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For past issues of *The SORT-fied News*, bibliography, links to other skeptics, and more, check out the SORT Website—  
<http://www.quiknet.com/~kitray/index1.html>

## SORT's Next Meeting:

**Wednesday, Dec. 29, 1999  
 7:00 P.M.**  
 La Sierra Community Center,  
 Room 405  
 5325 Engle Road  
 Carmichael, CA

# The SORTified NEWS

## HAPPY HOLIDAYS AND A JOYOUS NEW MILLENNIUM!

Please excuse the shorter than usual newsletter this month but the combination of the holiday crunch and a couple of January 1st manuscript deadlines have made December a pretty hectic time for us. We hope to return to "normal" in January. Note though that we will be holding our monthly meeting as usual this month—and hope to see you there, bring your holiday cheer and join us for coffee, cookies, and conversation.

We'll be at the La Sierra Community Center, 5325 Engle Road in Carmichael, just off Walnut, on Wednesday, December 29, 1999, at 7:00 p.m.

## CATCHING THE "MEME-SLES"

All right, we all know what memes are—you know, those skinny people in dark tights and white faces who stand on street corners and claim it's their artistic license to annoy the hell out of us by replicating every move we make. No, wait those are *mimes*, aren't they!

What are *memes* then? Good question, and not an easy one to answer. According to who you read or talk to, the whole concept of memes is either the hottest and

most exciting thing to come down the line since quantum physics, or it is zip, nada, a lot of pseudo-academic, pseudo-scientific, jargon-spouting intellectual game playing—in short, -much ado about nothing.

Or then again, maybe they are something else . . . a metaphor, a model, an analytical tool?

Certainly a number of good minds are interested in them, Richard Dawkins (who coined the term), Daniel Dennett, and Douglas Hofstadter for starters. And that's pretty sharp company. Meme advocates range from the soft ("it's a provocative idea") to the hard ("memes dictate the world—you are your memes"). The idea is simple but fertile—perhaps both too simple and too fertile, say detractors.

Meme theory is basically a theory about the spread of ideas, or patterns of information. In it, a meme is something like a gene; that is, memes (ideas, information patterns), like genes, spread themselves, replicate, evolve, and engage in the struggle for survival through mutation and adaptation. You can also liken them to viruses that spread and "infect" their hosts.

So far so good, and as you can see, the meme concept obviously provides an interesting and productive way to examine how

ideas and information spread throughout society. Why do some ideas or information patterns succeed when others fail? How do particular “mutations” affect the survival chances of a meme in an adaptive relationship with its environment?

The problem is, exactly what is it that we are talking about here—a metaphor or something else altogether? How far can this meme–gene analogy be pushed and still remain viable and coherent without crossing the line into that never-never land occupied by pseudo-science?

Join us at the December SORT meeting as we take a close look at some examples and implications of this fascinating and controversial idea.

### **A FEW INTERESTING BOOKS ABOUT MEMES**

There are a lot of books about memes and memetic theory out there. They run the gamut from simplified, “self-help” kinds of things—you know the type, the “How to Understand Memes and Get Control of Your Pathetically Out-of-Control Life” sort of thing—to more weighty and barely readable academic tomes with titles something like “Post-Evolutionary Memetics and the Pre-Freudian Mind.” Now, let me think about that, no, I’d rather not. Let’s leave that to the postmodern lit. types, who seem to have much too much time on their hands anyway.

Just off-hand, though, for a couple of places to start:

Take a look at *Virus of the Mind: The New Science of the Mind* by Richard Brodie. Brodie is a sharp cookie (if a little too self-congratulatory) who manages to mix something akin to the self-help approach with some more meaty and interesting material. His biography on the book jacket tells us that he “was Microsoft chairman Bill Gates’ personal technical assistant and the original author of Microsoft Word.” Take that for whatever it means to you.

Also, we suggest that you take a look at *Thought Contagion: How Beliefs Spread Through Society* by Aaron Lynch. Lynch takes a somewhat less jazzy approach and gives us lots of examples of memes in action, but he doesn’t always supply a strong thread through his discussion to tie it all together for the reader. Lynch’s biography on the book jacket identifies him as having worked at Fermilab as an engineering physicist “prior to concentrating on writing full time about memetics.” It also informs us that in 1988 “he was awarded a grant for full-time research on memetics by a private sponsor.”

We’ve given the biographical notations for these two books as an example of the eclectic nature of memetics and those drawn to it.

Note also that Susan Blackmore has a new book out on memes, *The Meme Machine*, but since we haven’t read it yet (too busy

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#### **About the Founding Members:**

Ray Spangenburg and Kit Moser are a husband-and-wife writing team specializing in science and technology. They are co-authors of 29 books and over 100 articles, including publication in the *Skeptical Inquirer*, and they are former co-editors of the *Bay Area Skeptics Information Sheet (BASIS)*.

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making our own book deadlines), we can’t give a report on it. Maybe by our next issue.

### **AROUND THE NET**

You can’t work all the time, and you know how easy it is to get sidetracked on the Net. We did hit upon a couple of interesting sites this month. Take a look at the following if you get a chance.

As the debate about genetically modified food continues, and is growing particularly hot in Great Britain these days, Prospect

Magazine (December 1999) offers an interesting article entitled "Against Anti-Science." It's well worth reading and can be found on the Web at [http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/highlights/against\\_anti\\_science/index.html](http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/highlights/against_anti_science/index.html).

What's happening with the explosive situation for chiropractors in Canada? See the Canoe (Canada's Internet Network) site for the story. <http://www.canoe.ca/ChiroYork/home.htm>

Trying to help a curious friend understand the difference between real science and the so-called "Creation science"? You can find some help at the always splendid site by Robert Todd Carroll—"The Skeptic's Dictionary." For a direct path to his Creationists and Creation Science definition go to <http://skeptdic.com/creation.html>. If you haven't been there before, take good look around at the entire site. It's a masterful achievement and is continually kept up to date.

"Doubt is the beginning of wisdom."  
—Clarence Darrow



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*"Educating ourselves  
and educating others"*

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