Evolution by Imitation
Gabriel Tarde and the Limits of Memetics

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Meme theory confronts us with a rather unflattering image of ourselves. In Daniel C. Dennett's words, conscious selves are nothing but the 'vehicles' or 'nests' of the true heroes of the evolutionary story of culture, the memes. In the memetic view, cultural evolution is not about 'us', but about 'them': the units of culture such as the ones mentioned by Richard Dawkins: "tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches". In this paper, I shall take a critical look at some premises of this memetic 'shift of perspective', which turn out to be highly problematic. In a first step, the memetic image of the self as a 'meme nest' shall be traced back to its neo-Darwinian origins. Meme theory is built directly on the model of genetic evolution (I). As some considerations concerning the ontology of memes shall reveal, there are fundamental differences between genes and memes which cannot be accounted for within the memetic view (II). In a third step, Gabriel Tarde's idea of 'evolution by association' shall be introduced as a convincing alternative to the memetic idea of cultural evolution. Writing almost a century before the term 'meme' was even coined, Tarde put forth a theory, which already contained much of the insights that make memetics attractive to the social sciences. More than that, Tarde was safe from the fatal memetic tendency to model cultural evolution too closely on genetic evolution (III). In the concluding section (IV), I shall come back to the initial question concerning the place of the self in society: what is our role in cultural evolution in a Tardean view?

I. Blows to Self-Love

When Sigmund Freud counted Darwinism among the most severe blows which human self-love has suffered at the hand of science, he was only referring to Darwin's insight into man's "descent of the animal kingdom" and his "ineradicable animal nature". Had Freud had any apprehension of what else Darwinism had in store for us, he might not have called his own central insight (i.e. the discovery of the role of the subconscious) an even "more wounding blow" (Freud 1957: 84–5). Our animal (and, for that matter, vegetal) kinsfolk, as well as the dominant role of our subconscious seem rather easy to put up with as compared to the genetic neo-Darwinian image

of ourselves. The ultimate blow to our self-love is this. Whereas Darwin himself kindly left us in the belief that the 'struggle for existence' was all about *our* existence (i.e. the existence of the kind of beings that we are, and the kind of life that *we* live – individually as well as a species), this picture has radically changed with the integration of genetics into Darwinism. It is not *we* there in the spotlight on the stage of the evolutionary drama called 'the survival of the fittest' anymore. It's the genes. The modern version of the evolutionary story is told from the 'gene's eye-perspective'. In this view, evolution is all about the replication of the genes. Whereas the genes are the actors on the stage, we are nothing but more or less contingent accessories. In Richard Dawkins's words, the living bodies and conscious minds that we are have no more importance in the evolutionary story than that of the 'survival machines' that some sets of more or less cooperative genes have built themselves in order to provide for their own survival, or replication. "They are the replicators and we are their survival machines. When we have served our purpose we are cast aside. But the genes are denizens of geological time: genes are forever" (Dawkins 1976: 37). In other words, we are "robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes" (Dawkins 1976: ix). Not only are 'we' replaced by 'them' as the agents on stage; upon closer look, it becomes apparent that at least at this basic level of the theory, any sort of agency is removed from the picture. The sense in which the genes become the 'subjects' or 'agents' in this story is metaphorical. Genes are not literally 'selfish', nor are they 'programming' anything; 'Darwinism' is the title of the theory that explains why it *looks as if* there was some selfish scheming going on from the side of the genes, even though there are really nothing but 'blind' natural forces, and no design or purpose (in the proper sense of the word) involved in the process.[2] Thus the intentionalist vocabulary (the one that includes words such as 'selfishness' or 'programming') in this neo-Darwinian story is only shorthand for a more complete non-intentionalist description.[3]

Yes, one might say, but why should social scientists bother? However severe this blow to our self-understanding, it might seem that the damage can be restricted to our self-image as *biological* creatures, and kept away from our role in society and culture. Our biology might be left to 'them'; but surely, one might think, society and culture are still up to 'us', i.e. a matter of *our* ways of existence. Much to the reassurance of our self-love, most neo-Darwinian attempts to break into the sphere of the social and cultural sciences have proven to be rather limited in range.

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[2] In Daniel C. Dennett's words, Darwin's theory is "a scheme for creating design out of chaos without the aid of the mind" (Dennett 1995: 50).

[3] A gene is said to 'aim at' x when it is selected for the fact that under circumstances y it will cause x. In Dawkins's sense, a gene is ultimately 'selfish' (or 'aims at replication') because (and insofar as) the fact that under suitable circumstances copies of that gene are generated is the reason why it is still around.

For all of its fundamental insights, classical sociobiological explanations do not seem to have gone much beyond the level of the analysis of some basic behavioural dispositions so far. And there is reason not to expect much more from this side. There seems to be a systematic barrier to this research program. Many societies and cultures on the planet have undergone fundamental changes within centuries or decades, sometimes even within years. All those changes and new phenomena that have appeared on the cultural scene can hardly be explained in terms of genetic evolution, for at the level of the human genome, hardly anything will have changed within this short time span. The huge difference in speed between genetic evolution and sociocultural developments seems to thwart any attempt to gain substantial explanations of actual social and cultural phenomena by going back to the level of genetic evolution.

In spite of this 'failure' of classical sociobiology, there is no reason for human narcissism to feel saved from the Darwinian blow to self-love in the social and cultural sciences. At the end of his fascinating book on the selfish gene, Dawkins has sketched a neo-Darwinian perspective for the social and cultural science, which avoids the classical socio-biological short-circuit between the cultural and the genetic level. It is here, where the memetic project is initiated. The core idea is "to throw out the gene as the sole basis of our ideas of evolution" (Dawkins 1976: 205), and to postulate a second and much faster evolution, a cultural evolution that has started only with the development of human consciousness. Like any evolution, this second one is about the "differential survival of replicating entities" (Dawkins 1976: 206). In this case, however, the 'replicating entities' are not genes, but 'memes', i.e. units of culture such as the ones mentioned in Dawkins's famous list of examples: "tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches" (Dawkins 1976: 206).[4] The close analogy (or kinship) between memetics and the theory of genetic evolution is evident from the word "meme" alone. As Dawkins says explicitly, it is because it "sounds a bit like 'gene'" that he has created the neologism "meme" (Dawkins 1976: 206). Thus it seems that some of the more cautious memeticists' worries notwithstanding,[5] the project to build the theory of cultural evolution on the model of genetic evolution lies at the very heart of the memetic program. Even though not all memeticists agree upon whether or not there is an equivalent of the distinction between genotype and phenotype in the cultural sphere, the analogy between memes and genes (and with this the analogy between Memetics and Neo-Darwinism) is not marginal, but a premiss of the entire

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[4] Daniel C. Dennett characterizes memes as "ideas", and he gives the following list of examples: "arch, wheel, wearing clothes, vendetta, right triangle, alphabet, calendar, the *Odyssey,* calculus, chess, perspective drawing, evolution by natural selection, impressionism, 'Greensleves', deconstructionism" (Dennett 1995: 344).

[5] For a more cautious view of the relation between genetics and memetics cf. Blackmore (1999: 66).

memetic venture.[6] All memeticists agree that memes are replicators just like genes. As such, the evolutionary triad of replication, variation and selection applies to memes just as it does to genes. Whereas genes replicate by *inheritance*, memes replicate by *imitation*; indeed this way of replication is taken to be so essential to memes, that sometimes, memes are simply defined as "units of imitation" (Dawkins 1976: 206). Whenever somebody takes over something from somebody else by means of imitation, a meme is replicated. And just as genes are subject to mutation, variation comes into play on the memetic level, too, because imitations are rarely perfect. Urban legends (another often-quoted example for memes) are likely to undergo changes along their long way through society. Besides replication and variation, there is also a great deal of *selection* going on in the cultural sphere. Under the current conditions at least, memes depend on the human mind for their replication. And as this is a rather scarce resource, memes are in fierce competition with each other. The space for memes is limited. Of all the stories we tell each other, only very few will ever make it to the level of an urban legend. Most are bound to fall into oblivion shortly after they are told. "Tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches": all of these are thus in a kind of selective "struggle for existence" (Dawkins 1976: 206).

More than all those analogies in the details, the general thrust of the memetic program parallels the one of the neo-Darwinian genetic evolutionary approach. Just as the latter wipes us from the centre of the stage of biological evolution, the memetic program displaces us from our high seats as the authors and creators of our 'cultural products'. In this view, we are not the ones in charge in the sociocultural sphere: it's them, the memes. Culture is not to be conceived of in terms of what *we* think, feel or decide to do anymore. In the memetic perspective, it is simply a matter of the *differential replication of memes*. Susan Blackmore illustrates this *memetic shift in perspective* that is connected to a memeticist understanding of culture: "Instead of thinking of our ideas as our own creation, and as working for us, we have to think of them as autonomous selfish memes, working only to get themselves copied" (Blackmore 1996: 8).[7] Aaron Lynch (whose book's merits lie not so much in theoretical analysis, but in its unique richness as a collection of memetic observations) illustrates his slightly more moderate version of this "paradigm shift" (Lynch 1996: 17) with an example: "If a denomination expands, the sociologist usually asks what sort of advantages attract all the newcomers. The memeticist, on the other hand, studies the denomination's creed with an eye toward how it evolves and furthers its own replication" (Lynch

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[6] Sometimes, the memetic project is criticized on the grounds that the evolution of memes is Lamarckian rather than Darwinian. For a convincing refutation of this view cf. Dawkins's remarks in the foreword to Blackmore (1999).

[7] In his book on *The New Science of the Meme*, Richard Brodie tries to catch this "profound insight" in a sentence that reveals that in a sense, it is not all that profound after all: "This is the most surprising and most profound insight from the science of memetics: your thoughts are not always your own original idea" (Brodie 1996: 14).

1996: 22).[8] Using yet another example, Daniel Dennett puts it more bluntly: "a scholar is just a library's way of making another library". Dennett continues, addressing his reader directly:

> I don't know about you, but I'm not initially attracted by the idea of my brain as a sort of dung heap in which the larvae of other people's ideas renew themselves before sending out copies of themselves in an informational Diaspora. It does seem to rob my mind of its importance as both author and critic. (Dennett 1993: 202)[9]

In the memetic view, *our* role is subordinate to the memes in a twofold sense: on the one hand, our mind it is seen as the "dung heap" or "meme nest" (Dennett 1995: 355), i.e. the selective environment in which the drama of the 'struggle for existence' of the genes takes place. At the same time, we are the meme's "survival machines" (Dennett 1995: 347–8), i.e. our mind is shaped or modified by the memes to provide for their survival.[10] Memes determine how we behave; thinking of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony might make us whistle and spread the tune to those around us. Or, to mention an example that has helped a great deal in popularizing the memetic account, the belief that the end is near is likely to "cause" proselytizing behaviour, which in turn favours further replication of that meme (cf. Lynch 1996).

In the following sections of this paper, the memetic 'shift of perspective' from 'us' to 'them' (and the concept of the self as 'meme nest') shall come under closer scrutiny. I shall argue that the memeticists are mistaken in their view of cultural evolution. In section II, I shall argue that the memetic view rests on a distorted conception of the units of cultural evolution. The main problem of the memetic approach is that it ignores some fundamental ontological differences between genes and 'memes'. It is built too closely on the model of genetic evolution, a model that is unfit for cultural evolution. In section III, Gabriel Tarde's idea of 'evolution by association' shall be introduced as a convincing alternative to the memetic idea of cultural evolution. In the concluding section IV, I shall come back to the initial question concerning the place of the self in society: what is our role in cultural evolution in a Tardean view? Here, I shall take issue with some recent interpretations of Tarde's view of the self.

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[8] Lynch is unique among the memeticist in propagating a "non imperialistic" relation between memetics and other approaches, claiming that a kind of division of labour between different approaches is required (Lynch 1996: ix).

[9] Cf. also the almost identical formulations in Dennett (1995: 346). For a diagnosis of the "fundamental incompatibility" between the memetic approach and "the Cartesian voluntarism implicit in much social sciences", see also Marsden (1998).

[10] In Dennett's words, memes transform the "operating system" or "the computational architecture of the brain" (Dennett 1995: 340).

II. Meme Ontology

Looking back on the quarter of a century that has passed since Richard Dawkins, in his book on *The Selfish Gene,* first envisioned the memetic approach to culture, it still seems unclear whether or not it should be called successful in its own terms. On the one hand, memetics has gained considerable attention, especially from the side of the general public. At the same time, however, and in spite of all efforts (see, e.g., the *Journal of Memetics*)[11] and a steadily growing body of memetic literature, 'memetic thinking' is by and large still a rather marginal phenomenon in the social and cultural sciences. Looking from afar, it seems that this might have to do with the fact that in spite of considerable efforts, some basic issues concerning the core concepts of the theory have not yet been settled. Most prominent among these is the question concerning the ontology of the meme. As some memeticists say themselves, there is still no convincing answer to the question what memes really *are* (cf. Blackmore 1996: 92). In the relevant literature, memes are often defined by their way of replication: memes are units of imitation. This answer, however, simply begs the question. What is it that is imitated when somebody tells a story that she has read in the paper, or wears clothes according to the latest fashion, or unconsciously humms some tune which she has picked up in the elevator to her office, or uses the new recipe for cooking tomato soup that he has gotten from his mother-in-law? At first look, one might think that there is a simple 'physicalist' or 'naturalist' answer to that question. Why not define the meme by the 'physical manifestation' of all of these practices, i.e. the sequence of sounds in the case of the tune, the shape, colours and fabric of the clothes, the composition of the ingredients in the soup? Upon closer consideration, however, it becomes apparent that the physicalist approach is flawed. It seems obvious that in some cases at least, the physical 'bearer' or 'manifestation' of the meme has to be distinguished from the meme itself. Thus the story of the spider in the yucca palm might have completely changed its 'physical appearance' (in terms of sound-waves or ink lines) along its way, e.g. when it crossed the border between the English speaking world and the French speaking world. The sounds (as well as other 'physical manifestations' such as signs) are different, but the meme itself is unaffected by this change. Whether told in English or in French, it is still the same story, i.e. the same meme. Same meme, different 'physical manifestation': something similar happens when an orally transmitted story is written down. After the process, the physical 'bearer' is a completely different one (ink stains on paper instead of sound waves); the meme itself, however, remains the same.

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[11] Cf. http://jom-emit.cfpm.org/.

Thus the physicalist approach to the ontology of the meme reaches an impasse. It seems that in the case of the story, as well as in all similar cases (i.e. where institutional facts are concerned), it's not the physical manifestation of the symbols themselves that make up the meme, but their *meaning*.[12] True, some physical manifestation is *always* required for something to have meaning. However, it is not the physics in itself, but our *practices* that settle the meaning of such phenomena as the sound waves and ink stains we produce and interpret when we communicate. This suggests that instead of a physicalist approach, an *intentionalist* approach to the ontology of memes is required. In Dennett's words, the meme is visible only in the "intentional stance" (Dennett 1995: 356).[13] The meme is the *intentional object*, i.e. whatever people *mean* by uttering those sounds or making these marks.

From this, however, arises a fundamental critique of the memetic 'shift of perspective', and its orientation on the neo-Darwinian model of genetic evolution. The problem is this. Meaning is ontologically different from brute natural facts: the ink lines on the paper, the sequences of sound waves have a *meaning* not in themselves, but only in relation to *somebody*. In this sense, the memes are *ontologically subjective*.[14] To use the examples John R. Searle gives to illustrate the difference between the ontologically objective and the ontologically subjective, memes (in terms of the 'meaning' of signs of any kind) are more of the kind of pains and aches than of the kind of mountains or molecules. They are not there independently of whether or not there is somebody who is aware of them, which makes them different from things such as mountains, which existed long before there was any consciousness of their existence. As social facts, symbols have a radically *subjective mode of existence*. It is only 'for us' ('us' in the sense of the members of the widest possible, the least parochial community of interpreters) that the scribblings and sounds that we use to communicate have the meaning they have. Thus it seems quite obvious that whoever talks about symbols, or institutional facts in general, cannot remain silent about 'us', the form of life whose conventions are constitutive of the institutional facts, which are the focus of memetic analysis. Memetic analysis has to take an 'intentional stance'

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[12] I will not discuss the question of whether or not all memes have to be of the kind of symbols, or institutional facts. Personally, I'm inclined to answer this question in the negative (take the example of a tune: with very few exceptions, tunes are sequences of sound-waves which do not have a "meaning", at least in the linguistic sense of the word. Thus in my view, an elaborated 'meme ontology' would have to start out with sorting out such differences, beginning with the difference between memes of the symbolic sort and memes of the non-symbolic kind. I conjecture that the turnout of this enterprise would be that 'meme' is an equivocal term. In the following, I am exclusively concerned with memes of the 'symbolic' sort.

[13] For a description of the 'intentional stance' see Dennett (1978: 236–42).

[14] For an analysis of the basic traits of ontological subjectivity see Searle (1995: 7 ff.).

towards us, because memetics is ultimately about what we *mean* when we do things such as producing certain sounds, or making marks on the paper.

In his analysis of *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, Dennett asks the decisive question concerning the ontology of memes: "what stands to a meme as DNA stands to a gene?" (Dennett 1995: 353). It seems that if, as Dennett himself seems to suggests, what 'makes up' the meme is ontologically subjective, then an unbridgeable rift opens up between memetic and genetic evolution, which has far-reaching consequences for the status of the memetic approach to culture. 'Our' relation to our genes is fundamentally different from the relation to our memes. In the case of memes, there is no equivalent to the DNA-sequences that floated freely in the primordial soup long before they began to build themselves 'survival machines' in order to survive in the struggle for existence. Because other than DNA, meaning is ontologically subjective, our relation to the memes is not that of a contingent 'meme machine'; beyond the 'survival machines' the memes have built themselves, and beyond the 'heap of dung' which more or less by accident is the 'ecological niche' in which memes thrive, we play much more important a role on the stage of cultural evolution. We are not simply 'meme machines' in the sense in which we might rightly be called 'gene machines'. And we are not just a part of the copying environment in which memes compete. Insofar as the relation to 'us' is an essential part of what meaning *is*, we are *constitutive* of the very 'matter' of which memes consist.[15] There is simply no meaning (and no memes) in the world without conscious beings having intentions, thoughts, and feelings, and without them being capable of interpretation, and mutual imitation, and of communication by means of the use of symbols. Thus it seems that from the ontological differences between genes and memes, *serious doubts arise concerning the transfer of the genetic 'paradigm shift' to the memetic level.* As shown in section I, this transfer is central to the memetic program. With the result of this section, it seems that it rests on a mistake. There is no equivalent to the

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[15] As is self-evident from what is said above, my use of the terms 'ontological subjectivity' and 'constitution' does not mean that I am committed to the view that meaning is 'produced' by some sovereign decisions of self-transparent subjective wills. In this context, 'ontological subjectivity' simply means that for such 'brute facts' as sound waves, ink lines, and alike to have meaning, there has to be somebody around in relation to which those brute facts mean (or used to mean) what they mean (even though this 'somebody' might be utterly intransparent to herself and completely un-sovereign. More than self-intransparent, the subject in question might even be dead. For the latter case take the example of 'indecipherable' signs from ancient ages, which still do have a meaning, even though there is nobody around who can tell us what that meaning *is*). Also, by calling meaning ontologically subjective, I am by no means committed to some radical idealist view according to which all events can be traced back to self-transparent subjects. Indeed I claim that such a view is a mere caricature of the 'traditional view', a mere fiction of some versions of the critique of the 'autonomous self' which were put forth about a quarter of a century ago, and which live a strange kind of after-life in some strands of current 'continental' social theory.

neo-Darwinian, genetic shift of perspective from 'us' to 'them' in the cultural sphere. Independently of 'us' (i.e. the members of the widest community of communication), the memes would simply not exist. There is no equivalent to the primordial DNA (that is ontologically objective) in memetic evolution. Because it is ultimately about *meaning*, memetics is always and inevitably about 'us', i.e. the forms of life that make it possible to bestow things such as certain sequences of sounds with *meaning*. Memetics cannot abstract from those creatures that *make sense* of physical facts. This fundamental difference between 'our' relation to the (ontologically objective) genes on the one hand and 'our' relation to the (ontologically subjective) memes on the other gets out of sight because the memeticists are driven by the urge keep their theory of cultural evolution as close as possible to the neo-Darwinian model of genetic evolution.

As mentioned above, it was because he wanted to sound the word a little bit more like 'gene' that Richard Dawkins cut a syllable off the Greek word 'mimema' when he coined the term 'meme'. This episode concerning its origin (Dawkins reports it himself) epitomizes what is problematic about the whole memetic venture, wrapping up nicely the fatal tendency of memeticists to model cultural evolution on genetic evolution. Just as Dawkins simply cut off the word what did not seem to fit, memeticists distort the phenomenon to fit the model of genetic evolution. Once one becomes aware of this problem, the question remains to be answered: what will the memetic research program have to turn into, once the orientation on the model of genetic evolution (which is so fundamental and so fatal for the memetic account at the same time) is given up? What does an adequate understanding of cultural evolution look like?

III. Évolution par association

The importance of Tarde's *Laws of Imitation* (Tarde 1921) for the issues at stake in the controversies around the memetic project has not escaped the notice both of memeticists and of their critics. Even though there is no systematic analysis of the topic available as yet, it seems that there are three typical views of the relation between memetics and Tarde's theory of imitation. The first view is expressed in a paper that has stirred much of the current 'Tardomania'. In his paper 'Gabriel Tarde and the End of the Social', Bruno Latour claims that the memetic account (Latour refers to Blackmore) is just some 'simplified version' of Tarde's monadology, thereby implying that on the fundamental level at least, there is no real disagreement between these theories (Latour 2002: 119–20). The second view concurs with the first, but gives a different twist to the diagnosis of some 'fundamental agreement'. Looking from the 'memetic' side of the relation in question, Paul Marsden has made a similar remarks concerning some deep affinity – even though in his 'memetic' view, the integration between Tarde's theory of imitation and

Memetics goes the other way around. Following Marsden, Tarde's "programme for sociology" has so "much in common with the memetic project", that in spite of his deplorable failure to grasp and appreciate the essential features of Darwinism and in spite of his somewhat less concise concept of imitation, Tarde should be honoured as one of the most important "Forefathers of Memetics" (Marsden 2000). The third view (which is closest to the one to be developed in the following) does not deny the similarities either. Here, Tarde is credited with having anticipated almost everything that is interesting about memetics. At the same time, however, a fundamental difference between Tarde and Memetics is emphasized. In his critique of the memetic project, Gustav Jahoda focuses on the memetic 'shift of paradigm' or 'shift of perspective' which in his view, seems to be the main mistake of memetics, especially of Blackmore's interpretation. "Intentionality has been transferred away from humans and to the memes" (Jahoda 2002: 65). According to Jahoda, his reluctance to make this move is what makes an alleged "Forefather of Memetics" such as Gabriel Tarde superior to the memeticists themselves.

Before addressing this particular issue, let us take a closer look on Tarde's relation to Darwinism. Tarde's paper on 'Darwinisme naturel et darwinisme social' from 1884 provides a vivid illustration of some of the problems that, at first look at least, faced any adaptation of pre-genetic Darwinian thinking for the purpose of the social sciences. Paradoxically, the most basic problem does not arise from the biological orientation of Darwin's theory. Rather, it stems precisely from those motifs, which Darwin had taken over from social science. In Tarde's view at least, Darwin's fatal mistake was to follow the Manchester School of Economics in its obsession with (and fixation on) the "magic power of competition" ("vertu magique de la concurrence", Tarde 1884: 614). Tarde is well aware of the fact that the Darwinian motifs of the 'struggle for existence' and the 'survival of the fittest'[16] originated in the theory of capitalism. And it is on these grounds that Tarde criticizes Darwinian 'selectionisme'. Following Tarde, the problem of Darwinism is not the transfer from the 'social' to the 'natural' or vice versa, as one might think from the title of Tarde's paper, but the fact that Darwin has made the wrong choice in modelling the theory of evolution on a distorted theory of economic competition. In Tarde's view, competition, rivalry and conflict are only one of the two fundamental types of social relations, the other being *cooperation*, which in economical terms corresponds to labour ("travail"; cf. Tarde 1884: 614). For Tarde, Darwin's "Manchester school-like" tendency to overestimate the role of rivalry and competition at the cost of the role of cooperation led him to neglect the very preconditions of any 'struggle for existence': "one has to be strong in order to fight, and strength

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[16] For these two core concepts of the Darwinian account, see Darwin (1975), chapters 5–6.

comes from interior unity" (Tarde 1884: 613). In this view, any 'struggle for life' *presupposes cooperation*. What makes the individual body 'fit' is the cooperation between the organs. Thus contrary to Darwin's account, *cooperation* rather than *competition* should be the prime topic of analysis. Tarde sums up his criticism of Darwinism, when he propagates to replace Darwinian 'selectionisme' by an understanding of 'évolution par association' (Tarde 1884: 613).

A lot of the insights that put Tarde back on the map of current social theory (after a rather long 'latency phase', is directly connected to this theory of 'évolution par association', especially the idea that any individual is a society, and the thesis that any whole is always less complex than its parts (in his paper, Tarde presents both of these views as direct objections to Darwin; Tarde 1884: 609). However, I will not pursue this particular aspect of Tarde's 'évolution par association' any further here. Independently of the question of whether or not this criticism, as directed against Darwin, was justified (at first sight at least it seems that it was), it clearly seems that genetic neo-Darwinism does not adhere to the old metaphysics of the development from simple elements to complex wholes anymore, thus making a renewal of the Tardean line of critique somewhat redundant. Neo-Darwinians are generally aware of the communal character of wholes, and, connected with this, of the complexity of lower levels of integration. As Richard Dawkins puts it, any individual has basically a "communal character" (Dawkins 1976: 25): it is the (more or less) cooperative project of a large multitude of genes. And along these lines, nothing seems to speak against seeing the genes themselves, in turn, as cooperative projects to provide for the preservation of the even more complex molecular protein structures that make up the genes. Thus it seems that modern, genetic evolutionary theory has long integrated the basic insight of Tarde's 'évolution par association', the insight that any higher-level competition (e.g. between individuals) goes hand in hand with lower level-cooperation (e.g. between genes). It seems that what Tarde harshly criticizes under the title of *selectionisme* has not much to do with Neo-Darwinian thinking in the first place. Indeed it might even appear that Tarde's 'evolution by association' fully conforms to the neo-Darwinian memetic program. For Tarde himself identifies 'association' (or 'travail') with imitation (Tarde 1884: 615), and famously, Tarde compares the role of imitation for the social with that of inheritance in the biological sphere (both are forms of 'universal repetition', the third being 'ondulation' within the physical sphere; see Tarde 1921: 1 ff.). This closely parallels the memetic idea that imitation and inheritance are the two 'ways of replication' in the genetic and memetic evolution, respectively. Beyond the idea of replication, Tarde's theory of imitation also seems to include *variation* and *selection*, the other two essential features of any theory of evolution. According to Tarde, variation is an essential feature of any imitation: "actually, even the most imitative of all men is innovative in some respect" ("à vrai dire, le plus imitateur des hommes est novateur par quelque côté," Tarde 1921: ix). And when

such innovations in turn become the object of imitation, they are not only subject to all sorts of *recombinations* and mutual *reinforcements*, but sometimes stand in a direct 'struggle for existence' against each other. Tarde captures this in a concept he takes over from the physics of waves when he speaks of the various phenomena of 'interference' between imitations, and he gives a detailed description of what parallels the role of selection in the theory of evolution under the heading *le duel logique* (Tarde 1921: 167–87). At the same time, the relation between Tarde's theory of imitation and the memetic account of cultural evolution is not exhausted in close analogies that are somewhat obscured by a few minor misunderstandings of the essence of Darwinism on Tarde's side. Tarde, who is not obsessed with the memetic idea of modelling cultural evolution on genetic evolution, gives a surprisingly clear and convincing answer to the question concerning the nature of the content of imitation:

> What is imitated is always an idea or a wish, a judgement or a plan, in which a certain amount of *belief* and *desire* are expressed, which is the entire soul of the words of a language, the prayers of a religion, the administrations of a government, the paragraphs of a code of law, the duties of a moral system, the work of an industry, the products of an art. (Tarde 1921: 157)[17]

The ultimate 'objects of imitation' are our beliefs and desires. This requires a somewhat more ambitious concept of imitation than the one that is commonly used. In Tarde's words, imitation does not go "outside in", but "inside out". It does not pick up what is observable about the actions of others first. Rather, the imitation of other people's expressions and behaviour comes

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[17] *"Ce* qui est imité, c'est toujours une idée ou un vouloir, un jugement ou un dessein, où s'exprime une certaine dose de *croyance* et de *désir*, qui est en effet toute l'âme des mots d'une langue, des prières d'une religion, des administrations d'un État, des articles d'un code, des devoirs d'une morale, des travaux d'une industrie, des procédés d'un art" (Translations from *Les lois de l'imitation,* as well as from 'Darwinisme naturel et darwinisme social'*,* are by me). Shortly after the above-quoted passage*,* Tarde argues that beyond the apparent duality of belief and desire, the ultimate object of imitation (and thus the essence of society) is *belief,* because in the last resort, belief (in the form of convictions) is what desire is all about (cf. Tarde 1921: 160, where Tarde provides some further explanations). This view seems to reflect the classical 'Cartesian' primate of cognitive intentionality (cognitive attitudes such as beliefs) over practical intentionality (practical attitudes such as intentions), as criticized by Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time* (1996 [1927]: §12-13). Without being able to argue at sufficient length here, I see no real reason to follow Tarde on this reductive move.

only *after* the imitation of their ideas.[18] This understanding of imitation goes much against the grain of Stephen Turner's recent attempt to turn Tarde into the leading figure of a whole alternative paradigm in social theory, because the latter is based on an 'externalist' understanding of imitation, in which it is only and exclusively the 'outside aspects' of actions which are imitated.[19] At the same time, Tarde's 'internalist' theory of imitation seems to offer a convincing solution to the above-mentioned problem that faces the memeticist account. *Tarde's approach to cultural evolution does justice to the ontologically subjective character of the 'replicators'.* If 'evolution by association' is about our beliefs and desires, it is, as a matter of course, always and inevitably about *us,* i.e. about the kind of creatures whose beliefs and desires cultural evolution is all about. Thus Tarde's theory of 'evolution by association' avoids the fatal memeticist tendency to displace the 'self' by the meme. This does not mean, however, that Tarde returns to the subject as 'author' and sovereign in the cultural sphere. The Tardean view on the role of imitation does not provide support to the anti-memetic thesis that the assumption of a 'meme's eye perspective' (in terms of an inherent tendency of the memes to replicate) is unnecessary because memes are copied only insofar as they seem to be useful for the projects of *persons* (and not because replication is good for the meme's own project).[20] In a Tardean view, imitation is not about copying what seems useful for one's projects. Rather it is, *the projects themselves* that are copied (and with it the standards by which usefulness is measured).

IV. The Self Between Hypnosis and 'Openness to the External World'

Thus the role and concept of the self in the Tardean theory of socio-cultural evolution is different both from the memetic view and from the concept of the self as the sovereign 'source' and 'author' of the cultural. In a Tardean perspective, the self is neither the 'heap of dung' the selective environment), or the 'survival machine' of memes, nor the 'wrong idea of the self' against which the memeticist critique is levelled.

But what is it, then? In a famous passage of his *Laws of Imitation*, Tarde compares the state of the subject in society to that of a *hypnotized* individual.

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[18] Cf. Tarde (1921: 225): "Cette marche du *dedans* au *dehors*, si l'on cherche à l'exprimer avec plus de précision, signifie deux choses: 1° que l'imitation des idées précède celle de leur expression; 2° que l'imitation des buts précède celle des moyens. Les *dedans* sont des buts ou des idées; les dehors, des moyens ou des expressions."

[19] Cf. Turner (2000: 106): "Imitation is wholly external: one can imitate only what one can see or hear, that is to say, the externals of an act, thus the content of imitation, are limited by our ability to identify something to copy. We may imitate unconsciously, but this does not mean that we have special powers of unconscious discernment that allows us to discern anything other than the external aspects of what we imitate."

[20] For such a view cf. Millikan (2003: 105–6).

The social state, just as the hypnotic state, is a dream of control and a dream in action. It is the illusion of both the somnambulist and the social human being alike to take those ideas to be spontaneous, which in fact she has taken over by suggestion. (Tarde 1921: 83)[21]

In this sense, the fact of imitation (which, according to Tarde, is the essence of the social) seems to run counter to our alleged 'intentional autonomy'.[22] If beliefs and desires are ontologically subjective in the sense that there has to be someone who 'has' the beliefs and desires in question, it is also true that these beliefs and desires are not really *hers* or *his*. Famously, Tarde (1921: 266 ff.) criticizes the allegedly 'enlightened' self-understanding of modern men who think to have freed themselves from the old authoritarian structures, and to follow only their own best judgement. In Tarde's view, this vision of the sovereign enlightened self is purely illusionary, for all that has changed between the middle ages and modernity is that people now mutually hypnotize each other, instead of being hypnotized by some leading figures or traditions. Thus the Tardean version of cultural evolution, just like the memetic version, requires some 'shift of perspective'. However, in the case of the Tardean model of cultural evolution, this 'shift of perspective' is no shift away from 'our intentionality' to the 'meme's eye view', as it is in the memetic project. Tardean evolution is not just about 'memes' in terms of thoughts and desires. The Tardean version of the evolutionary 'shift of perspective' is much more complex than the memetic one. Instead of changing the cast of the evolutionary play, instead of replacing our intentionality as the hero at the centre of the stage with some new agent (i.e. the meme), the scene is left intact, but it is shown in a whole new and different light. Our intentions (beliefs, desires and affective intentions) are not viewed in the perspective of their "direction of fit" (to use Searle's terminology; cf. Searle 1983). It is not (or not primarily) the *truth* of our beliefs or the *fulfilment* of our desires, i.e. the relation between the intentional subject – the one who 'has' the intention – and the intentional content, i.e. whatever the intention in question is *about*, which is highlighted in the Tardean perspective. The social side of our intentions is not to be found in the relation between the intentional subject and the intentional content, but in the relation between different intentional subjects. What makes beliefs and desires the object of analysis in social

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[21] "L'état social, comme l'état hypnotique, n'est qu'une forme du rêve de commande et un rêve en action. N'avoir que des idées suggérées et les croire spontanées: telle est l'illusion propre au somnambule, et aussi bien à l'homme social."

[22] For a powerful holistic defence of intentional autonomy against the collectivist alternative that has been of tremendous influence in analytical social theory see Pettit (1996).

science is not the fact that these intentions do (or do not) refer (or meet their conditions of satisfaction), it is not a matter of what these beliefs are *about* (and of whether the beliefs in question are true or not). Rather, it is a matter of how these beliefs spread (or vanish) in a population. Thus the perspective of the theory of 'evolution by association' cuts across our everyday perspective. Whereas normally, our intentions are relevant to us in the perspective of what they are *about*, the Tardean view looks at from where (or whom) these intentions are *taken over*, and to whom (and how) they are *passed on.*

For a more precise understanding of the relation between these two divergent perspectives (which might be called the 'referential' view and the 'social' view, respectively), it is important to keep in mind the following. Tarde criticizes the view of our individual self as the source of all of our intentionality, a view which is proven wrong by the fact that most of our beliefs and desires are by no means our own individual creations, but in fact taken over from others. However, Tarde does not claim that the question of whether or not intentions meet their conditions of satisfaction (i.e. whether or not beliefs are true), is *irrelevant* for an understanding of our intentionality (i.e. our beliefs and desires). And the fact that imitation is the way by which most beliefs are acquired does not mean that the beliefs and desires that are the object of Tardean analysis do *not* refer to an external world. True, this is what Tarde seems to suggest when, in the most famous passage of *Laws of Imitation*, he characterizes the "social man" as a "somnambule" (Tarde 1921: 83). It is tempting to interpret this passage as saying that it is not our relation to the external world, but our relation to our 'co-believers' that determines what we believe. Upon a closer reading, however, it becomes apparent that Tarde's view between the 'social' or 'imitative' character of our beliefs on the one hand, and our intentional 'openness' to the external world (an expression which Tarde occasionally uses himself!)[23] on the other is much more complex than that. In order not to misinterpret Tarde's somnambule, it is crucial to read closely:

> Assume a man who, *by way of hypothesis stripped of all extra-social influence, of the direct sight of the natural objects, of the spontaneous obsessions of his different senses, has no communication but with his fellow human beings* … Is not this the object suited for the study, through experience and

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[23] Cf., e.g., Tarde (1921: 86), where he speaks of the individual human being as a "natural being, susceptible and open to the impressions of the external nature" ("être naturel, sensible et ouvert aux impressions de la nature extérieure"), thus contrasting the 'natural' intentional openness with the 'social' somnambulism.

observation, of the essential features of the social relation, thus *detached of all influences of natural order and physics …?* (Tarde 1921: 83)[24]

In other words, Tarde's somnambule is an *abstract* entity, i.e. the result of an abstractive experiment of thought. The fact that our beliefs and desires are taken over from others characterizes us as *social* beings. This, however, does not mean that the reference to the world ("direct sight of the natural objects") and the spontaneity of some elementary form of desires ("spontaneous obsessions") are inexistent in (or inessential to) our intentionality. Tarde does not mean to claim that it is only as *social* beings that we have beliefs and desires. He just states that very often, our intentionality has a *social* aspect, which consists in the fact that our beliefs and desires are taken over from others, and that if and insofar as this is the case, the intentionality in question cannot be analyzed *exclusively* in terms of the relation between the 'subject' on the one hand and the 'object' which the intention is 'about' on the other. In this case, the relation to other 'intenders' (which runs across the intentional subject-object-relation) has to be taken into account. And this is what social science is supposed to do.

Thus it seems that even though Tarde's image of the *social* man (the somnambulist) seems to fly into the face of the modern human self-image, his *overall view* of our beliefs and desires is compatible with a great deal of *intentional autonomy* in terms of spontaneity of desires and intentional openness to the external world. (As we shall see below, Tarde even suggests that our intentional openness is a *precondition* of our social somnambulism.)

Before taking a closer look at the relation between intentional openness and somnambulism, a critical remark concerning the current 'Tardomania' (Mucchielli 2000) is in order. The fact that Tarde characterizes his somnambulist, i.e. the purely imitative dimension of our beliefs and desires, as the result of an *abstractive* experiment of thought puts him directly at odds with those of his present-time interpreters who like to see the imitative dimension as the 'foundation' of our beliefs and desires (typical for this view is Leys 1993). As the above-quoted passage indicates, this is not what Tarde suggests. Tarde introduces his somnambulist quite explicitly as an abstract entity. Abstractions, however, are generally rather unfit for foundational purposes of any kind. For any abstraction *presupposes* whatever

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[24] "Supposez un homme qui, *soustrait par hypothèse* à toute influence extra-sociale, à la vue directe des objets naturels, aux obsessions spontanées de ses divers sens, n'ait de communication qu'avec ses semblables … [N]'est-ce pas sur ce sujet de choix qu'il conviendra d'étudier, par l'expérience et l'observation, les caractères vraiment essentiels du rapport social, *dégagé ainsi de toute influence d'ordre naturel et physique …?*" (my emphasis).

[26] "Si l'être social n'était pas en même temps un être naturel, sensible et ouvert aux impressions de la nature extérieure … il ne serait point susceptible de changement."

it is that is left out of the picture in the course of the abstractive process. In this sense, Tarde's picture of the *somnambule* as the 'social self' *presupposes* the sense in which social *and* 'extra-social' influences are closely intertwined (indeed, as we shall see below, Tarde claims that the social self has its roots in the pre-social sphere). This, however, is at odds with some recent attempts to pit Tarde against some or another more 'traditional' view of the role of the self. Contrary to what Ruth Leys seems to think, Tarde does not "break with the Cartesian ontology of the autonomous subject by defining the self in terms of the social" (Leys 1993: 282). As we have seen, Tarde is well aware of the extra-social dimensions of selfhood even when he draws our attention to the social aspects. What he does is something quite different from breaking with the 'Cartesian ontology of the autonomous subject': he adds a *social ontology* to the Cartesian ontology of the mind. At first look at least, it might even seem that Tarde is not completely free of the under-socialized (or perhaps even anti-social) Cartesian image of intentionality, according to which anything that is 'valid', 'true' and 'authentic' about our intentionality is basically a matter of the monological representation of the external world in the secluded immanence of the individual mind. In the Cartesian view, the self is 'social' only insofar as it is disturbed and deflected by 'social' factors such as authority, traditions and conventions. Tarde is much closer to this view than one would guess from his current reception. Thus he explicitly states that it is only because we are not just 'social' beings, but also 'natural' beings, that we can *change* and *renew* our lives and culture: "If the social being was not at the same time a natural being, sensitive to the impressions of the external nature … he would not be susceptible to change" (Tarde 1921: 86).[26]

More than this, in a passage that faintly echoes Descartes's departure from social life in his "lonely withdrawal"[28] to his secluded castle in his *meditationes*, Tarde says that to make inventions or discoveries, we have to break away from our groups and societies: "In order to innovate, in order to make discoveries, in order to wake up for a moment from her or his familial or national dream, the individual has to escape from her or his society for a moment" (Tarde 1921: 95).[29] Upon a closer look, however, it becomes apparent that the relation between the 'natural' and the 'social' aspects of our intentionality is not as static as it may first appear. Tarde

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[28] Cf. Descartes' *Meditationes de prima philosophia*, 1st Meditation, §3.

[29] "Pour innover, pour découvrir, pour s'éveiller un instant de son rêve familial ou national, l'individu doit échapper momentanément à sa société."

[31] "Ces croyances et ces besoins, que l'invention et l'imitation spécifient et qu'en ce sens elles créent … *ont leur source profonde au-dessous du monde social, dans le monde vivant*."

makes clear that there is no clear-cut line between the 'natural' and 'social' aspects of beliefs and desires. It is not the case that our beliefs and desires are *either* to be located in our 'sensual' relation to the world *or* taken over from others by means of imitation. Rather, our natural 'openness to the external world' (as "natural beings, susceptible and open to the impressions of the external nature"; Tarde 1921: 86) on the one hand, and our 'hypnotized' state as social 'somnambules' on the other, are in a close interplay. By way of imitation, beliefs and desires are 'refined' both by new inventions and by other imitations (Tarde 1921: 159). In this sense, new discoveries about the 'external nature' are often made on the base of beliefs, which are taken over by way of imitation. At the same time, Tarde makes clear that the 'natural' is more basic than the 'social' insofar our 'openness to the external world' logically *precedes* our 'somnambulism'. All beliefs and desires are ultimately rooted in the pre-social dimension of our intentionality: "These beliefs and desires, which are specified (and in this sense created) by invention and imitation, *have their deeper source beneath the social world, in the living world*" (Tarde 1921: 159; my emphasis).[31]

In this sense, the 'referential' aspect precedes the social aspect of our intentionality. The referential 'aboutness' of our intentionality, i.e. our intentional 'openness to the external world', is more fundamental than the imitative character of our beliefs and desires. Thus the picture of our 'somnambulism' has to be relativized. If we take over other's beliefs and desires by means of imitation, this is only *insofar* and *because* as 'natural' (i.e. pre-social) beings, our intentionality already entails a genuine 'openness to the external world'. This directly relates to the question of the role of the self in Tardean 'evolution by association'. The following overall view emerges. Our intentional 'somnambulism' is ultimately founded in our 'openness to the external world'; in most cases, the two 'aspects' of our intentionality (the 'referential' or 'natural' and the 'social') do not conflict with each other, but stand in a relation of mutual refinement and specification. At the same time, Tarde is well aware of the fact that there are exceptions to the rule. The 'hypnotic' power of certain beliefs to conquer our minds by way of imitation does not always go nicely hand in hand with the truth of these beliefs. Thus in his paper *Darwinisme naturel et darwinisme social*, Tarde describes the Darwinian selectionist idea of the 'survival of the fittest' as a "magic formula which has the gift to capture the mind which it enters". However, Tarde does not think that the spread of this idea is in any sense inevitable. Indeed, he calls upon his readers to beware the "bewitching power" of this and similar ideas ("méfions-nous de leur ensorcellement" Tarde 1884: 607). Thus Tarde addresses us not *only* as the social 'somnambules' who believe whatever they are told, but *also* as 'natural' beings who, to some degree at least, are able to resist those 'contagious thoughts' by means of a critical assessment of their *truth or falsity*.

I conclude with a brief list of the main arguments of this paper. 1) By contrast to the units of biological evolution (genes), the units of cultural evolution ('memes') are ontologically subjective. 2) This is ignored in the memetic view, which heavily distorts the theory of cultural evolution to fit the all-powerful model of genetic evolution. 3) The mistaken analogy between gene and 'meme' leads to a mistaken view of the role of the self. 4) Gabriel Tarde presents us with a theory of cultural evolution that is not flawed by the memetic orientation on genetics. 5) Tarde's concept of the 'social self' does justice to the social aspects of our intentionality, without being incompatible with a robust conception of intentional autonomy.

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