

# ***RELATIVELY SPEAKING***

*The Philosophy of Individualism*

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## ***ON POLITICS: HUMAN RIGHTS AND PRESIDENT CARTER***

Carter's views on "human rights" may be indicative of an absolute approach to problem solving. For example, after the Soviet sentencing of dissident Anatoly Shcharansky a few months ago, Carter was quoted in the media as vowing to continue his campaign for human rights, and saying: "I speak today with the sadness the whole world feels at the sentence given Anatoly Shcharansky...a person can be sent to jail simply for asserting his basic human rights."

From an absolute point of view, Carter makes sense: (a) it is Trust that every human has certain rights; and (b) informed persons like Carter can speak for "the whole world."

From a relative point of view, several questions come to mind: (1) Is not Carter denying the sovereignty of another country by telling them what they should do domestically? (2) If one country does not acknowledge another country's sovereignty, how can differences be resolved other than by war or subjugation? (3) As a practical matter, are not concepts like "human rights" established by international councils? And, if so, might the citizens of the US find that they have lost their own sovereignty in that their human rights could be established by world "leaders"? And, (4) doesn't rhetoric like Carter's lull individuals into thinking that their rights are God-given and as such inviolable, rather than something they fought to establish and something they must fight like hell to preserve?

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## ***ON GROWTH: I'M SHALLOW TOO!***

Recently, the *Los Angeles Times* cartooned a couple in their 30s with the caption: "Really? I'm shallow, too."

Woody Allen, in his award winning "Annie Hall," had a similar line. As the principal character in the film, Woody asked a couple how they managed to get along. The woman said, "Well, he is rather shallow and I am also shallow, so we are perfectly compatible."

Perhaps this type of humor reflects a new area of social growth. Consider that today's focus is on inter-personal communications. It follows that there would be social pressure to communicate something of personal significance. Initially, a person may feel that s/he should be an expert at communication, and feels frustrated when nothing significant comes to mind.

Secondly, there may come a major human decision: (a) does s/he escape from the frustration or decision making by avoiding people and situations where personally significant communications are expected—escaping into cute phrases, word games, or physical projects (I personally prefer physical projects); or (b) does s/he seek out such situations letting the chips fall where they will (short of going to jail).

Consider that the absolutist would tend to escape. Growth is holding onto the Truth you have, and adding a fragment of new Truth, which should be given painlessly by an expert. Personal decision making and frustration are not part of the program.

Consider that the relativist would tend to seek out such situations as fundamental to life—s/he has no Truth to lose, and life itself may be seen as a process of alternating between the breaking apart and putting together of one's mental world.

A typical phrase associated with the "breaking apart" phase is "back to the drawing boards"; and also Kahlil Gibran's (*The Prophet*) argument that "your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding."

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## ***ON RELIGION: POPE AND TRUTH***

Pope John Paul II has had considerable newspaper coverage since taking office. Consider that the Pope is of considerable interest partially because he is the leader of a major institution which is experiencing disruption and uncertainty as a consequence of having its absolute assumptions challenged. The issues revolve around the infallibility of the Pope, and the Church's methodology of establishing the Trust.

Since the followers in an absolute structure believe their leaders are privy to the Truth, changes in the Truth are frequently orchestrated by the leaders behind closed doors. However, the public did have a rare opportunity to twice observe the Church's method for selecting a Pope—who in turn is empowered to reveal the Truth. Several issues may be relevant to Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

Consider that it can be easily documented that the Pope is a source of Truth within the Catholic Church structure. As such, it follows that the Catholic Church structure is absolute by definition. That is, the Pope establishes Truth for all people—Trust that is absolute (not relative to a given individual's understanding).

Incidentally, the Pope was not always a unique source of Truth. It was in 1970, or about 100 years after the US *Declaration of Independence*, that the Church hierarchy voted for the doctrine of papal infallibility.

Recent differences within the Church over abortion, divorce, celibacy, etc., are fundamental problems because they challenge the very capacity of the Church to declare Truth.

More specifically, how does a majority vote establish Truth or God's will? The Pope was selected by about 115 cardinals in a simple majority vote (he wasn't elected on the first balloting which requires a two-thirds plurality). Debates over this issue may be minimized by the Church's procedures of keeping the proceedings secret, and immediately burning the ballots after each vote, but the issue is still there: If I say I am following the will of God as declared by the Pope, isn't that another way of saying that my trust is in the Pope (or the people who elected the Pope)? More specifically, my trust and faith are really in my own ability to pick the right religious leader, or the right system (such as majority vote). I create the Truth by my selection, and then I worship it—simple idolatry.

***ON RELIGION: POPE AND TRUTH (Continued)***

On the other hand, a relativist position could argue the necessity of a personal relationship between God and each individual. Anyone or anything could assist in that relationship, but the bottom line would necessarily be a personal relationship between God and each individual, otherwise it is the mediator (person or system) that is being worshipped.

Recently, the Pope exemplified this issue. Granting that he was voted into office by a 50%-plus vote, he now equates his pronouncements with "God" or "Truth," and was quoted as saying: "In particular, the indissolubility of Christian marriage is important...we must proclaim it faithfully as part of God's word...."

The problem is not a question of belief, but rather meaning. How do you take a majority vote and arrive at God's word or absolute Truth? Perhaps it was a conflict such as this that prompted one popular leader to comment that "millions of people are leaving the Church and returning to God." Perhaps God is a relativist.

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***ON SEX: TO TALK OR NOT TO TALK***

Sex is surely a dominant theme in our culture. Many people seem to even judge their personal worthy by some sexual index—they feel good about themselves because of their sexual restraint, or because of their sexual prowess. Either way, they see their sexual behavior as significantly affecting their personal vale.

This article is the first in an anticipated series where the Absolute/Relative distinction will be applied to the general topic of sex. Your thoughtful comments will be appreciated.

In contrasting the absolute and relative positions on sex, the most basic distinction that comes to my mind is whether or not to even talk about sexual behavior.

The absolutist could very well argue that sexual issues should not be discussed at all, except perhaps for when an informed person is instructing a less informed person in proper sexual conduct. The argument is simple. The absolutist, by definition, has access to Truth as it exists independent of any person or thing (such Truth is absolute or not relative to anything). It could follow therefore that "good" people act according to the Truth, and people who intentionally act contrary to

***ON SEX: TO TALK OR NOT TO TALK (Continued)***

the Truth are “evil.” Furthermore, a proper goal in life is to seek out and follow the Truth. As for sex, the first step is for the experts to establish the Truth about proper sexual behavior. When an individual has a question regarding proper sexual conduct, s/he should ask the proper expert—a parent, medical doctor, priest, etc. The point is, to freely discuss sex, unless you are a recognized expert is to possibly entertain evil. Absolute church structures have the responsibility for guiding their followers away from improper exposure as well—for example, the “Index Librorum Prohibitorum” cites the books that the Roman Catholic Church condemns and forbids its members to read (except by special permission) as dangerous to faith, morality, etc.

From an absolutist point of view, perhaps the most evil aspect of freely discussion sex (or anything for that matter) is the implied egotism, or the assumption that the True answers are available to you as a result of your own individual effort and thinking. Individual answers are an anathema (Greek. = thing devoted to evil) to the absolutist, since individual answers are virtually always unique to some degree, and therefore relative to each individual.

In contrast to the absolutist, the relativist could very well argue the desirability of sex being talked about freely. The argument is again simple. Sex issues are prevalent in our society and we are all involved in making decisions related to these issues. Consequently, free and open discussions on sexual matters could very well enable us to make more intelligent decisions, or confirm the soundness of our presently held views.

We are all involved directly or indirectly in some of the following types of issues: parent/child communications including role models; personal identity development; abortion laws and morality; pornography laws and morality; and social interactions (family, dating).

From a relative point of view, to avoid discussion on sexual issues is to intentionally base our decision-making on ignorance—we can’t even intelligently pick someone to follow.

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***ABSOLUTIST OF THE MONTH***

**Tom Hayden, Chairman of the Campaign for Economic Democracy—at least to the degree this nation-wide organization is a major voice which advocates the outlawing and replacement of private ownership with collective ownership. Or as Hayden says it: “...to bring giant corporations under democratic control.”**

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***RELATIVIST OF THE MONTH***

**Reed Larson, President, National Right to Work Committee—at least to the degree this nation-wide organization is a major voice opposing compulsory union membership. Or as Larson says it: “Americans must have the right but not be compelled to join labor unions.”**

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***T A L K B A C K***

***Dialogue***

TES, Monrovia, CA

*Dear Editor, I consider your newsletter a refreshing jolt (sort of like being sprayed with cold water through the garden hose) and a very interesting conversation to share...however, I question whether relative thought has any relevance in the “real” world...*

**Dear TES, I think a major issue of the day relates to reality and the nature of the “real” world. Individuals searching for something “real” may be responsible for the inflation in antique furniture prices, popularity of songs from the 60s, and natural foods. Furthermore, I think there is an increasing awareness of the part the individual plays in creating his own “reality” through what he chooses to expose himself to (friends, books, ideas). I agree that today’s “reality” may be substantially absolute, but I think that the “reality” of the future may very well be increasingly relative—at least for society’s decision makers.**

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***ADDRESS CHECK: 2<sup>nd</sup> CALL***

I was encouraged by those of you who have already verified your addresses. It was pointed out to me that this address verification does put a requirement on the readership that could be avoided—a decision to respond.

For some, a decision to respond primarily means that they are choosing to be exposed to the ideas contained herein. For others, it means that they must agree with the contents herein. And, still for others, it means they must act rather than simply re-act.

Regarding this newsletter, a decision to respond only means you choose to be exposed and nothing is inferred as to agreement.

Responding does separate the actors from the spectators, and perhaps more importantly, it is a practical way to update the addresses.

It may very well be argued that the beginning point of relativity is the act of choosing, and the beginning point of choosing is to do so.

If you would like to continue receiving these newsletters, please send your present mailing address to:

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Box 2555, Terminal Annex  
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**[Note: Since 1982, SOC's address has been  
PO Box 1211, Arcadia, CA 91077-1211]**

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