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For past issues, links to other skeptics, and more, check out the SORT Website:

<http://home.surewest.net/kitray>

For more about the co-founders of SORT, see

[www.spangenburgandmoser.com](http://www.spangenburgandmoser.com)

**JANUARY**  
**SORT Meeting**  
**Tuesday, January 30, 2006**  
**7:30 P.M.**

La Sierra Community Center  
 Room 800, 5325 Engle Road  
 Carmichael, CA

(See driving directions, p. 3)

# The SORTified NEWS

“Doubt is the beginning of wisdom.”

—Clarence Darrow

## January 30 Meeting

### TO THINE OWN SELF BE TRUE? OR IS THERE REALLY SUCH AN ENTITY?

The start of the new year has always been a time when many people make their “New Year's Resolutions” so we'll take a bit of advice from a classical “advice giver” (namely Polonius from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*) as a lead to discussion at our January 2007 SORT Meeting. The somewhat wordy old gent, you'll recall, laid a lot of advice on anybody who would listen, but his most famous bit comes in his advice to his son Laertes:

This above all: to thine own self be true,  
 And it must follow, as the night the day,  
 Thou cans't not then be false to any man.

Our question of the night is this: Can anyone really know oneself well enough to be “true” to that self? Or do our biases, self deceptions, and culturally inherited preferences color our beliefs in who and what we are? Perhaps we are all many persons, playing many different roles for different situations or people? Is it possible then to even have one “true” self? Is there some kind of “core” self, one that retains some essential values beneath the many roles that are played?

It should be an interesting night around our open round table. Hope to see you there and as usual free hot coffee, regular and decaf, soft drinks

**HAPPY BIRTHDAY**  
 to  
**SORT and SORTERS!**

**The SORT Round Table is**  
**10 years old!!**

**Next SORT Meeting:**  
**January 30, 2007**

and cookies will be on hand during the meeting to help keep things mel-low. And, to celebrate SORT's 10th birthday, we'll have cake as well—for you, the people who have made SORT an oasis and a month in, month out celebration of the intentional life of reason.

Join us then at the January 30 SORT meeting and take part in our open round-table discussion. Think of it as a good, intelligent evening talking with friends. In today's hectic world that's not so easy to find anymore.

*See page 3 for directions.*

### LET'S CELEBRATE!

This month marks SORT's Tenth Anniversary! meeting. It's been ten fascinating years and we will be aiming for ten more so join us and have a bit of our birthday cake and our continued best wishes to all those who have made SORT a monthly repast of thoughtful and provocative

conversation.

## BOOKED AGAIN!

Believe it or not, despite some pressing deadlines from our editors and publishers and the usual craziness of the holiday season we actually found time to do a little reading.

Here are a couple of books that we recommend. For starters—*The Philosopher at the End of the Universe* by Mark Rowlands is subtitled *Philosophy explained through science-fiction films*. Well, it’s not exactly exhaustive but it is a neat idea and does a pretty good job at what it does, especially if you are a science fiction film buff. Did you ever think that you might pick up some interesting philosophical ideas from Arnie? You probably missed them in *Terminator* and *Total Recall*. Sure, you just kind of felt that *Blade Runner* was trying to get us involved in actually thinking behind its wonderfully dark facade, but you’ll find out what it was here. How about taking a quick course in the problems of free will? Just take another look at *Minority Report*. Well, o.k., that one is pretty obvious, but what about the morality lesson in *Alien*? Or the philosophical thoughts buried in the Star Wars films, and what in the world can *Independence Day* teach us? Anyway, you get the idea and any book that puts Harrison Ford, Keanu Reeves, and Tom Cruise up alongside Plato, Socrates, and Nietzsche has got to hold your attention.

From the lofty to the scary, three books: *Skipping Towards Armageddon: The Politics and Propaganda of the Left Behind Novels and the Lahaye Empire* by Michael Standaert, Jack Lewis Taylor’s *Religion, Politics and the Christian Right* and *The Baptizing of America: The Religious Right’s Plans for the Rest of U*” by Rabbi James Rudin. These pretty much explain themselves in their titles. All are fascinating if unnerving reads.

And, as they say (probably much too often) last but not least, one of our favorite books of the year *Enlightening the World* by Philipp Blom presents a wonderfully alive look at Denis Diderot and the other writers and philosophers who produced one of the great works of the Enlightenment *Encyclopedie*.

And finally, while we’ve got you in a thoughtful mood Ken Nahigian gives us another provocative essay.

## OBJECTIVITY by Ken Nahigian, 2007

You’ve heard the old joke: The world has two kinds of people, those who divide things into two groups, and those who don’t. Well, that’s how this starts.

The world has two kinds of things: those that exist because we think them or talk of them; and those that would exist anyway. Rocks and trees would still be if we ignored them, or even if all humans died (solipsists may please now exit quietly). We call these *objective*, that is, being like an object. But marriage, greed, comfort, debt and credit, mortgages, political disputes, social castes, national boundaries and philosophical distinctions such as this one—all these exist only because conscious observers have developed the word/concept, and talk about them in various ways. They are *subjective*.

One truly interesting question of philosophy is whether these two groups are completely distinct, with a sharp line between, or if they blend into each other. In the philosophy biz, that’s to ask if it is a *dichotomy* or a *continuum*. I used to think of it as a dichotomy. Now I regard it as more of a continuum. For example, one may well argue that “five” (the abstract quantity, *fiveness*) exists apart from us—you could still have five rocks in a field, even if humans had never evolved—and perhaps this extends to fractions and even irrational numbers; but when you start to talk about negative numbers, com-

## The Sacramento Organization for Rational Thinking (SORT). . .

- Is dedicated to the promotion of rational thinking in all areas of life.
- Upholds the superiority of science over the mystical.
- Promotes and supports all efforts of intelligent communication that provide a counterpoint to the strong waves of anti-rationalism, irrationalism, and mysticism sweeping the world today.

## Toward these ends we . . .

- Host a monthly discussion group.
- Publish a monthly newsletter.
- Host special events, talks, and presentations.
- Host a web page.

While SORT began with and still continues to be concerned with the promotion of critical thinking in areas dealing with the pseudo-scientific, the paranormal, the mystical, and the fraudulent, we strongly promote critical thinking in *all* areas of human thought and endeavor.

The core of SORT activities is our discussion group. The art of intelligent conversation is not dead. We at SORT believe that rational conversation--the meeting of minds, the free exchange of ideas and the provocative stimulation of critical questions-- is one of the most civilized and enlightening of all human activities.

SORT discussion topics have ranged from UFOs to the Holocaust, from “alternative medicine” to the problems in communicating science to the public, from classic and recent cons and scams to the teaching of critical thinking. Our discussions are hosted by one of the SORT founders, and participants are by no means limited to experts (although they may include experts) but are made up of intelligent and questioning people concerned with the topic of the evening.

plex numbers, hypercomplex numbers, infinitesimals, transfinite numbers, matrices, vectors, multi-variable functions, tensors, fields, Galois groups and the Mandelbrot Set, etc., the compulsion to regard these as purely mental constructs is overwhelming. (“God made the integers,” said old Leopold Kronecker, “all else is the work of man.”) Yet study math and you’ll find that the stretch between such highly abstract things and the simple notion of *five* is quite continuous. You don’t get from one to the other in a big jump. You get there in gradations, by nudges, by shades—each step building inexorably on the previous. (And at least one good mathematician, Roger Penrose, does believe that the Mandelbrot Set exists “all on its own.”)

For that matter, a clever person could easily argue that *debt* and *credit* are also objective. Certainly an atom can become ionized, lose an electron, and thereby accrue an electrochemical debt; and certainly this can have serious physical consequences, which would exist even if humans had never evolved. This brings us to the threshold of another philosophical dispute, *nominalism* vs. *realism*; but for now, I don’t want to go there.

So for sake of argument, it’s a continuum, not a dichotomy. And the degree of objectivity we assign to something much depends on how we think of it. (Solipsists may now re-enter the room.)

People have spilled much ink over how much objectivity we “should” assign to this concept or that. For example, where do we put God—on the near end of the objectivity spectrum, along with rocks and trees, or further along, next to Nature, or the far end, with Mother Goose? And what about *values*, such as beautiful, ugly, tasty, contemptible? To Platonists, Objectivists such as Ayn Rand, and some Christian thinkers like C.S. Lewis, these are objective qualifications,

while most philosophers would insist they are only in our minds. Outside of us, in the world of whirling atoms and twinkling stars, the universe just doesn’t care about such things.

Closely tied in to this is the question of *moral objectivity*. Good vs. evil, right vs. wrong, is it more an objective distinction, or a subjective? I happen to believe it is objective, at least it has a certain objective footing, regardless of what we think. And yet I also believe values are subjective! How do I manage that? By recognizing moral principles not as simple values, but *meta-values*, statements *about* values, and about relationships between them. If you wish to live in a social context with other autonomous individuals, do thus-and-so, else your presence in that social context is likely to be cut short. That is not to say moral precepts don’t often include conventions which are partly subjective, matters of fashion and culture, like dress codes or the rule about driving on the left side in England; but at their core is bedrock which stands on its own—abstract rules emerging from the interaction of individuals who try to live, much as Bernoulli’s laws emerge from the interaction of molecules in a fluid or a gas. And are therefore quite as objective.

So we can have objective state-

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## About the Founders

Ray Spangenburg and Kit Moser are a husband-and-wife writing team specializing in science and technology. They are coauthors of more than 50 books and over 100 articles, including publication in the *Skeptical Inquirer*, and they are former coeditors of the *Bay Area Skeptics Information Sheet (BASIS)*.

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ments about subjective things. Just as the statement “John is angry” can be objectively true, though

## GETTING TO LA SIERRA COMMUNITY CENTER

**From Highway 50:** Take the Watt Avenue exit and head north. Turn right on Marconi, by the Raley’s store. Travel east on Marconi to Walnut and turn left. Travel north on Walnut to Engle and turn right. Turn left at La Sierra Community Center. Follow the road past the main parking lot and along the east side of the building. Room 800 is in the second building on the left (just past the open, grassy area). Park, look for the SORT sign, and come on in!

**From I-80:** Take the Madison exit and head east. Turn right on Garfield and head south. Turn right on Gibbons and left at La Sierra Community Center. Follow the road along the east side of the building. Room 800 is in the last building before the open, grassy area. Park, look for the SORT sign, and come on in!

anger itself is subjective. (Have a headache yet? If not, you're a trooper.)

Another fascinating tie-in is the question of whether primary sensations, such as warmth or redness, are objective or subjective. If an object looks red, is it red in/of itself, or do our eyes or mind just see it that way?

I am inclined to slide warmth or redness down toward the subjective end of the scale, simply because things change color in different kinds of light, some folk are color blind, and different people can feel chilly or too warm in the same room (if you're married, you know just what I mean). But if, for example, you define redness as the tendency to

absorb or reflect certain specific electromagnetic spectra, then yes, it is objective, or more so. Believe it or not, this was a highly vociferous debate in circles of philosophy just recently. Now you know why philosophers are wet blankets at parties.

What *is* objective? Abstruse conditions like rest mass, structure, moment of spin, chemical composition, electrical charge, position relative to other objects—aspects fairly difficult to determine. And at the cutting edge of science, where quantum physics starts to grade into metaphysics, you will even find scientists who argue that conditions such as time and position (locality) are also illusions, that is, subjective

masks for deeper, more objective attributes it might take years of study to understand.

Face it: in our daily lives, we float in a sea of subjectivity. We must dive deep, deep below the surface to find the objective heart of things.



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*Educating Ourselves  
and Educating Others*

ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

