

THE FIVE GROUP QUESTIONS ON PAPER STRIPS

1. Is religion the opium of the people?

2. Are communism and fascism quasi-religions?

3. Is fanatical devotion to a sports team similar to religious observance?

4. What is secularism? Provide some real life examples of secularism in action.

5. Are religion and science incompatible Knowledge Systems?

DAWKINS: THE GOD MEME—GOING VIRAL?

Consider the idea of God. We do not know how it arose in the meme pool. Probably it originated many times by independent 'mutation'. In any case, it is very old indeed. How does it replicate itself? By the spoken and written word, aided by great music and great art. Why does it have such high survival value? Remember that 'survival value' here does not mean value for a gene in a gene pool, but value for a meme in a meme pool. The question really means: What is it about the idea of a god that gives it its stability and penetrance in the cultural environment? The survival value of the god meme in the meme pool results from its great psychological appeal.

It provides a superficially plausible answer to deep and troubling questions about existence. It suggests that injustices in this world may be rectified in the next. The 'everlasting arms' hold out a cushion against our own inadequacies which, like a doctor's placebo, is none the less effective for being imaginary. These are some of the reasons why the idea of God is copied so readily by successive generations of individual brains. God exists if only in the form of a meme with high survival value, or infective power, in the environment provided by human culture.

Dawkins, Richard (1989) *The Selfish Gene*. [First published 1976] Oxford University Press.

EASY WARM-UP QUESTION

- **Why is the transmission of cultural memes so much faster than biological evolution based on genes made of DNA?**

MORE CHALLENGING QUESTIONS

- **Do we have an innate predisposition for religion rather like our propensity for language? Could religious belief be somehow encoded in our genes?**
- **How might powerful survival tendencies like ascribing agency (cause and effect) and personifying the things we observe play into the origin of religion ?**

- How might intellectual traits like our tendency to simplify, idealize and explore concepts like infinity?

LIMITS OF EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY

- The “scientific” questions above represent provocative and fascinating lines of inquiry; but they are essentially “How” questions. Are we missing the point entirely if religion is fundamentally concerned with very big “Why” questions?
- If we can show convincingly that there is a biological basis for religion—think carefully—does that change anything?
- If we take a strictly scientific stance are the ultimate “Why” questions meaningless? Is the only remaining option silence?