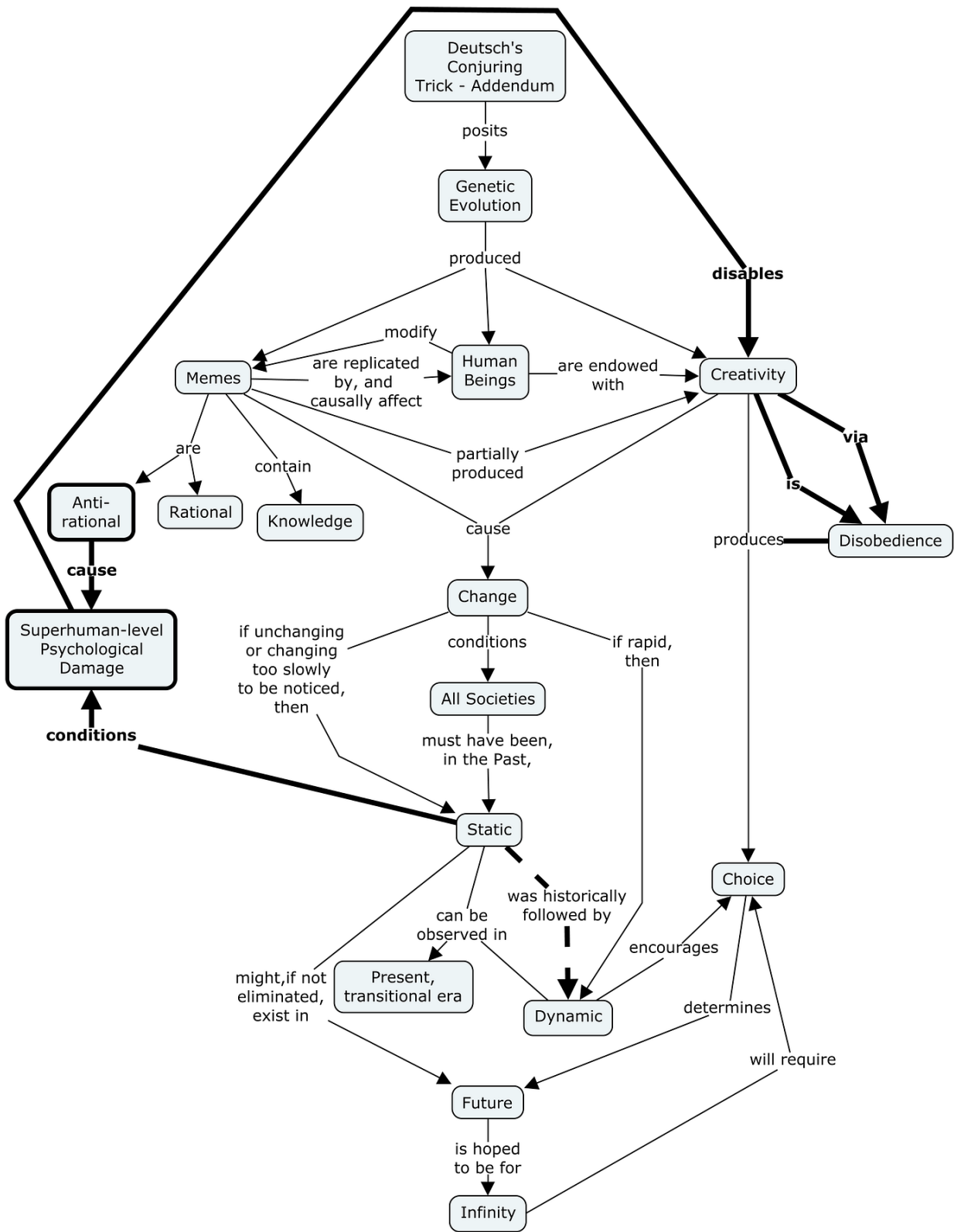
Deutsch's conjuring trick, addendum

.@DavidDeutschOxf: Creativity is disobedience. By not recognizing that, by suppressing disobedience, you're suppressing creativity—always.

Apart from mass murderers or something. But even then, it's only the actions of criminals that have to be suppressed. Their ideas are best dealt with in non-violent ways.

So we need to make a physically safe society, but not a society safe from ideas—unless they're ideas about violence, intolerance, or suppressing the growth of knowledge.

And there are many such ideas around.

4:06 AM · Nov 16, 2024 · **23.6K** Views

Creativity is disobedience suggests that Deutsch views the two terms as synonymous. But in clarifying public statements, Deutsch has stated that he views disobedience as *a necessary precondition* to creativity.

David Deutsch ✔
@DavidDeutschOxf

Yes. Knowledge via creativity via disobedience.

12:35 PM · Apr 2, 2024 · **913** Views

Whereas the remnants of creativity — and the deep truths that might be discovered through its human application — had the potential to usher in the new era, Deutsch's optimistic outlook on that path seems to be diminishing, so it is time for action.

Disobedience is the activism Deutsch's historicist explanation now promotes.

Sins of Historicism

Popper tried to sensitize the world to the sins of historicism. It is not clear why neither Deutsch nor those who promote his work ("Deutschians") do not discuss the divinity inherent in his explanation.

But they do not. And they continue to commit the sins as they expand on the central myth.

Revisionist History

Popper excoriated:

[We can] write that history which interests us. This does not mean that we may twist the facts until they fit into a framework of preconceived ideas, or that we may neglect the facts that do not fit (PoH, Section 31).

Examples of revisionist history are replete in the Deutschian mythological universe. Deutsch himself offered several, including when he cited Galileo and Newton as the heroic inventors that ushered in the Enlightenment:

* I suspect that [the Enlightenment] began with the philosophy of Galileo and perhaps became irreversible *with the discoveries of Newton.*

Deutsch fails to note that both were reared in societies that were far more Deutschian-static than Deutschian-dynamic. Galileo's treatment at the hands of the Inquisitors demonstrates that all too clearly, as does Newton's goal of describing the divine design of the universe.

Deutsch's description of Sparta — [now available in video documentary format](#) — presents a view of the Spartan existence:

* The epitome of a pessimistic civilization, it was notorious for its citizens' austere 'spartan' lifestyle, for the harshness of its educational system, and for the total militarization of its society. Every male citizen was a full-time soldier, owing absolute obedience to his superiors, who were themselves obliged to follow religious tradition. All other work was done by slaves: Sparta had reduced an entire neighbouring society, the Messenians, to the status of helots (a kind of serf or slave). It had no philosophers, historians, artists, architects, writers — or other knowledge-creating people of any kind apart from the occasional talented general. Thus almost the entire effort of the society was devoted to preserving itself in its existing state — in other words, to preventing improvement.

Yet...from [Wikipedia](#):

Besides physical and weapons training, boys studied reading, writing, music and dancing. Special punishments were imposed if boys failed to answer questions sufficiently "laconically" (i.e. briefly and wittily)

Less information is available about the education of Spartan girls, but they seem to have gone through a fairly extensive formal educational cycle, broadly similar to that of the boys but with less emphasis on

military training. Spartan girls received an education known as mousikē. *This included music, dancing, singing and poetry.* In this respect, classical Sparta was unique in ancient Greece. In no other city-state did women receive any kind of formal education… Spartan women, of the citizenry class, enjoyed a status, power, and respect that was unknown in the rest of the classical world…Unlike Athenian women who wore heavy, concealing clothes and were rarely seen outside the house, Spartan women wore dresses (peplos) slit up the side to allow freer movement and moved freely about the city, either walking or driving chariots… *Spartan women were also* literate and numerate, a rarity in the ancient world. *Furthermore, as a result of their education and the fact that they moved freely in society engaging with their fellow (male) citizens, they were* notorious for speaking their minds even in public… *Plato praised Spartan women's ability when it came to philosophical discussion. Most importantly,* Spartan women had economic power because they controlled their own properties, and those of their husbands. *It is estimated that in later Classical Sparta, when the male population was in serious decline, women were the sole owners of at least 35% of all land and property in Sparta.*

While Spartan life for boys and men does indeed seem to nicely fit the Deutschian-static expectation, life for girls and women seems to have been the most Deutschian-dynamic in all of the known Grecian world.

One could list several innovations either created or experimented with by the Spartans, to include a governing system of checks and balances, and military formations and strategies. It could be argued that the latter examples are just more cases of using creativity to display one's exceptional conformity and obedience to the militarized authoritarian leadership. They are nothing but mere continuations of the sorts of knowledge primitive people focused on in their attempts to solve parochial — i.e., not *universal* — problems:

The first people to live at the latitude of Oxford (who were actually from a species related to us, possibly the Neanderthals) could do so only because they brought knowledge with them, about such things as tools, weapons, fire and clothing.

Curiously, though, such uses serve just the opposite benefit once the Enlightenment emerged:

…Newton's laws are useful for building better cathedrals, but also for building better bridges and designing better artillery.

Spartan innovations could be added to a much longer list of innovative acts and things originated from within Deutschian-static societies that had significant effects on societies outside their own. To name but a few in recent times: Soviet nuclear weapons, Viet Cong tactics, 9/11. And some that were / potentially are more pro-humanity and even fun: Sputnik, DeepSeek, Tetris.

To these counterfactuals, the Deutschians may reply that they are mere anomalies or innovation for obedience sake, and that long-term survival is the ultimate objective measure of progress. The 250 to 600 million members of Indigenous — "primitive, tribal" — people living today, or the [37 to 72% living under authoritarian or autocratic rule](#), offer sufficient tests of this measure.

Psychologism

Little needs to be said about the Deutschian use of psychologism. The entire conjuring trick rests on the "psychological damage" rendered upon both cognition and emotions.

It is a popular explanatory strategy. We impose upon those who behave in ways we do not agree with nor approve of, any number of psychologistic explanations — crazy, mad, insane. Sociologically, we readily compare the behaviors of groups to those Deutsch describes as static: cultish, totalitarian, authoritarian, dictatorial. While the behaviors of individuals with such groups are real phenomena, most explanations of them are not typically offered with scientific insight or indifference.

Ironically, new scientific discoveries can offer the psychologistic approach even more explanatory pathways. People are now "wired different" and suffer from "mind viruses." Deutsch exercises some caution in analogizing his memes as viruses:

* some people use the metaphor of memes as viruses — which control part of the functionality of cells to propagate themselves. Some viruses do just install themselves into the host's DNA and do little else except participate in being copied from then on — but that is unlike memes, which must cause their distinctive behaviours and use knowledge to cause their own copying.

But the cat has long since been out of the bag. New discoveries in biology and other sciences often get co-opted into the psychologistic strategy:

Elon Musk ✔ ✕
@elonmusk

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Most people don't understand that their minds can be taken over by a virus, just like a computer virus takes over your computer.

The woke mind virus is like Cordyceps.

> **Colin Wright** ✔ @SwipeWright · 20h
>
> Gender ideology parasitized people's brains and turned them into seemingly rabid versions of their former selves.
>
> This is how one of my very closest friends (at the time) responded to my article debunking the "sex spectrum" in 2020, including my responses....
> Show more

12:16 AM · Jan 29, 2025 · **19.9M** Views

To be crystal clear: Deutsch is in no way responsible for how others seek to explain. But explaining human behavior through the

application of psychologism is liable only to perpetuate the strategy, even if one denigrates the science more broadly:

Whether the cause is inherent, or comes from outside our skin, the intention is to show that "**all** of those other people" are alike. Here again, Popper's anticipations were remarkably prescient:

We appeal to their common origin if we wish to explain the likeness of two [things]; that is to say, we explain similarity in the main genetically*; and if we make a metaphysical system out of this, it is* liable to become a historicist philosophy *(Popper, 1983; p. 166).*

Holism

Deutsch knows exactly what holism is:

* While I am on the subject of bad philosophical doctrines with moral overtones*, let me add holism, a sort of mirror image of reductionism. It is the idea that the* only valid explanations (or at least the only significant ones) are of parts in terms of wholes. *Holists also often share with reductionists the mistaken belief that science can only (or should only) be reductive, and therefore they oppose much of science.*

*All those doctrines are irrational for the same reason: they advocate accepting or rejecting theories on grounds other than whether they are good explanations (*BoI*, Chapter 5).*

Which makes his use of holism in his *social* scientific explaining all the more baffling. His treatment of societies and cultures can be described as nothing other than holistic. He appreciates that hybrid versions exist, for example his observation of the formation within the dynamic society of anti-rational subcultures.

But in his explanations employ holistic entities — societies and cultures are his **units of analysis**.

* The world's major cultures — including nations, languages, philosophical and artistic movements, social traditions and religions — have been created incrementally over hundreds or even thousands of years.

It is perfectly acceptable to seek to explain the behavior of acting units, so long as the components of the acting units — that is, the people who comprise the units — are not neglected in favor of explanation of the whole group.

Again, Deutsch knows this, as he explained this very requirement in Chapter 5 of *BoI*, quoting himself from *FoR*:

Consider one particular copper atom at the tip of the nose of the statue of Sir Winston Churchill that stands in Parliament Square in London. Let me try to explain why that copper atom is there. It is because Churchill served as prime minister in the House of Commons nearby; and because his ideas and leadership contributed to the Allied victory in the Second World War; and because it is customary to honour such people by putting up statues of them; and because bronze, a traditional material for such statues, contains copper, and so on.

Deutsch makes Popper's methodological case for him — situational logic and individualism. *Individuals*, acting with agency, create situations, including situations that are unfortunate and cruel. Analysis of such situations must begin and end with those individuals.

Treating societies holistically fails to acknowledge basic facts of human existence: individuals move, observe, communicate, and act. And in so doing, they confront other individuals, who are in the process of doing the same. These social interactions enable the thinking of heroic inventors. There is no doubt that when such the interactions are *forcibly or neglectfully constrained*, people suffer; if it happens early enough, individual human beings [do not become people](#).

This is the situation Deutsch rightly wants to avoid. Unfortunately, his solution of attempting to mix holism and psychologism requires alchemy to work.

Utopianism & Inexorability

Deutschians deny their Utopianism on the Popperian grounds that since we cannot know the future growth of knowledge, we cannot predict the future. This is the right answer, for the primary reason that Popper formulated in *PoH*:

the search for the law of the 'unvarying order' in evolution cannot possibly fall within the scope of scientific method, whether in biology or in sociology. My reasons are very simple. **The evolution of life on earth, or of human society, is a unique historical process.** *Such a process, we may assume,* proceeds in accordance with all kinds of causal laws, for example, the laws of mechanics, of chemistry, of heredity and segregation, of natural selection, etc. Its description, however, is not a law, but only a singular historical statement. *Universal laws make assertions concerning some unvarying order, as Huxley puts it, i.e. concerning all processes of a certain kind; and although there is no reason why the observation of one single instance should not incite us to formulate a universal law, nor why, if we are lucky, we should not even hit upon the truth, it is clear that any law, formulated in this or in any other way,* must be tested *by new instances before it can be taken seriously by science.* But **we cannot hope to test a universal hypothesis nor to find a natural law acceptable to science if we are forever confined to the observation of one unique process**. *Nor can the observation of one unique process help us to foresee its future*

development. The most careful observation of one developing caterpillar will not help us to predict its transformation into a butterfly. (Section 27).

Deutsch has indeed been incited, and there is no doubting the necessity he sees in articulating the laws of history:

* the biosphere is incapable of supporting human life.

And so he proceeds to do just that: think about what might have caused our present situation and how we can set a better course toward the future. A future that, once obtained, cannot be reversed:

* [Static] cultures [once transitioned to dynamic cultures] cannot become static again. They must either become 'Western' in their mode of operation or lose all their knowledge and thus cease to exist — a dilemma which is becoming increasingly significant in world politics.

Grand explanations of history cannot be tested, as Popper clarified. But the laws on which they are built can, and to be taken seriously by science, they must be tested by new instances.

Luckily for Deutsch, his *universal law of static-to-dynamic-society unidirectionality* has yet to reach the test condition:

* an (as yet hypothetical) fully dynamic society.

And so this particular law remains, perhaps for infinity, only falsifiable *in principle*. Which bestows upon it a science-ish sheen.

Given that, as of 2023, "[the number of countries moving towards authoritarianism is more than double the number moving towards democracy](#)," I have no intention of placing wager on Deutsch's law, should it ever become testable.

Moreover, the test condition requires human intervention to be realized. Human intervention that is at the mercy of a superhuman evil mechanism. A challenge for any social scientist to take seriously indeed.

Nevertheless, Deutschians have formulated their Utopia. Deutsch's version centers on the role of explanatory knowledge in transforming the universe into our home for infinity:

* Enlightenment is the moment at which explanatory knowledge is beginning to assume its soon-to-be-normal *role as the most important determinant of physical events.*

And while he denies the prospect of omniscience...:

Neither the human condition in particular nor our explanatory knowledge in general will ever be perfect, nor even approximately perfect. We shall always be at the beginning of infinity.

...he holds onto the prospect of an **end-state**:

*Even in the West, the Enlightenment today is nowhere near **complete**.*

He **knows** the key features of the end-state, by way of the property of negation.

Utopia, for Deutsch, is the **antithesis** of his considerably detailed static society.

And he **knows** the single path that leads to his Utopia:

*There is **only one way of thinking** that is capable of making progress, or of surviving in the long run, and that is the way of seeking good explanations through creativity and criticism.*

Other Deutschians see the vision, too. Though they also deny the inexorability of it all and are quick to note that the present is the transitionary era, they still recognize the end-game — the "*perfectly* dynamic society" that Deutsch has described by way of its opposite:

Another way of coming at this is that we do not believe we are in a perfectly dynamic society: only approximately so. We "tend in that direction" so to speak. But things can always go terribly wrong. This is why I've been animated to push back against the e/acc crowd precisely because they endorse *inevitable* progress. We don't. I think it's that which is "sheer mythology" as Popper was referring to things. Utopia - or belief it is coming - we reject.

Activism

Deutschians know their role in bringing about Utopia.

* We now have to accept, and rejoice in bringing about*, our next transformation:* to active agents of progress in the emerging rational society — and universe.

The most blatant activism to date is seen in the publication of *The Sovereign Child* (2025), authored by Aaron Stupple, M.D., with Logan Chipkin.

Irony hardly captures the authors recognition of one of the sins of historicism in a section discussing Popperian piecemeal social engineering:

To improve the education system, the utopian would describe the ideal alternative in great detail (cloaked in moralistic language to recruit supporters) and then tear down the existing system so that none of the **evil** vestiges persist *on the way toward the newly formed vision (TSC, Chapter 9).*

Their activism targets the parent/child relationship. Their recommendations are aimed squarely at bolstering the creative operating force by way of disobedience and/or the discontinuation of rules within the household. If we start now with today's youngest generation, they hope:

…we could be training up a generation of problem solvers with unprecedented productivity…The biggest impact of liberating children will be unlocking the creativity and productivity of adults (Chapter 11, titled "Past and Future"*).*

There should be no doubt about the urgency of the present era. Utopia is within our grasp, if only we act now to not just tear down but *eliminate* the very source of the existing system:

The stakes are high. We owe it to our descendants to **expurgate** static norms *as quickly as we can and pave the way toward an extraordinary future (Chapter 11, titled* "Past and Future"*).*

Their greatest sin of historicism is revisionist history. Or perhaps more appropriately, revisionist explanation. Chapter 11 rehashes Deutsch's explanation, borrowing the same grand scheme and most of the specific features:

So why did these anatomically modern, creative, problem-solving humans not bring about the Industrial Revolution earlier? **David Deutsch has a fascinating theory**: *that our ancient ancestors used their* creativity to suppress new ideas...People...make these mental *leaps all the time, mixing up applications for tools in various ways because they have a mental model that they can manipulate...How do you prevent a creative mind from trying out new things? You use* violence and threats of violence, dogma, taboo, and excommunication. *Surely, ancient peoples didn't knowingly employ these tactics to intentionally achieve stasis. Instead, it was likely a natural consequence of our species' ignorance about how to steward knowledge...The norms themselves gradually became infused with the same supernatural providence and power that were thought to drive the natural world...To be sure, preserving knowledge is important. It can indeed be lost, and there are many examples of ancient societies backsliding. Romans living after the collapse of the empire dwelled among the crumbling engineering marvels that they no longer knew how to create or maintain. Authority figures were right to be worried about losses like this...Progress took off when* **pockets opened up** *that tolerated, and even encouraged, new ideas. This must have happened a few times in our history as a species, but they ultimately*

*collapsed under external pressure and internal stasis. A remarkable exception was the European Enlightenment of the 1600s and 1700s, because the pockets that opened up then have been expanding ever since…***In David Deutsch's conception of human history***, that is when the West shifted to a tradition of problem-solving and tolerance of new ideas, and especially of criticism in general.*

All seems quite reasonable, actually.

Except that this is ***not*** David Deutsch's conception of human history, his fascinating theory. The emergence is there. The mental models are new, but functionally they are the same as ideas. Creativity is appropriately in its operative force role. The trademark humility about the future growth of knowledge is in other parts of the book. They even recognize that, sometimes, *authority figures are right* to worry about knowledge loss.

But…what happened to the memes? Specifically, the anti-rational memes that are functionally responsible for the suppressing the creative operative force. The ones that contain all the knowledge of how to use violence, threats of violence, dogma, taboo, and excommunication.

The word "meme" does not appear in *The Sovereign Child*. David Deutsch does. Karl Popper does. Sarah Fitz-Claridge does—it was her "intuitions about childhood freedom" that Deutsch aligned with his

"views on personhood" to start a "movement promoting a radically noncoercive approach to parenting" (*TSC*, Preface).

It is not clear why the authors did not include the linchpin functional component of Deutsch's explanation. We cannot, of course, get inside their heads; we can only guess. But the failure to include any mention of memes brings the subtitle of their book right back to the irony of it all:

*How a **Forgotten** Philosophy can Liberate Kids and Their Parents.*

Perhaps including mention of autonomous entities whose content we do not know, or a superhumanly evil mechanism, might have required some additional explaining. Or maybe, given their autonomy, the anti-rational memes decided to not include themselves. Or maybe the authors chose to not include the anti-rational memes because they chose to not perpetuate that part of the myth, even as they committed all the other sins of historicism. Asking questions about how, exactly, the *pockets of tolerance opened up*, i.e., emerged, might be one way to start to investigate why the memes were not included.

It is worth analyzing their primary recommendation to *expurgate static norms* in light of Deutsch's *entire* explanation and including *all* of its functional components. It seems yet another paradox would have arisen. Consider what is required to *ultimately* expurgate *all* of the static norms of a given society where

any anti-rational memes are present, which includes the West, according to Deutsch:

* anti-rational memes are still, today, a substantial part of our culture, and of the mind of every individual

It is safe to assume the authors do not advocate for expurgating the anti-rational memes from their embodiment in parental or child brains. The parents and children would need to choose to either self-expurgate or have others expurgate the anti-rational memes during their moment of behavioral embodiment. This approach is, presumably, what the strategies recommended in TSC aim to accomplish. The challenge lies in overcoming the superhuman abilities of the anti-rational memes. But assuming this is possible, the parents and children *must also be isolated* from any potential transmission of anti-rational memes as they go about all the expurgating. Difficult paradox to solve, for sure.

Sidenote: The following is logically valid: Creativity via disobedience; Disobedience is achieved through expurgating static norms. Once all static norms have been expurgated, disobedience is no longer possible. Intermediate conclusion: Creativity is no longer dependent on disobedience, since there are no more norms to expurgate. Final conclusion: Creativity's dependency on disobedience was *situation-specific* rather than an absolute requirement. In other words, creativity is just as possible under conditions of obedience.

Creativity is **not only** via disobedience, which Deutsch already knows.

The Benefit to Damage Ratio

David Deutsch is now a significant figure in the history of Popperianism. Indeed, for some, he occupies the same rarified air in which others hold Popper, appropriately or not.

The elements of Deutsch's works that promote the critical attitude and open societies are not only commendable but necessary in the **unended** quest for more open societies. In many respects, he has advanced those ideals in ways that Popper's works could not on their own.

And yet, his explanation of the "Evolution of Culture and Creativity" stands to potentially promote more damage than all of the benefit he might contribute.

When historicist explanations capture interest, they take attention away from social science built on top of Popperian methodological pillars: the autonomy of people, situational logic, and individualism.

We can directly compare Popper's metholological description with *throwaway* observations Deutsch makes as he articulates his core explanation:

Popper's Method

all collective phenomena [are] due to the actions, interactions, aims, hopes, and thoughts of individual men, and … due to traditions created and preserved by individual men (PoH, *Section 32*).

Deutsch's Findings

* *we* approve/disapprove *of the* underlying intention

* *raw* violence

* *Nations beyond the West today are also changing rapidly, sometimes through the* exigencies *of warfare with their neighbours*

So how does one gain status

whoever controlled mating *in that society*

if we end up behaving like other people, it is because we have rediscovered the same idea

*all sorts of people, *many of them* vehemently opposed to each other's objectives, *over many generations.*

people who have diverse, unpredictable objectives

one might remember seeing an already-respected *person doing the same thing.*

We have **hard to vary explanations** of many of these phenomena — *most importantly, of violence* — that are based in Popper's recommended method. They **require no magic**.

Deutsch's explanation is precisely accurate about one thing: the universe is a competition and the ideas of man are perhaps the most important competition we are intimately involved in. [There's a lot of creatures out there, too.]

If Popper was right that all life is problem solving, then for people, [deciding who will take on the dominant and subordinate](#)

[roles](#) at any given time is premier amongst the problems. Human beings interacting at all levels of engagement — from the kitchen to the schoolyard to international relations — have been trying to solve for this problem since we became human beings. As did those before us.

Deutsch knows that choosing which ideas to pursue is how people create action — he rightly calls this creativity. But choosing to make the memes *causal* disallows the prospect that we can discover how and why people were creative by simply asking them. Maybe not simply — helping people articulate their inexplicit knowledge requires significant effort on both sides of the elicitation. And even though Deutsch borders on eliminating the prospect of doing so outright…:

* because a recipient cannot see the representation of the meme in the holder's mind. A meme cannot be downloaded like a computer program.

…he does not jettison the prospect completely:

* Meme acquisition comes so naturally to us that it is hard to see what a miraculous *process it is, or what is really happening. It is especially hard to see where the knowledge is coming from.*

Sidenote: I'll grant here that Deutsch uses *miraculous* in the sense of being highly improbable and extraordinary while bringing very

welcome consequences — and not in the divine sense. But also note that the theme continues.

Figuring out where the knowledge is coming from, is indeed very hard — [some of us try to make a living doing it](#). But we can get started under the simple premise that it begins and ends with people.

And we can all agree that people use the knowledge they created to choose which courses of action to pursue out of those available to them in any problem situation — [just as living things have been doing since life originated](#).

And we can agree that **people alone** have created a great deal of the problem situations for themselves and other people. The Spartans who established their institutions chose how to organize them.

The Athenians also chose.

Specifically, the Athenians chose to: build the most powerful navy of their time; develop and lead the Delian League, a military alliance against any enemies that might threaten Ionian Greeks; and sign a treaty of mutual protection with Corcyra, which Sparta and its allies interpreted as a provocation.

So just as we choose which path to pursue, we also carve the path. Deutsch's explanation of a feedback loop is spot-on, but the mechanism is — ***always and only*** — people choosing.

Someone, somewhere along the way, chose. They might have erred, and we may disagree with their choices. But they can always choose again.

In the meantime, we can try to show them that other options are available. And that the options we prefer and the choices we have made might be better choices for us all in the long run, even when we know they are not the perfect option. We will forever be making tradeoffs. Ultimately, it will be up to them to choose how they make their trades.

And we can do all of that without magic.

I suspect the Deutschians, and especially David Deutsch himself, would find explanations based in Popperian methodological pillars to be genuine progress in our understanding of human behavior, if they knew of them.

Perhaps they will discover them on their own, as Deutsch discovered Popper after his foray into inductivism ([with a little help from his moral tutor](#)).

Or perhaps they will invite discussion about them, as Popper recommended and this essay attempts to jumpstart.

Or perhaps they will label this **methodologlical** critique as yet another message of pessimism or relativism or some other -ism they view as the enemy — because that is what historicist explanations enable and invite — then continue to extend and proliferate the **sheer mythology** that is historicism (PoH, Section 33).

The choice is theirs. But since some of them recognize the value of one of Popper's other works, *The Myth of the Framework*, I'll close with Popper's suggestion about the separation between science and ideology:

...there is a [great] danger: a theory, even a scientific theory, may become intellectual fashion, a substitute for religion, an entrenched ideology...the problem...arises from certain links between science and ideology — links which do not exist, but which have led some people to conflate science and ideology, and to muddle the distinction between scientific and ideological revolutions. I think that this is quite a serious problem at a time when intellectuals, including scientists, are prone to fall for ideologies and intellectual fashions. This may well be due to the decline of religion, to the unsatisfied and unconscious religious needs of our fatherless society. During my lifetime I have witnessed, quite apart from the totalitarian movements, a considerable number of intellectually highbrow and **avowedly non-**

religious movements with aspects whose religious character is unmistakable once your eyes are open to them...*It is important to distinguish between a scientific revolution in the sense of a rational overthrow of an established scientific theory by a new one, and all processes of 'social entrenchment' or perhaps 'social acceptance' of ideologies, including even those ideologies which incorporate scientific results (MotF, page 16).*

Appreciation

David Deutsch ✔️
@DavidDeutschOxf

Most of it is accurate. One thing that isn't is the idea of explanation via memes. Memes are just ideas. They cause behaviours just as other ideas do. But most ideas im a mind are not memes. Only ones whose behavours cause their instantiation in other minds.

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[1] Except where otherwise noted, the content appearing as quotes with a dash (*) is drawn *BoI* Chapters 15–18. Where content is extracted from other chapters, the chapter number is given. To aid in readability and because I extracted from the Kindle version of *BoI*, page numbers are not provided. All uses of (…) and [ ] are for brevity or reorganization. All non-*italics* within quotes show emphasis added.

Readers are *strongly encouraged* to review and compare the original *BoI and TSC* content to the argument here to judge whether any content is misquoted or taken out of context.

Karl Popper

David Deutsch

Historicism

Written by Brian Moon

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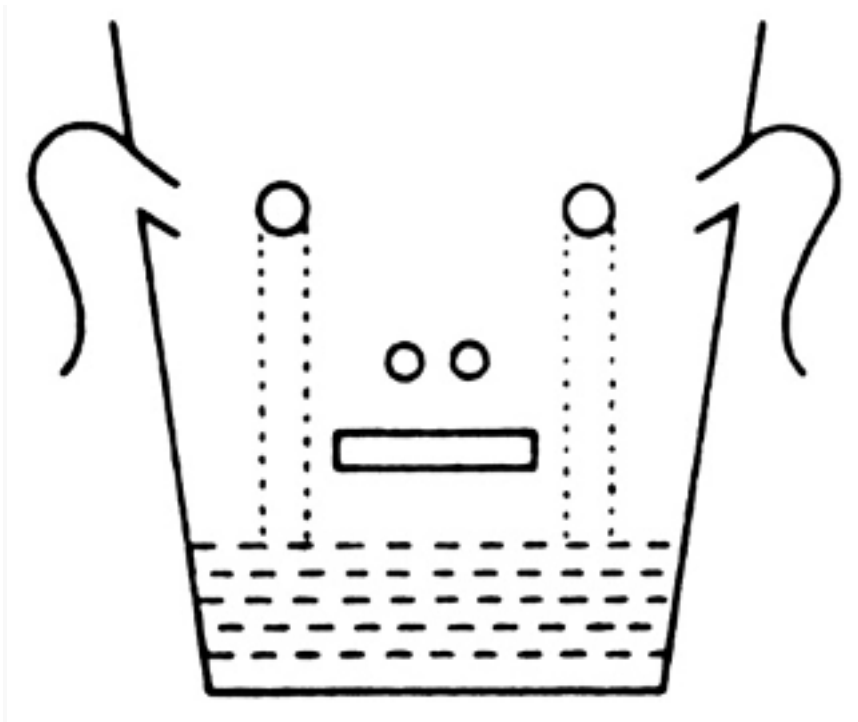
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From Buckets to Sieves
A call for the death of bad theories of mind

Jan 17, 2024

49

Requirement	Mead's conception of human social acts	Can GenAI do it?
Roles	"the individual acts people must carry out during the execution of a social act to ensure its completion"	Sure, to the capacity for which it is programmed
Attitudes	"the impulses or physiological stirrings in our bodies that travel through pathways in our central nervous systems, preparing us to perform our roles in social acts"	Yes, in so far as algorithms can be considered analogous
Significant symbols	"a synonym for spoken or manual language"	Definitely, this is the bread and butter
Role taking	"our assuming the attitudes of the other participants in the social act"	Somewhat, to the capacity for which it is programmed
Social objects	"the assumption of a common attitude toward some prospective social act's execution"	Somewhat, to the capacity for which it is programmed

Brian Moon

Rebranding AI as 'Asocial Intelligence'

Reframing expectations by remembering how we got here

May 28, 2024

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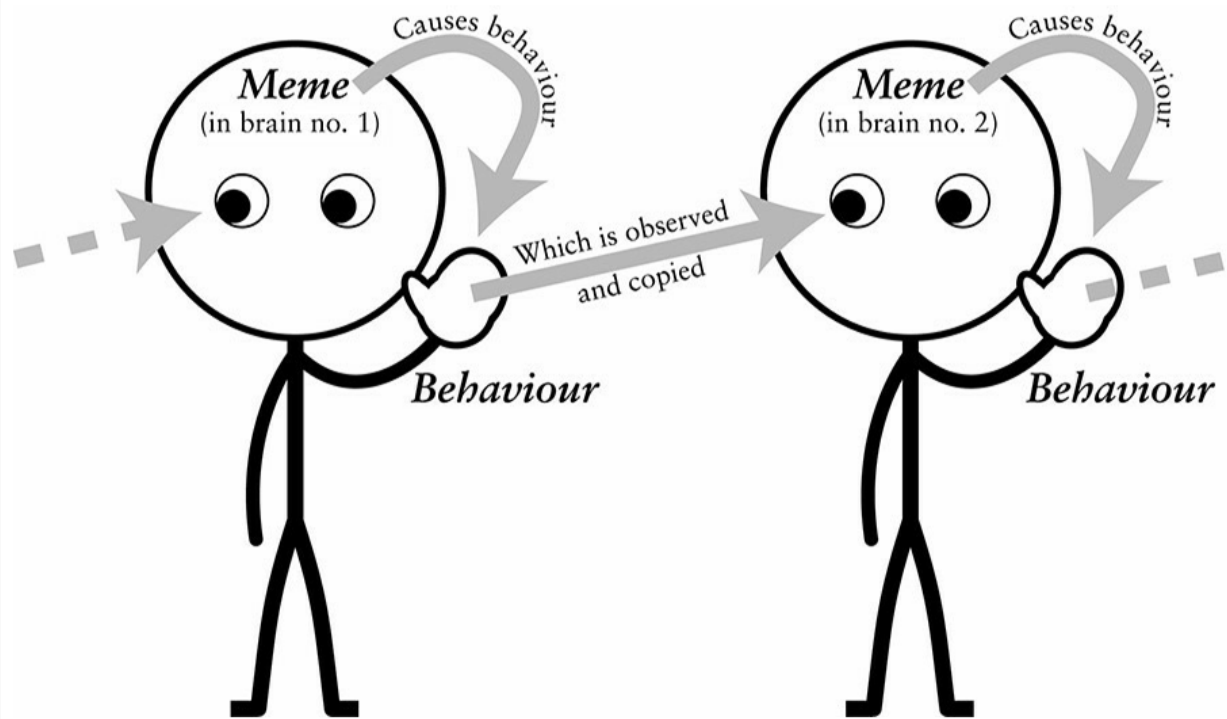
Brian Moon

From Sieves to Hoses
Stepping over dead theories of mind

Jan 17, 2024

56

Guidance for being a good mentor	Guidance for being a good mentee
• Consider being a mentor if you have specific experience or knowledge that others can learn from; Look for opportunities to give your mentee specific input for improving performance and learning new skills[3] • Ask questions to stimulate mentees' thinking and problem-solving skills to help guide them toward self-sufficiency; Resist the urge to spoon-feed your mentees and allow them to figure out for themselves what they need to know; Provide a series of questions or issues; Indicate openness to being a mentor; Be accessible to the mentee[4] • Share experiences; Develop insight through reflection[5] • Communicate effectively[6]	• Be curious, organized, efficient, responsible, and engaged[7] • Identify knowledge and skill gaps; Actively listen[8] • Ask thoughtful questions[9] • Set specific goals and expectations for the mentoring relationship; Treat the mentor professionally and in an ethical fashion; Be thoughtful and sensitive about the mentor's feelings and time; Be punctual, reliable, and develop an independent work style; Create an environment in which the mentor can best meet the needs of the mentee[10]

Brian Moon

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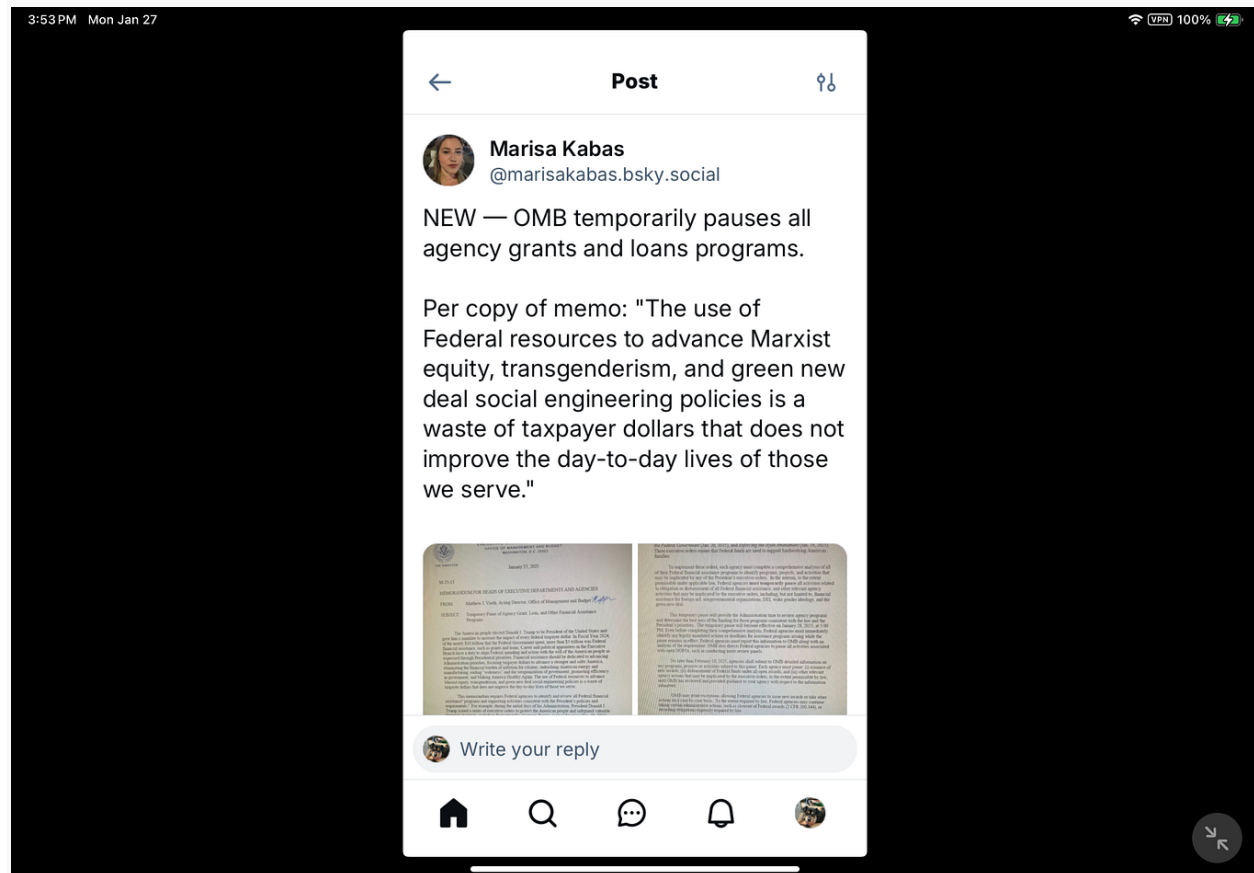💬 87   🔁 1.2K   ♡ 8.6K   •••

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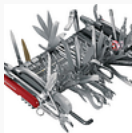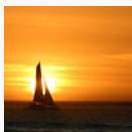
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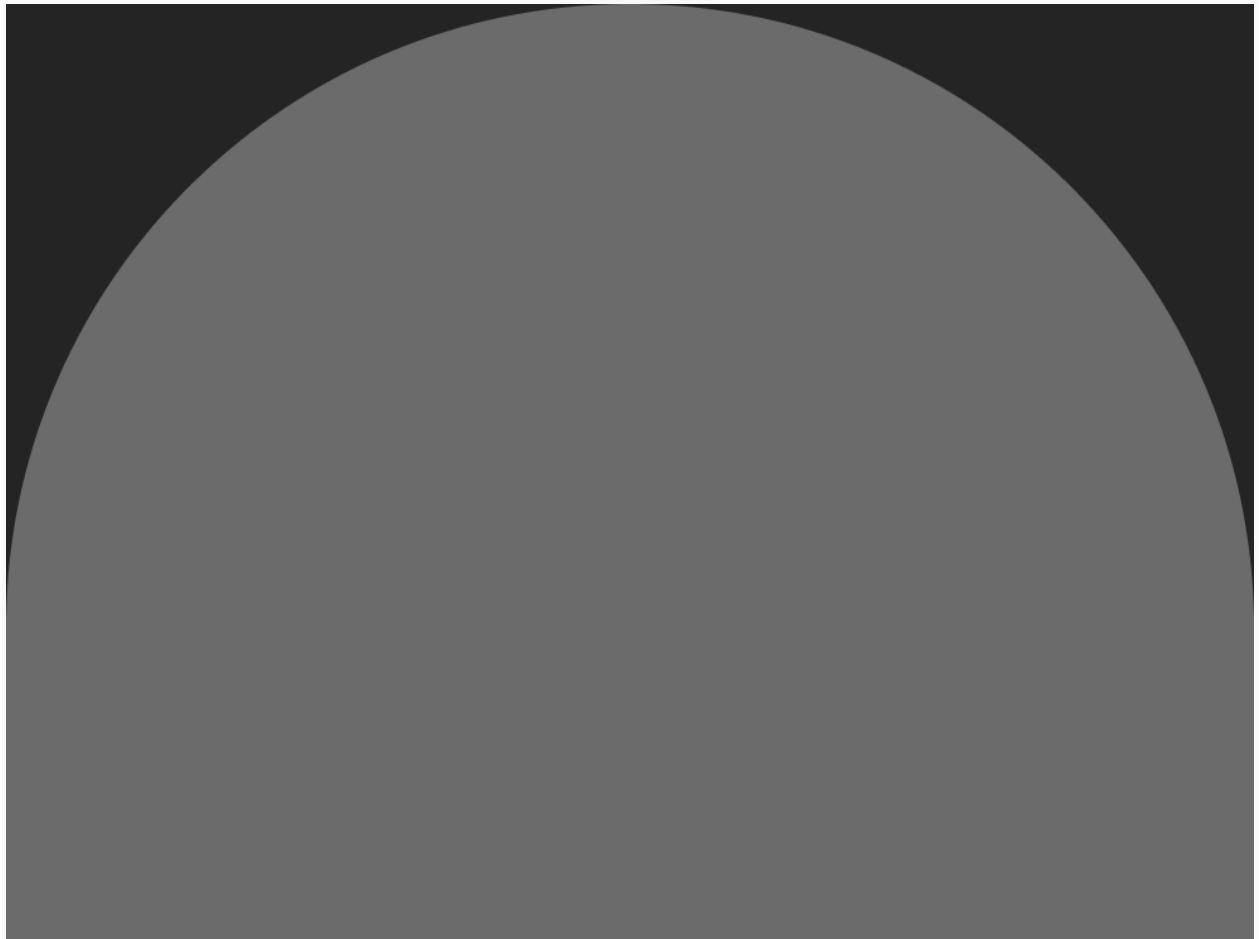4d ago

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