

RELATIVELY SPEAKING

The Philosophy of Individualism

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ON PHILOSOPHY: GETTING IT TOGETHER

There is nothing more practical than a personal philosophy which gives an over-all coherent form to our individual activities. This point is poignantly made clear to me each time I think about the life and death of British actor Peter Sellers.

On the one hand, I intensely enjoyed his "Pink Panther" series in which he played the bumbling Inspector Clouseau. I thought there was a delightful and satirical message in "Being There" where he portrayed Chancy Gardiner.

However, when Sellers died last year of a heart attack at the age of 54, I was struck most by statements attributed to him regarding the emptiness of his own personal philosophy. The Associated Press reported that Sellers once confessed, "I have no personality of my own whatsoever. No personality to offer to the public. I can't do anything from within myself. I have nothing to project. I've got so many inhibitions that I sometimes wonder whether I exist at all."

Though Sellers could realistically play the role of another, it appears that he was vividly aware that he had no role or philosophy for his own life. Whether accurate or not of Sellers, I think this portrayal of him reflects a dominant theme of our time—searching for a workable, personal philosophy which organizes an otherwise fragmented life into a meaningful whole.

The main thrust of the philosophy portion of these newsletters is two-fold: (1) to show that the concept of relativity is an effective tool for describing in general terms what an individual is presently doing with his/her life; and (2) to show how the concept of relativity provides practical approaches for increasing the integrity of an individual's philosophy in the future. Correspondingly, the benefits of using relativity include: (a) an increased sense of personal identity; (b) the ability to articulate and thus discuss and share one's self with another person; and (c) an increased ability to accommodate new experiences. More on this later.

ON RELIGION: TRUTH OR FAITH

I have never found it useful to know whether an individual considers himself religious or non-religious; similarly, I have found it to be of little use to know that a person is a Protestant, Catholic, or Jew.

Even though history is filled with raging battles between these (and other) religious groups, knowing that an individual is a member in such a group seems to serve little purpose.

On the other hand, I do find it useful to know whether an individual's beliefs are based on absolute or relative assumptions. Such information can pin-point areas of potential conflict or agreement. Time can be maximized and communication facilitated.

By definition, an absolutist's religious position begins with the assumption that he has a truth. Perhaps it came from the *Bible*, the Pope, or through a church governing board; but regardless of how he arrived at the truth, the absolutist assumes it to be the truth for all people for all time.

After getting the truth, the absolutist makes a commitment to the truth and thus gets saved. After that, the emphasis is shifted to saving others. A major selling point is the feeling of peace and security which accompanies knowing the absolute truth.

The relativist's position is a little more difficult to describe—at least for me.

By definition, the relativist begins with the assumption that he has no truth and can never get one. Or said positively, all the relativist has is his own unique world of past experiences. He also has his current experiences, but since they are interpreted in the light of his unique past experiences, no other individual sees the world as he sees it presently.

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder; but so is everything else!

A 5-year-old will interpret the *Bible* differently than a 25-year-old because their past experiences are different; and two 35-year-olds will also interpret the *Bible* differently because their past experiences are different.

This view brings us to three points of contrast between absolute and relative positions:

1. Rather than a religion based on certainty, the relativist has a religion based on faith—a belief not founded on certainty.
2. Rather than having truth, the relativist has a relationship.
3. Rather than having a belief in the certainty of a stated truth assumed to be from God, the relativist has a belief in the existence of his own relationship with God.

ON RELIGION: TRUTH OR FAITH (Continued)

I would like to hear from those of you that have an interest in this area. I personally think this area (covering values, meaning, purpose in living, etc.) is a headline issue in our society today. Send in your comments even if only a sentence or two. Future newsletters will follow-up on this theme of absolute and relative approaches to religion. The "mixed" views will also be included. The context will generally be the Judaic-Christian views simply because most of us are more familiar with them than any other perspective and because these views are perhaps reflected in our laws and customs more than any other single religious perspective.

Incidentally, I think there is considerable support for holding that Abraham and Jesus used relative assumptions. However, for those of you with absolutist persuasions, there will be Moses and Paul; and if you prefer to "mix" the absolute and relative positions, perhaps you can identify with the Pharisees and Sadducees.

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T A L K B A C K
M O N O L O G U E

AM, San Gabriel, CA

Welcome back newsletter. I've missed you!

BB, Pasadena, CA

Good to hear from you.

OJ, Pasadena, CA

I send to all the people I met in your class my "warm fuzzies." The newsletter helps me to ease a little out of the rut of "...and that is one reporter's opinion."

I appreciate your comments. Perhaps next time I will have return envelopes to send along with the newsletter. GFB

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T A L K B A C K
D I A L O G U E

Pat from Connecticut

Why do you express [relativity] in such economic terms?

One reason I recommend looking at relativity is because I am convinced that it will “pay-off,” generate “benefits,” and because I find it to be by far the best “product” on the market. I find such terms to be graphic, familiar and personally persuasive when initially deciding whether to stop and look at something.

Rather than economic terms, my own bias is to use terms generally associated with logic such as “integrity,” “consistency,” and “reasonable.” This bias will be well represented in the newsletter along with the more physical/economic terms which you pointed out.

In addition, the most difficult set of terms for me are those describing the third of the three classical areas of human experience (body/mind/spirit). The term I tend to use most is “choice.”

Since relativity is applicable to all three areas, I will tend to use all three sets of terms.

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QUOTES OF THE MONTH

After all, if one is seeking peace, one can find it very easily. One can devote oneself blindly to some kind of cause, to an idea, and take shelter there.

[Krishnamurti’s *The First and Last Freedom*, 1968, p.28]

Relations, surely, is the mirror in which you discover yourself. Without relationship you are not; to be is to be related; to be related is existence. You exist only in relationship; otherwise you do not exist.... With relationship, I am not.

[*ibid.*, p. 104]

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