relabels a "near-life experience," and which he recounts without self-pity and with a wonderful sense of humor. I was most moved, though, by those moments when his pastoral vocation takes him to the bedsides of the dying. I found myself wishing this little book were just a bit longer and carried more of this kind of authority.

Neuhaus is satisfied neither with an objective understanding of the condition of death nor with a purely subjective response to the event. While recognizing that such arguments can be "endlessly fascinating," he knows that meditations don't have to reach firm conclusions. He understands—and persuades us, too—that "death eludes explanation." He is finally content with an understanding of the correlation between brain and thought, between matter and spirit, that can only be explained as mystery. Despite what might sound like an overtly Christian ending, it is a measure of the success of this meditation that it can convince, at least for a moment, even the nonbeliever.

—Keith Taylor

THE ELECTRIC MEME: A New Theory of How We Think and Communicate.
By Robert Aunger. Free Press. 334 pp. $27

If the brain is an alphabet soup, according to Aunger, "memes" are the alphabet letters that spell out our most fundamental beliefs and values—in effect, our culture. Richard Dawkins coined the word to help explain cultural evolution in *The Selfish Gene* (1976). In the years since, the concept has spawned a thriving field called memetics, complete with academic conferences (Aunger organized the first one) and rival theories.

Memes are abstractions rather than tangible objects, and many memeticists are philosophers by training. In this captivating if sometimes challenging book, Aunger, a biological anthropologist, approaches the subject with scientific precision.

He differs with those who view memes and ideas as synonymous. A meme, in his view, is far smaller, the most basic building block of understanding. "You can't equate meaning with memes," he writes. "Meaning comes in the contingencies of their expression." Memes are mere nuances: cognitive morphemes whose sum equals a word and, in accumulation, an idea. That is, it takes a bunch of memes combined with a bunch of context to produce a single thought, let alone a fully developed concept.

Some memeticists liken memes to viruses; others say they're closer to genes. Aunger rejects both models. To him, a meme is more like a benign parasite that's incapable of reproducing without a host, the host being the human brain. In the brain, memes are both fecund and redundant, generating multiple copies to ensure against cell death. Out of sheer repetition, the meme eventually embeds itself in long-term memory. From there, it transmits outward in search of another brain.

How do memes bridge the gap between minds? They don't fly through the air like "magical darts," Aunger writes, or spread like germs. According to his model, the meme expresses itself as a signal—utterance, writing, semaphore—that "searches for a place to create a brother meme elsewhere." Without actually leaving the brain, the meme seeks to lodge a duplicate meme in another host. The meme proselytizes. But, as human proselytizers know, the message may not be faithfully reproduced—"noise in the chain" may modify or corrupt it.

Originally, Aunger says, memes probably came along to influence behavior. In shaping behavior, they seem to be governed by natural selection. Memes compete, he writes, "to be selected for the good effects they produce in the host."

One of Aunger's most compelling arguments is that memes can store cultural information in the external environment. While a meme stays in the brain, its message can be buried in an artifact, such as the Rosetta stone, that awaits a signal to replicate itself in a new brain—a signal that may not come until the meme's living hosts all are dead. The symbiotic relationship between meme and artifact is especially rich concerning books, paintings,

videotaped TV shows, and other communicative objects. "We are educated in part by our own artifacts," Aunger writes, and "the real cause of cumulative culture may be the ability to share knowledge across generations through the manufacture of artifacts." Culture, it seems, is infectious.

—Jay Kirk

CONTRIBUTORS

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