

# The Evolution of MEMES

CCSS Summer 2015-B Z F

Selections from David Deutsch, *The Beginning of Infinity*,  
Chapter 15 THE EVOLUTION OF SOCIETY

(**Bold Type**=emphasis added in transcription; text in GREEN=text added in transcription)

Transcriber: B Z Friedlander)

## **Ideas That Survive**

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 behavior. Thus the shared values of a nation, the ability to communicate in a particular language, the shared knowledge of an academic discipline and the appreciation of a given musical style are all, in this sense, 'sets of ideas' that define cultures. Many of them are inexplicit; in fact all ideas have some inexplicit component, since even our knowledge of the meaning of words is held largely inexplicitly in our minds. Physical skills, such as the ability to ride a bicycle, have an explicit content, as do philosophical concepts such as freedom and knowledge. **The distinction between explicit and inexplicit is not always sharp.** (*Emphasis added in transcription.*) For instance, a poem or a satire may be explicitly about one subject (*in the mind of the creator*), while the audience in a particular culture will reliably, and without being told, interpret it as being about a different one.

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. Most of the ideas that define them, including the implicit ones, have a long history of being passed from one person to another. That makes these ideas *memes* – ideas that are replicators.

Nevertheless, cultures change. People modify cultural ideas in their minds, and 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: **there is no way to download them directly from one brain to another like computer programs. Even native speakers of a language will not give identical definitions of every word. So it can be only rarely, if ever, that two people hold precisely the same cultural idea in their minds....**

Thus a culture is in practice defined not by a set of strictly identical memes, but by a set of variants that cause slightly different characteristic behaviours. Some variants tend to have the effect that their holders (*initiators*) are eager to enact or talk about them, others less so. Some are easier than others for potential recipients to replicate in their own mind. These factors and others affect how likely each variant of a meme is to be passed on faithfully....

A fundamental question in the study of cultures is: what is it about a long-lived meme that gives it this exceptional ability to resist change throughout many replications? Another – central to this book – is: when such memes do change, what are the conditions under which they can change for the better?

The idea that cultures evolve is at least as old as that of evolution in biology. But most attempts to understand how they evolve have been based on misunderstandings of evolution....

# Evolving MEMES in our Modern American Society !

CCSS Summer 2015-(Reference *Deutsch on Memes*–in *Beginnings of Infinity*)

## The Robert E. Lee Problem

NY Times JUNE 26, 2015

[David Brooks](#)

The debate about the Charleston Bible study shooting has morphed into a debate about the Confederate battle flag and other symbols of the Confederacy. This is not a trivial sideshow. Racism is not just a personal prejudice and an evolutionary byproduct. It resurfaces year after year because it's been woven by historical events into the fabric of American culture.

That culture is transmitted through the generations by the things we honor or don't honor, by the symbols and names we celebrate and don't celebrate. If we want to reduce racism we have to elevate the symbols that signify the struggle against racism and devalue the symbols that signify its acceptance.

Lowering the Confederate flag from public properties is thus an easy call. There are plenty of ways to celebrate Southern heritage and Southern life without choosing one so enmeshed in the fight to preserve slavery.

The harder call concerns Robert E. Lee. Should schools and other facilities be named after the great Confederate general, or should his name be removed and replaced?

The case for Lee begins with his personal character. It is almost impossible to imagine a finer and more considerate gentleman. As a general and public figure, he was a man of impeccable honesty, integrity and kindness. As a soldier, he displayed courage from the beginning of his career straight through to the end. Despite his blunders at Gettysburg and elsewhere he was by many accounts the most effective general in the Civil War and maybe in American history. One biographer, Michael Korda, writes, "His generosity of spirit, undiminished by ideological or political differences, and even by the divisive, bloody Civil War, shines through in every letter he writes, and in every conversation of his that was reported or remembered."

As a family man, he was surprisingly relaxed and affectionate. We think of him as a man of marble, but he loved having his kids jump into bed with him and tickle his feet. With his wife's loving cooperation, he could write witty and even saucy letters to other women. He was devout in his faith, a gifted watercolorist, a lover of animals and a charming conversationalist.

In theory, he opposed slavery, once calling it "a moral and political evil in any country." He opposed Southern secession, calling it "silly" and a rash revolutionary act. Moreover we shouldn't be overly guilty of the sin of "presentism," judging historical figures by contemporary standards.

The case *against* Lee begins with the fact that he betrayed his oath to serve the United States. He didn't need to do it. The late historian Elizabeth Brown Pryor demonstrated that 40 percent of Virginia officers decided to remain with the Union forces, including members of Lee's family.

As the historian Allen Guelzo emailed me, "He withdrew from the Army and took up arms in a rebellion against the United States." He could have at least sat out the war. But, Guelzo continues, "he raised his hand against the flag and government he had sworn to defend. This more than fulfills the constitutional definition of treason."

More germane, while Lee may have opposed slavery in theory he did nothing to eliminate or reduce it in practice. On the contrary, if he'd been successful in the central task of his life, he would have preserved and prolonged it.

Like Lincoln he did not believe African-Americans were yet capable of equality. Unlike Lincoln he accepted the bondage of other human beings with bland complaisance. His wife inherited 196 slaves from her father. Her father's will (somewhat impractically) said they were to be freed, but Lee didn't free them.

Lee didn't enjoy owning slaves, but he was considered a hard taskmaster and he did sell some, breaking up families. Moreover, he supported the institution of slavery as a pillar of Confederate life. He defended the right of Southerners to take their slaves to the Western territories. He fundamentally believed the existence of slavery was, at least for a time, God's will.

Every generation has a duty to root out the stubborn weed of prejudice from the culture. We do that, in part, through expressions of admiration and disdain. Given our history, it seems right to aggressively go the extra mile to show that prejudice is simply unacceptable, no matter how fine a person might otherwise be.

My own view is that we should preserve most Confederate memorials out of respect for the common soldiers. We should keep Lee's name on institutions that reflect postwar service, like Washington and Lee University, where he was president. But we should remove Lee's name from most schools, roads and other institutions, where the name could be seen as acceptance of what he did and stood for during the war.

This is not about rewriting history. It's about shaping the culture going forward. (in other words: *helping memes evolve*)

## **MEME Replication, 2015**

*This note is attached to a YouTube Page I will display at Tuesday's PPOS discussion of Memes In the Evolution of Culture [David Deutsch, The Beginning of Infinity, Chapter 15]. It shows more than a dozen YouTube uploads of copies of a newly created folk song concerning the recent Charleston, SC, multiple murders at the AME (Black) church.*

*B & F*

Two days after the shooting at the AME church in Charleston, SC, folksinger Peter Mulvey posted his song "Take Down Your Flag," (referring to the Confederate battle flag) on YouTube.

By 8:30 AM June 30, 10 days later, there were nine pages of YouTube uploads of the same song by other artists, some including additional verses to Mulvey's song.

For centuries following Homer, other bards wandered the Mediterranean reiterating the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, but never at a rate of meme replication like this.