

Theology Coming to Terms with Evolution

EVOLUTIONARY THEOLOGY AND GOD-MEMES:
EXPLAINING EVERYTHING OR NOTHING

by Joseph Poulshock

Abstract. It is not uncommon for Darwinists and memeticists to speculate not only that god-memes (cultural units for belief in a god) evolved as maladaptive traits but also that these memes do not correspond to anything real. However, a counter-Darwinian argument exists that some god-memes evolved as adaptive traits and did so with a metaphysical correspondence to reality. Memeticists cannot disallow these positive claims, because the rules they would use to disallow them would also disallow their negative claims. One must either accept that positive Darwinian theological claims can fall within the bounds of science (and therefore be judged on their explanatory merits alone) or must disallow both sets of arguments, including any claims that god-memes fail to correspond to reality. Given that many Darwinists do not appear to accept a modest version of science that avoids negative metaphysical claims, precedence exists in memetic and Darwinian discourse for making positive metaphysical claims as well.

Keywords: atheism; Susan Blackmore; Richard Dawkins; faith-memes; god-memes; memeplex; memes; memetics; metaphysics; methodological naturalism; noncorrespondence to reality (NCR); positive correspondence to reality (PCR); religion; science; science-meme; theism; theology.

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As the new millennium begins what many Darwinists have called the Age of Universal Darwinism (Dennett 1995; Cziko 1995), evolutionary explanations of *everything* abound. We see academic disciplines replicate and evolve—in a Darwinian algorithmic fashion—into evolutionary linguistics, evolutionary psychology, Darwinian epistemology, evolutionary economics, law, and even ethics and theology. The last discipline on this list, evolutionary theology, emerges with some sense of irony, not because it deals with the legitimate study of the origin and existence of human beliefs in gods or the integration or reconciliation of Darwinian thought and theological traditions (Haught 2000; Ruse 2001) but because it sometimes interacts with questions pertaining to the very existence of gods—from a scientific perspective. Despite claims from Stephen Jay Gould (1999) that religion and science encompass intrinsically immiscible realms, that science has nothing and indeed can say nothing religious, other Darwinists go beyond simple explanations on the origin and existence of faith-memes. The result is at best a paradoxical overlapping of allegedly nonoverlapping realms or at worst the elimination of faith from the realm of real knowledge. Because scientistic Darwinists champion the superiority of science—often without considering its limits and how the rules of science apply to their very own scientific discourse about religion—it is not uncommon for them to attempt not only to explain where the idea of the gods came from but also to explain away the existence of God.

GOD-MEMES AND NEGATIVE EVOLUTIONARY THEOLOGY

In this article I use the terms *god-meme* and *faith-meme* for any religious belief, following the conventions of memetics as defined below. *Negative evolutionary theology* here refers to discourse, generally from Darwinists or memeticists, that treats god-memes as not only maladaptive but especially as having no correspondence to metaphysical reality. Cornelius G. Hunter (2001) and Paul Nelson (1996) provide an excellent critique of negative theology in general—the idea that waste and evil in the natural world demonstrate God's noninvolvement in nature—and provide support for natural selection. However, I focus here mainly on claims relating to god-memes and their ability to influence human beings to maladaptive behavior and especially these memes' noncorrespondence to reality (NCR), as these NCR claims find their expression in the popular science writings of leading memeticists and Darwinists. My aim is to answer the following kinds of questions: What god-memes are purportedly maladaptive, and why? What kinds of NCR claims are exemplary for leading memeticists? What are the problems with these NCR claims? Is it possible to make *Darwinian* counterclaims for a positive correspondence to reality (PCR) claim for god-memes? If so, what is the comparative explanatory status and power between PCR and NCR claims for god-memes?

PSYCHOLOGICAL, CULTURAL, AND METAPHYSICAL MEMETICS

Memetics deals with the origin and spread of beliefs through society (Dawkins 1976; Lynch 1998) and constitutes one Darwinian approach to understanding mind, language, and culture, where memes (concepts analogous to genes) allegedly form the bits of civilization that replicate themselves to design culture—and the minds that make it (Blackmore 1999). Incidentally, this article does not deal with the formidable challenges facing the field of memetics regarding its status and validity as science. (For that discussion, see Aunger 2001 or Poulshock 2002.) Regarding the god-meme, leading memeticist Susan Blackmore (1995) strongly argues for its NCR status: “There is one scientific idea which, to my mind, excels all others. It is exquisitely simple and beautiful. It explains the origins of all life forms and all biological design. It does away with the need for God, for a designer, for a master plan or for a purpose in life. . . . It is, of course, Darwin’s idea of evolution by natural selection.”

In evolutionary terms, Blackmore suggests that the idea of god arose perhaps to assuage fear and provide (spurious) comfort. Hence, Blackmore’s simple NCR claim, buttressed by natural selection, is that the god-meme arose to allay the fear of something, probably death, and provides counterfeit consolation. The NCR claim exists implicitly in the statement that the comfort is false. At best, the faith-meme provides a fictional comfort, a placebo peace. Besides being axiomatic and finding backing from natural selection, the support for this NCR claim comes indirectly from many examples of illogical or inane (that is, maladaptive) god-memes. Hence, these god-memes survive not because they are true in any metaphysical sense. “No—they have survived because they are selfish memes and are good at surviving—they need no other reason” (1995). Blackmore means that memes are selfish in that they influence their own survival independently of the human agents they inhabit. That is, such god-memes exhibit some inherent qualities that ensure their survival—in spite of their lack of truth value. The point here is not to discuss the intriguing reasons that such memes may survive; the key issue for this discussion is Blackmore’s claim either that god-memes fail to correspond to reality or that the maladaptivity of some god-memes provides support for their NCR status.

THOUGHT CONTAGION AND GOD-MEMES

Another meme theorist, Aaron Lynch (1998), who employs a contagion metaphor regarding the spread of memes though remaining apparently neutral regarding the claim that the god-meme is inherently maladaptive, appears to offer an NCR scenario for such memes. He speculates that religions evolved from human valuation of fertility—that such values were verbalized, and that later, when the concept of the deity emerged, early humans attributed these commands to the deity. Hence, Lynch concludes:

“Memetic analysis of religion illuminates a stark contrast between religious thought and scientific thought: religious thought generally holds that certain special beliefs are divinely created. Memetic science contends that great religions evolve from a vast accumulation of observable, mundane human actions. The creation-evolution conflict thus opens a new front: the origins of religions” (1998, 133). In this scenario it is important to note the following implications: (1) there is a biological origin for religion—a value placed on fertility, or reproductive success; (2) this value is verbalized and then attributed to the deity; (3) the implicit origin of the god-meme and the commandments related to it are mundane rather than divine; and (4) such discussion opens up debate on the origin of religions.

COMPARING OR CONFLATING RELIGIOUS AND SCIENTIFIC THOUGHT

Although this is a fascinating speculation, more interesting than its content is the comparison between religious and scientific thought—that religion employs divine explanations and science mundane ones. Does this mean that science simply prescind from divine explanations as a methodological principle, and therefore looks only for natural explanations and is in fact methodologically blind to anything potentially divine in the causal mix? Or does it mean that science axiomatically employs an implicit atheistic assumption that allows only NCR explanations for any and all god-memes? If Lynch is simply offering a mundane explanation, based on methodological naturalism, of the origin of religion—one that simply ignores any mention of potential divine causation—he has come up with a commonly accepted form of speculation for the origin of god-memes. On the other hand, if he is implying an NCR claim for god-memes, he has clearly surpassed the reasonable limits of proper methodological naturalism by making a metaphysical claim.

In my view, Lynch’s discussion (1998, 100–101) clearly implies an NCR claim. However, two other issues appear even more important than this. First, is such a widely accepted form of discourse—a speculative scenario for the origin of feature *X*, in this case a god-meme, based on methodological naturalism—really exemplary of scientific thought, especially in comparison with religious thought? Frankly, such scenarios, though common in popular science literature, may have more in common with much religious thought than with scientific thought, in that they speculate on scant evidence and deal deeply in “god talk” and, hence, are fundamentally theological. In such scenarios it appears that the axiomatic status of epistemological naturalism may assume a role similar to religious revelation. Second, if Lynch is making an NCR claim for god-memes, what is the scientific basis for such a claim? That is, if that basis theoretically precludes any metaphysical PCR claims for god-memes because such claims are religious, doesn’t that also preclude any NCR claims for god-memes,

given that they are also religious, albeit in a negative sense? That is, if it is against the rules to offer PCR claims, should it not also be against the rules to make NCR claims, and if it is all right to offer NCR claims, why not offer PCR claims also? Whatever answers emerge for these questions, they also appear to raise the issue of the self-contradictory denial of metaphysics in some Darwinian discourse that makes metaphysical claims. Nevertheless, this point—the apparent equivalent status of NCR and PCR claims regarding the origin of god-memes—will be discussed further on.

ON THE REPRODUCTIVE FITNESS OF GOD-MEMES
IN HUMAN AGENTS

In addition to discussing god-memes with the implicit assumption of their NCR status, Lynch does mention some specific and reasonably scientific statements regarding religious meme propagation. For example, he suggests that monotheist-memes unify, consolidate, and attenuate their hosts' efforts at spreading other god-memes. First, polytheistic memes, because there are more of them, take more time to propagate, so monotheistic memes maintain "efficiency attributes" that enhance their self-replication. However, monotheistic memplexes could just as easily require that their hosts spend much more time propagating their memes than polytheistic memplexes would require of their hosts. This is especially true if a monotheistic memplex is a highly developed system of thought requiring study of information contained in libraries and taught in graduate schools or if the monotheistic memes possess a time-consuming "propagate me" trait and the polytheistic memes do not. Second, and more credibly, however, Lynch does mention that monotheistic memes possess traits that can undermine competing memes. For example, the claim that "God is one; other gods are naught" exemplifies this undermining trait. Nevertheless, Lynch leaves unexplained more interesting questions such as why such monotheistic memes have not prospered over polytheistic memes in spite of massive propagation efforts in India and Japan.

In short, Lynch's analysis of god-memes coheres where it evaluates the potential Darwinian fitness of particular memes—that is, aspects of these memes that may add to their reproductive fitness apart from human agency. However, although Lynch acknowledges the memetic advantage of some religious memes for their inherent fitness traits, he tends to prescind from discussion for any kind of validity of any religious beliefs, focusing only on the qualities that facilitate their propagation. This is a valid approach up to the point that the validity of particular religious memes is not explicitly transparent or active in their transmission. However, certain religious memes may proliferate on their inherent validity besides their intrinsic self-propagation traits, such as threats, promises, or the ability to undermine competing memes. For example, the meme "honor your parents"

may possess an extrinsic-validity trait if it helps protect children from dangers that they do not innately recognize. Hence, it becomes a meme principle that causes its hosts to generate *survival-oriented* behavior for many situations on the basis of the cumulative knowledge of parents. Thus, Lynch's approach may help us understand why some memes self-propagate more than others; but beyond this, his approach is somewhat limited if it fails to recognize a meme's propositional or practical truth value, not only when the traits of such memes may promote their own survival but especially when they promote the reproductive fitness of the humans they inhabit.

DAWKINS AND MALADAPTIVE AND GOD-MEMES

Richard Dawkins is another leading Darwinist—and the originator of memetics—who writes a substantial amount of negative theology. First of all, Dawkins clearly characterizes faith-memes as maladaptive in that (1) they are based on inner convictions in lieu of evidence, and (2) the lesser the evidence, the worthier the faith-meme. Such memes *infect* the minds of believers, so that Dawkins calls them “faith-sufferers” (1991). Thus, the antievidence faith-meme is a pathological one, and the providence science-meme is a sensible one. Along these lines, he suggests that Doubting Thomas, in requesting evidence for faith, was acting like a scientist, not a believer, when he demanded to see the physical body of the risen Christ. Besides this misconstrual of the passage (John 20:24–29) and of Christian epistemology, which does not disparage a Thomas-type attitude of testing the basis of belief but simply praises the faith of those who have believed on the word of eyewitness testimony, Dawkins broadly caricatures all faith-memes as maladaptive and unhealthful.

Regarding the maladaptivity issue, in addition to focusing on the *attitudes* of antievidence and antitestifying god-memes, Dawkins also points out the dark, dysfunctional, or destructive *actions* of people “possessed” by such memes. The following passage characterizes Dawkins's writing regarding detrimental faith-memes:

Much of what people do is done in the name of God. Irishmen blow each other up in his name. Arabs blow themselves up in his name. Imams and ayatollahs oppress women in his name. Celibate popes and priests mess up people's sex lives in his name. Jewish *shobets* cut live animals' throats in his name. The achievements of religion in past history—bloody crusades, torturing inquisitions, mass-murdering conquistadors, culture-destroying missionaries, legally enforced resistance to each new piece of scientific truth until the last possible moment—are even more impressive. (Dawkins 1998)

In a more recent passage, commenting on the tragic terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, Dawkins stakes his claim ever so outspokenly for the deadly dysfunction of god-memes: “I am trying to call attention to the elephant in the room that everybody is too polite—or too devout—to

notice: religion, and specifically the devaluing effect that religion has on human life. I don't mean devaluing the life of others (though it can do that too), but devaluing one's own life. Religion teaches the dangerous nonsense that death is not the end" (Dawkins 2001).

There are numerous problems with these statements. It is a clear logical error (the fallacy of composition) to state unequivocally that all faith-memes produce murder and mayhem. Different memes make for different manners; moreover, Dawkins does not strengthen his case by fallaciously broad-stroking all religious belief in kamikaze colors. (Whatever happened to the meme that belief in eternity means our actions in this life bear on the next and that this inspires us to good, not evil?) Furthermore, it should be evident that any ideology can spur brutality, including state-sponsored atheism. Sadly, evil gets done in God's and No-God's name. Hence, it does not simply follow that life-after-death-memes make suicidal terrorists of their believers any more than materialistic-memes make mass murderers of despots who deny the soul-existence of the people they exploit. Indeed, evil ideologies exist, but it is unhelpful to oversimplify behavior in this way, by broadly blaming memes without considering that different meme packages should produce different behaviors or by carelessly attributing behavior to memes without taking into account the complexities of individual or social human agency. This underscores a central problem with much memetic thinking. Memes may possess an independent replicator dynamic—an inherent quality that promotes their fitness regardless of their hosts—but the human factor must also be considered. For example, it is not uncommon for human agents to exploit for base purposes memes whose logical conclusion should actually promote good, and the converse is also true, that a well-intended person can do a great deal of good with a bad set of memes.

Nevertheless, Dawkins's argument should be sensibly summarized as follows: god-memes that are irrational (defined here as antievidence memes) and memes whose logical conclusion produces dysfunctional or destructive behavior provide preliminary support for his NCR claim about the improbability of God (1998). It should be clear, however, that Dawkins seriously fails to demonstrate, first, that all god-memes are irrational, unless epistemological naturalism is subsumed into the definition of rationality. Second, he does not establish that all god-memes produce destructive behavior, because not all meme sets contain the roots of such behavior, and the connection between the memes, good or bad, and the behavior, destructive or productive, is not always clear. However, a softer version of his argument does obtain: god-memes that specify irrational and malevolent behavior in their hosts support their own NCR status. Such memes appear to metaphysically self-destruct and fail to exhibit their probabilistic correspondence to reality because of their dysfunctional nature.

DAWKINS'S NCR CLAIM ON THE IMPROBABILITY OF GOD

Despite the importance and validity of this softer version of Dawkins's argument on the maladaptivity of god-memes, there is a problem with its connection to his greater NCR claim on the improbability of God, which is based on the idea that natural selection negates the argument from design. That is, the softer version only discounts irrational and destructive god-memes, but Dawkins uses it to support his improbability thesis for all god-memes. Hence, the argument needs to be tested on different sets of god-memes and not extended beyond where it obtains. Thus, the maladaptivity argument may provide no—or, at best, only partial—support for Dawkins's NCR improbability argument. That is, the maladaptivity argument provides only partial support for the NCR improbability argument if the two arguments truly depend on each other. However, if the two arguments can be uncoupled—that is, if maladaptive god-memes do not necessarily exist in the memplex, which originates in some form of the intuition from design—Dawkins's argument is significantly weakened. And this appears to be the case. Not all god-memes are maladaptive, and even if natural selection completely negates faith-memes founded in some form of the argument from design, it is by no means clear that potentially adaptive faith-memes find their evolutionary origin or epistemological grounding in the design intuition.

Nevertheless, it should prove helpful to briefly summarize and evaluate Dawkins's NCR claim that god-memes find their origin in some broad sense of the logic of design. What follows is a short gloss of Dawkins's argument on the improbability of God:

Why do people believe in God? For most people the answer is still some version of the ancient Argument from Design . . . beautiful, complex, intricate, and obviously purpose-built structures must have had their own designer, their own watchmaker—God. . . . And yet, as the result of one of the most astonishing intellectual revolutions in history, we now know that it is wrong, or at least superfluous. We now know that the order and apparent purposefulness of the living world has come about through an entirely different process, a process that works without the need for any designer and one that is a consequence of basically very simple laws of physics. This is the process of evolution by natural selection. . . . The Argument from Design, then, has been destroyed as a reason for believing in a God. (Dawkins 1998)

This is not an evolutionary scenario for the origin of the god-meme, but it is clearly an attempt to explain why religion exists. It implies that ancient god-memes may have emerged as conscious human agents tried to interpret and understand the order and complexity of the world, and they were simply in the dark about complexity and about the Designer until natural selection was discovered. This may be the case; however, again there are serious problems with this scenario. First, Dawkins has not empirically demonstrated, either in a historical evolutionary sense or in a

modern psychological, anthropological, or memetic sense, that god-memes find their origin or grounding in the intuition from design. Oversimplifying will not help us understand the complex reasons underlying the origin and grounding of god-memes. Second, Dawkins's blunt claim that natural selection destroys god-memes (based in the argument from design) suffers also from oversimplification, because many design arguments exist that do not relate to biology or natural selection. J. P. Moreland (1987) mentions eight basic kinds of design arguments and three logical forms of argumentation, all of which potentially escape Dawkins's and Darwin's critiques. Moreover, William Dembski's work on design (1998; 2001), which easily integrates with evolutionary common descent, nonetheless poses a most rigorous challenge to any overextended applications of the mechanism of natural selection. Third, as I show in the following section, it may be a misapplication of the mechanism of natural selection to claim that it destroys all forms of the design argument as well as the PCR status of some faith-memes.

GOD-MEMES AND POSITIVE EVOLUTIONARY THEOLOGY

Though the origin of religion is a vast and still-developing subject, about which Daniel Dennett claims, "A world of [Darwinian] research opportunities beckon" (1997), the foregoing provides a background of how some evolutionists have construed the origin, grounding, and spread of god-memes. Nevertheless, it is possible to propose an alternative, atypical explanatory scenario for the origin and the existence of the god-meme that also fits within the Darwinian paradigm, especially memetics and evolutionary psychology, and may possess equal or greater descriptive force. Incidentally, this "evolutionary theology" differs from that of John Haught, for although he develops an expansive "theology of evolution," he does not deal explicitly with the origin of the god-meme except to mention "the ancient religious intuition that the universe is the expression of an eternal meaning" (2000, 57). This is significant because evolutionary discussions generally deal with causal histories that differ in explanatory power and therefore warrant critique. Hence, on the basis of the precedence of Darwinian explanations related to the origin and descent of organisms and behaviors (Darwin 1901), it seems fitting to include the origin of belief in evolutionary discussions of theology. The following section, therefore, outlines a basic speculative scenario of how the god-meme could have emerged.

THE EVOLUTIONARY EMERGENCE OF PCR GOD-MEMES

The following chart depicts characteristic discussion as well as noncharacteristic discussion on the adaptivity and metaphysical status of god-memes.

Typical Darwinian Discourse on God-Memes			
Maladaptive	Adaptive	NCR Status	PCR Status
X		X	
X	X	X	
	X	X	
Atypical Darwinian Discourse on God-Memes			
	X		X
X	X		X
X			X

Generally speaking, Darwinists tend to axiomatically assume or use some form of evidence to support their contention for the NCR status of essentially all god-memes. Support for the NCR claim, as already mentioned, also derives from the existence of maladaptive or self-contradicting god-memes, or, as in Dawkins's case, from application of the argument against design. Moreover, as the chart shows, it is also possible (although outside the purview of this article) to interpret god-memes as adaptive or as a mixture of adaptive and maladaptive traits but for some reason to still argue for or assume their NCR status. Nevertheless, in spite of these trends in the Darwinian literature, it is possible to make counter-Darwinian claims for both the adaptive and PCR status of some god-memes. The following section outlines this discourse in kernel form.

As human intelligence evolved through time, cumulative knowledge accrued through a number of insights summarized roughly as follows. There is order, complexity, and information in the world, which is comprehensible to the rational mind. Rational minds tend conspicuously not to arise from nonrational processes. The products of intelligence, complex artifacts, languages, and cultures do not *observably* emerge from nonintelligence. In fact, the kind of exquisite complexity observed in much of the natural world often overwhelms observers with a vision and intuition of the vestiges of a Mind. Even granting a Darwinian explanation for the common descent of the biological world, philosophers have profited numerous human insights regarding purpose, simplicity, beauty, complexity, sense, cognition, and the existence of information. Hence, these aspects of nature may have operated as environmental pressures to engender into human cognition a multifaceted intuition of purpose, meaning, and designing vision to the cosmos.

Moreover, human beings and other creatures possess moral capacities (de Waal 1996), and human individual and social health tend to flourish as groups develop and follow what become tried and tested moral impulses, which they often perceive as emanating from the cognizable purpose and designing vision they comprehend around them (Benson 1997;

1998). Furthermore, transience and death weigh heavy upon humans, often along with a concurrent, natural, and universal longing for immortality. This yearning, like physical hunger and thirst, indicates an unfulfilled need that appears to find its realization in the evident metaphysical pointers that humankind perceives as real environmental pressures.

A man's physical hunger does not prove that that man will get any bread; he may die of starvation on a raft in the Atlantic. But surely a man's hunger does prove that he comes of a race which repairs its body by eating and inhabits a world where eatable substances exist. In the same way, though I do not believe (I wish I did) that my desire for Paradise proves that I shall enjoy it, I think it a pretty good indication that such a thing exists and that some men will. A man may love a woman and not win her; but it would be very odd if the phenomenon called "falling in love" occurred in a sexless world. (Lewis 1965, 30)

This story is incomplete; it does not outline a cumulative, historical, evolutionary process, and it can be developed more rigorously, especially with regard to how god-memes may meet biological and psychological needs. However, as an essential concept—that god-memes potentially arose from real environmental pointers and pressures—it is sound. Moreover, although this scenario of course counters common Darwinian opinion, it still matches the same kind of explanatory discourse in the aforementioned explanations for the god-meme—except for the contrary conclusion. The punch line is this: It is an evolutionary possibility that the god-meme evolved as a metaphysical correspondence, that is, as an adaptation to something real. Numerous factors in the historical fitness landscape pressured humans to adapt and hence to adopt belief in gods, not as a wish-fulfillment, fictionally based adaptation, as some ardent Darwinists claim, but as a survival adaptation to real evolutionary pressures. Bluntly put, the origin of the god-meme arose through natural selection because this meme corresponded to an Actuality that acted as an environmental-selection pressure on humans who developed the cognitive capacities to perceive it. The twist is that God *was* in the details.

THE EQUIVALENCE OF EVOLUTIONARY PCR AND NCR CLAIMS

Because the preceding argument flies in the face of much present scientific opinion, it is important to scrutinize it more closely. First, it is common for interpreters of Darwin to argue, as Robert Pennock says, "Faith is more valuable to the extent that it is chosen in spite of the lack of evidence," and "religion is typically private and exclusive. . . . Science, on the other hand, is inherently public and inclusive" (Pennock 1999, 352–53). True, there is a private nature to religious faith; for example, in Western culture sacred texts do not enjoy the public authority of science, and some religious people attest to private revelations. However, stating that all faith-oriented epistemology stems from antievidential, private, or hidden knowledge depreciates the intellectual rigor of many god-memes. Moreover, as has been

shown, the evolutionary twist on the classical pointers toward God's existence represents one form of publicly accessible knowledge supporting the PCR status of some god-memes. Therefore, one cannot discount PCR claims on the grounds that they belong solely to the realm of private and antievidential religion. They also find their basis in a form of publicly oriented substantiation.

A second rebuttal to this scenario expresses that science accepts only natural explanations. As philosopher of science Stephen Meyer comments, "Biologists, and scientists generally, assume the rules of science prohibit any deviation from a strictly materialistic mode of analysis" (1994, 69). Hence, saying that the existence of the god-meme is an adaptation to a particular reality exceeds the limits of science by appealing to something not perceptible to science, something beyond nature. If this rule applies here, however, it is completely vacuous for evolutionists to attempt to confute belief for a real and evolutionary basis for the god-meme as well. That is, if it is against the rules to offer scientific or evolutionary explanations for the existence of a reality above nature, it is equally against the rules to give scientific or evolutionary explanations for any nonreality above nature. Consistent application of this kind of methodological naturalism would mean that when scientists speak out on the NCR status of god-memes, they cease to speak as scientists. Such evolutionary explanations do not prove epistemological naturalism; they assume it. Hence, the sword of this second objection slices up both opposing views. Nevertheless, according to this logic combined with substantial precedence, because assumptions or explanations for the nonreal basis for the god-meme are common in the Darwinian literature,¹ there is no reason to exclude Darwinian explanations for the real basis for the god-meme. In short, an explanatory equivalence exists between the NCR and PCR claims regarding god-memes. (See Meyer 1994 for a similar discussion on the methodological equivalence of common descent and the design inference.)

Third, all this ignores a basic point. Darwinian theory can explain certain behavioral phenomena, such as belief in gods, as both adaptive and maladaptive. That is, explanations of evolutionary psychology or memetics can be so flexible that, arguing from the same foundational principles, they can give equally logical and coherent but opposite scenarios for the same trait. Irony results: well-written, carefully concocted, intelligent, interesting, speculative, and scientific-sounding stories that explain contradictory views equally well. We can consider these competing and contradictory explanations, but they are likely to remain tentative for lack of historical and empirical evidence. Hence, given the current state of evolutionary discourse, both NCR and PCR evolutionary scenarios for god-memes are valid, and although it is difficult to compare their explanatory power, we may have to evaluate them on the basis of other theories or multidisciplinary approaches to help us transcend the limits of Darwinism when it comes to thinking about god-memes.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that if one can propose a Darwinian explanation that (1a) belief in God evolved as a maladaptive trait and that (2a) Darwinism shows that theistic belief does not correspond to reality, one can just as easily argue in Darwinian fashion that (1b) faith evolved as an adaptive trait and that (2b) some god-memes actually correspond to reality, supporting the idea that God exists. Hence, if a Darwinist argues for the first two points, he cannot disallow my arguments on the grounds of methodological rules, because the very rules that he would have to use to disallow my claims would also disallow his. He would either have to accept my arguments as valid and within the bounds of what he calls science, and therefore let them be judged by their explanatory power in comparison with his, or he would have to disallow both sets of arguments and accept a more limited status for evolutionary theory that avoids metaphysical claims. The current trend toward universal Darwinism shows that it is unlikely that many leading Darwinists will limit the nature of their explanations. Therefore, it seems that research opportunities will abound for those willing to critique Darwinian negative theology on the origin of religion, probing the problems with such discourse, providing alternative explanations for the potentially positive correspondence between reality and some god-memes, and applying an approach that respectfully and carefully integrates metaphysics and science—and even Darwinism and theology.

NOTE

1. It is beyond the scope of this article to detail exhaustive examples of atheistic assumptions and explanations in Darwinian and memetic literature. Obviously, Dawkins's work is a prime example (1976; 1991; 1998; 2001). Blackmore's writings also exemplify this stance. "There is one scientific idea which, to my mind, excels all others. It is exquisitely simple and beautiful. It explains the origins of all life forms and all biological design. It does away with the need for God, for a designer, for a master plan or for a purpose in life. . . . It is, of course, Darwin's idea of evolution by natural selection" (Blackmore 1995). Dennett's work (1995) is also exemplary. A major research project awaits someone willing to outline the atheistic assumptions, explanations, and assertions in scientific and memetic literature today.

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