

Constellations of Dangerous Ideas

Hunter Beaumont, PhD.

For some years now, I have been interested in using constellations to explore the effect of certain dangerous ideas on human social systems. Although I recognized the phenomenon some years ago and gradually developed some ways of working with these dangerous ideas, I did not have a language adequate to describe what I was observing and doing. During the past few years I have slowly found a way of thinking about these phenomena that is both clear and elegant. Here is my first attempt to summarize my thoughts in a published paper.

In a TED talk from the year 2002¹ the philosopher Dan Dennet introduced the term “dangerous ideas”. In that talk he describes a parasite (*Dicrocoelium dendriticum*) that changes the brain of the host ant in which it lives, causing the ant to behave in ways that are harmful to the ant, but good for the parasite. It causes the ant to leave the colony every evening and to crawl to the tip of a blade of grass, where it uses its mandibles to cling tightly until dawn. This behavior has no advantage for the ant. In fact, it is very dangerous because it puts the ant in a good position to be eaten by a cow, sheep or horse – which kills the ant but allows the parasite to propagate. This is an example of genetic information self-replicating across generations. The same idea applied to humans is information (genetic or otherwise) that causes us to behave in ways that are not good for us.

The English biologist Richard Dawkins invented the word “meme” as a name for self-replicating cultural information that also crosses between individuals and evolves over generations. Examples of memes are the baggy trousers that teen-agers in many different cultures wear along with their base-ball caps worn with the bill turned back or to the side. Or the conviction that feeding babies from a bottle is healthier than breast feeding, a conviction which has led to thousands of infant deaths in developing countries.

In his TED talk Dennett goes on to describe “dangerous ideas” that infect humans like parasites, causing us to act in ways that are not in our best interests. Suicide bombers, for example, kill themselves and other innocent fellow human-beings, in the conviction that they are doing something “good”. Anorexic girls starve to death in the conviction that fat is ugly while others balloon to body sizes that are distinctly unhealthy because some unknown factor or factors interfere with their felt sense of what is healthy. All beliefs, convictions and ideologies function as memes. Some are very healthy and good, but others are dangerous ideas.

The recent film, *Das Weisse Band*, dramatically demonstrates the effect of “memes” or “dangerous ideas” on the lives of normal villagers only 100 years ago. Such dangerous ideas affect us because we believe that they are true, although they may only be interested in their own self-replication, not in our well being. In *Das Weisse Band* we recognize dangerous ideas about the body, about emotional expression, about right and wrong that quite clearly had a destructive effect on the lives of the people they had infected as well as on the history of the entire world, contributing as they did to both the first and second world wars.

Working in multi-cultural contexts confronts us with the very difficult question of recognizing which memes are healthy and which are dangerous? According to what criteria shall we distinguish between healthy and dangerous beliefs?

Family Constellations may offer some help, although there are many stories of constellation facilitators imposing their destructive memes on their clients. One of the destructive idea that I have been exploring with the aid of family constellations is what I call “hatred of the body”. This meme is often associated with religious beliefs and appears to have played a huge role in limiting the development of nourishing intimacy between partners in our grand-parents’ and earlier generations. This particular meme has a powerful influence on our experience and understanding of ourselves as men and women and on our capacity for intimacy with partners and children.

¹ (http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/dan_dennett_on_dangerous_memes.html). see also: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dicrocoelium_dendriticum)

It has been customary in family constellations to ask, “What actually happened?” in the conviction that actual events have more reality than family narrative. The power of this question has been well documented, and I still find the question brilliant in its capacity to cut through confusing family memories. However, in some constellations it has also been useful to ask, “What did he/she believe about intimacy and/or body?” There is often no way to answer this question objectively, Occasionally someone may remember something that grandmother said (or was reported to have said), but that is rare. More often, the beliefs must be inferred from their trans-generational effects. Then we are investigating the effect of a meme and not grandmother’s actual belief.

For example, a someone suffers from difficulties with intimacy in partnership. We may ask about abortions, previous relationships, identifications with unacknowledged partners of our parents or grandparents, and we may find patterns that yield helpful insights and support change. Because we often do find patterns of events, we are easily seduced into thinking that those events *caused* the difficulty with intimacy. I am suggesting that we look more closely. I am suggesting that the same meme that influenced our parents and grandparents to act as they did may be still influencing us, and that our hope for constructive change lies in identifying that meme and modifying it, not in reconstructing family history. Therefore, at least in some cases, it is more useful to ask, “What did they believe?” knowing full well that we can never know for certain what those forbearers actually believed. The question is our invitation to sense into the meme itself, and not get seduced by the events that resulted from its influence.

In many constellations it becomes clear that grandmother or great grandmother and grandfather or great grandfather were infected with strong beliefs about body and the nature of intimacy between men and women that caused them great suffering, It becomes clear that these beliefs effected our parents, and that we are still being affected. In such constellations, it may be possible to use representatives for both the “dangerous idea” and for the relationship to body that grandmother or grandfather would have developed if she/he had not been infected, or had been infected by a more friendly conviction. As I mentioned above, these hatred of the body memes are often associated with religious beliefs, and for this reason, the constellations often help us to revise family theology. The criterion that the family constellation applies to distinguish between destructive and constructive memes is simple: Does this belief support life, love and deep satisfaction in life?

From this perspective, it seems possible that the beliefs are more real (wirklich) than the so called events that arose out of their influence.