

# ***RELATIVELY SPEAKING***

*The Philosophy of Individualism*

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## ***ON PHILOSOPHY: THE ART OF FREEDOM***

We probably grew up with the absolute philosophy of subservience to the truth, rather than with the relative philosophy of individual freedom. We were told what we "must" do and what was "good" for us. We learned the art of subservience.

Today, we may be experienced practitioners of the absolute philosophy. We have a language of "I must...I have to...that's true...." We preach this doctrine of subservience to our children, students, and employees. We are inclined to support laws that prescribe good behavior (rather than simply prohibiting undesirable behavior).

The problem is that our absolute philosophy of subservience to an assumed truth is increasingly becoming irrelevant and inadequate for managing our daily affairs.

Cultural changes such as those following current advances in technology increase our leisure time and open alternatives to us in our decision-making. We are experiencing increasing freedom but we are tethered to an absolute philosophy of subservience—a free person with slave skills. We need a philosophy of freedom to match our increasing sense of freedom.

As the philosopher Henri Bergson put it "The tools of the mind become burdens when the environment which made them necessary no longer exists." In our lifetime, we may not become experts in managing freedom, but we can get started—and the next generation can ride on our shoulders.

Assuming there is a future, it will belong to those who can manage freedom. The philosophy of relativity is a conceptual starting point.

## ***HOW MUCH FREEDOM CAN YOU STAND?***

An hour? A day? A week? Consider that most of us could not tolerate more than a few minutes each day of a moderate level of freedom—"Freedom" defined here as being faced with alternatives from which to choose without a particular predisposition to choose one over the other. We may choose between coffee and tea for lunch, or we may consider a basic change in our vocation or marriage.

In a word, freedom is stressful. As the existential theme puts it, "there is anguish in making choices without knowing what is 'right'—without external guidelines."

Applying this principle, consider that the stereotyped image of the "housewife" may reflect a situation of considerable freedom. That is, she has substantial freedom to do what she chooses and how she chooses to do it any given moment. Compare this housewife with the bank manager's with his 8-hour job that ties up 12 hours each day (including maintenance activities such as dressing, eating, transportation, etc.) The "hard life" may be that of the housewife who has considerable freedom and consequently considerable stress. A phone call or letter that "demands" attention may be a welcomed relief from the stress of freedom.

Freely choosing what we are going to do is hard work and extremely energy draining. A w-month vacation—to do whatever we want—may be intolerable! Perhaps most of us just would not do it. We would escape the stress of continuous, open, decision-making by spending a couple of hours in the energy-draining process of freely planning "what we are going to do for the next 2 months." Then, having established our plan, we would stick to it and avoid the stress of re-evaluating our initial decision.

To illustrate, imagine our banker and housewife taking a 2-day drive to a vacation spot. The housewife has learned to manage considerable amounts of freedom and enjoys frequent stops at interesting spots that occur unexpectedly. The banker, who has not learned to manage freedom, finds such stops stressful and describes them as "delays." He finds relief in setting driving goals and making "good time" toward achieving them.

As our couple gets older and enters retirement, one could predict that the housewife, more than banker, would have great skills for managing the increased leisure hours. Thus, the housewife may find retirement less stressful than her banker-husband.

There is some evidence consistent with the theory that retirement is less stressful for the female than the male. According to the 1978 Report of the US Department of Health and Human Services, white male suicides double between the ages of 55 and 80, while white female suicides drop 50% during that time.

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## ***THE ECSTASY OF FREEDOM***

Picture yourself in front of a canvas, brush in hand, with a wide variety of colors from which to choose. You can paint on that particular canvas anything you choose. There is no “right” picture that is “supposed” to be there. Only one stroke of the brush can be made at a time, but a later stroke can be painted over a previous one.

You can make up your own mind ahead of time what you will paint, and once decided, continue to completion without change. Or, you can have an ongoing relationship wherein you constantly re-evaluate each stroke in terms of what you are at each moment.

Similarly, each brush stroke can be likened to a specific act during one’s life. Just as the combined strokes make up the picture, so the combined acts make up one’s life. The end result is a self portrait—an identity. Fundamentally, no one can tell us what that self portrait should be, but the choices are significant in that they create one’s identity. Or, as the existentialist puts it, “We are our choices.”

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## ***THE AGONY OF FREEDOM***

As outlined in “How Much Freedom Can You Stand?” assume that freedom is stressful.

Groups most sensitive to the stress of freedom may include the newly retired, the unemployed, and the new rich (less than three generations of wealth). Other groups may include graduating students, military personnel just completing a tour of duty, newly released prisoners, young adults leaving home to establish their own residences, couples who have just “made it” financially, and people around December and January who see the new year as a time for bringing about changes.

These groups may experience debilitating stress as a result of suddenly having many options available to them (freedom) after having spent considerable time in environments with structured demands. Thus, unable to deal with their freedom, members of these groups may have a greater tendency to turn their lives over to drugs or cults.

A similar problem of managing freedom may be seen in international affairs. Some politicians seem to talk and act as if the management of freedom comes automatically—all you have to do is go into a country, get rid of the bad guys, and walk away. Assuming an absolute philosophy, these politicians act as if goodness is the absence of evil. Jesus was perfect because he was without sin—getting rid of sin results in perfection. If you take away a hated dictator without teaching the skills of freedom to the citizenry, they may seek out even a worse dictator—consider Iran’s shift from the Shah to Khomeini. In addition, consider the references to *Matthe1* 12:43-45 and *Luke* 11:24-26, which argue, on a personal level,

***AGONY OF FREEDOM (Continued)***

that when you get rid of one problem without something to take its place, you create a situation seven times as bad so that the “last state of that man becomes worse than the first.”

In closing, consider that learning a relative approach to freedom on the one hand, or an absolute approach to subservience on the other hand, is a process beginning in childhood. As attributed to Oliver Wendell Holmes, “If you want to change the child, you must begin with the grandfather.”

Relativity may be the philosophy of the future, simply because it can deal with our increasing experience of freedom. That is, an absolute view by definition obviates freedom—the trust shall guide you. In contrast, a relative view (1) provides a mental model to enable a conceptualization of freedom, and (2) provides a basis for developing freedom-management techniques.

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***A FREEDOM-MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUE: 4 STEPS***

1. Identify what you are doing with your life by noting where you have spent your time and money during the last 6 months.
2. Set aside the time and money spent on maintenance, including eating, groom activities, and getting or training to get money (job, investments, school studies, etc.).
3. From the remaining time (weekends, evenings, holidays), take one hour per week and consciously choose an activities—omit anything that you think is “required” rationally or socially of you. [There are advantages to having choices consistent with logic and practical factors, but even after satisfying these conditions, there are still many alternatives from which to choose.
4. After a few weeks, reflect up on the difficulty and stress of choosing, and also reflect upon the basic sense of personal satisfaction obtained from achieving a goal of one’s own choosing. That is, your world is different because of your choices!

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

V. B., La Canada, CA

*"Thank you so much for continued input. These newsletters always provide good reinforcement to the relative frame of thought. The reinforcement is necessary for me to keep secure on a path of knowledge and thought that is seldom shared by the people around me. Once again, thank you."*

D.O., Sierra Madre, CA

*"Right on!! Regarding the contents of your last newsletter."*

S.F.B., Temple City, CA

*"Enjoy receiving and reading your newsletter."*

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