

RELATIVELY SPEAKING

The Philosophy of Individualism

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A NEW FORMAT

I would like to get the newsletters out more frequently. One problem is that it takes me a day or two (away from my job) to get into a mental set appropriate for writing. This generally means writing during vacation periods (Spring, Summer, Winter breaks). A more basic problem is that I like to play with the issues! For example, about 6 months ago, I wrote the first draft of the "Olympics" article. This newsletter is the sixth substantive rewrite. I let each draft sit for a while and then I re-read it. A new draft was a result of my arguing and debating g the previous draft. I prefer the later drafts over the earlier drafts, and I enjoy the mental stimulation of arguing with myself—but very few newsletters get mailed.

To increase the frequency of the newsletters, I am thinking of trying a different format. The newsletters will basically be first drafts. On the other hand, when I think and re-think a basic issue, I will put it in pamphlet form and mail it to anyone request it. Titles and request forms will be published in the newsletter. I am now drafting pamphlets on my favor topics: philosophy, growth, sex, politics, and religion.

You could think of the new format this way: the newsletters are the "junk food" which keeps the energy levels temporarily up, while the pamphlets could be likened to basic meals which take more time to consume, but are more complete and supply a more reliable energy source.

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ON PHILOSOPHY: THE 1984 OLYMPICS

Regarding the 1984 Olympics, consider two philosophical-type questions—each viewed from the absolute and relative perspectives.

First, "Do Olympic winners primarily represent (a) a standard of excellence (absolute) or (b) a model of individual commitment (relative)"?

- For the absolutist, the primary focus is on the particular physical accomplishment of the athlete. The physical act itself is the "best"—an ideal standard of excellence. Consistent with this view, "honor and humility" can primarily characterize the Olympic winners. Honor is bestowed upon the winner because

THE 1984 OLYMPICS (Continued)

the winner is the best representative, or approximation, of an ideal; humility is bestowed because the winner is striving, but does not achieve perfection even in his or her own specific area of competition.

- For the relativist, “individual commitment” primarily can characterize the Olympic winner. An Olympic winner probably has committed a major portion of his/her time to a specific goal. However, it is the commitment rather than the goal that is of primary significance. For example, an Olympic winner may be able to ski down a mountain faster than any competitor, but there is no particular significance to going down a mountain 5 seconds faster than a novice. It is the human capacity for commitment rather than the goal itself that is significant. That is, commitment involves consistently making choices toward a specific goal—such choices literally create our individual identity as human beings.

Second, “Is recognition primarily to the State (absolute) or to the individual (relative)”?

- The absolute assumption in a knowable truth for all people is consistent with the argument that individual growth is the responsibility of the State. The Olympic winner is a product of the State, a symbol of the success of the State, and reflects the commitment made by the State. This is a view consistent with socialist rhetoric. As 1984 USSR Winter Olympic competitor Sergei Khlebnikov put it when asked how he felt after winning the gold medal, “enormous pride that your country trusted you in representing them.”
- Relatively speaking, accomplishment is always an individual and arbitrary matter, both in the initial selection of a particular goal as well as in the daily decision to work toward that goal. Winning primarily reflects an individual commitment rather than a State commitment. This is a view consistent with some of the rhetoric in the United States. AS 1984 Gold Medal US winner Debbie Armstrong put it just prior to her winning ski run, “If I do my best, that is the same as a gold medal.”

Regarding the Soviet boycott of the Olympics, consider that it makes little philosophical difference whether the socialist and non-socialist athletes compete together—even if they were side-by-side physically, there is at best a limited rational basis for comparing their performances. That is, on what common basis could you compare the commitment of the State to the commitment of the individual as reflected in the quotes above?

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LITERATURE REVIEW & THOUGHTS

ON THE PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF RELATIVITY

Claudia R. Wright, PhD

Heraclitus said that a person can't step in the same river twice. Not only does the water and sands change but the person stepping in the river changes also.

This allegory suggests that "reality" is a process—a series of ongoing, intertwining events and perceptions. It is the implications of this process that can be considered as fundamental to the relative approach.

The process-nature of "reality" is a simple idea and neatly expressed by Heraclitus. But the implications of such a view are not as simple for me to communicate. First, there is no one place to begin. The process "begins" for me at some arbitrary point at which I choose to become aware of myself as I interact with others (or "things"). Choosing to step into the river, so to speak.

If I consider the Heraclitus observation that the river is changing and I assume that, in a similar fashion, my life is also changing, then what is this sense of "sameness" I experience? It is not the same river, and it is not the same me, but rather I am in relationship to (or with) the river. The idea, or implication of "relationship" becomes pivotal for me in understanding this assumption. An actor's line in a recent TV movie expressed it one way, "When I am alone, I do not exist." I exist, I am aware of myself, when I bump up against those "things" that are not "I." I become aware of me when I am in relation to something that is not me.

Another pass at this notion—consider your favorite song, hum a few bars. Now try and catch it, hold the sound—where did your song go? Shape, color, song, you, me, the river are in process—changing and in relationship to something else which is also changing. Stop the process? You simply disappear.

For me, the significance of a process-nature of reality assumption is that it places responsibility for "making sense"—of entering into relationship—on me as the perceiver and as the one who chooses. Thus, such an assumption provides for me a beginning point for the continuous task of defining myself.

[Ideas like this are discussed by Wendell Johnson in *People in Quandaries* (1946).]

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T A L K B A C K

Monologue

Don, Pasadena, CA

"Just when I get all my absolutes in order, you send out another newsletter!"

Patrice, Connecticut

"I enjoyed and found value in "Freedom Management Technique" and the particular example of the banker vs housewife. Helps explain an aspect of my current primary relationship which I had not understood in this way before."

George, Paradise, CA

"The letter gives me some insight into my grandchildren's stress of freedom. This helps since I really resent their growing up and becoming 'free' from me."

Michael, Los Angeles, CA

"It's been a long time since I actively thought about your philosophy, but it seems that it has affected me by making me aware of the of the importance of digging below the surface."

Frank, Los Angeles, CA

"Your newsletters are very informative, and even enlightening."

Eric, Pomona, CA

"I find your newsletter quite captivating and stimulating to the point of considering a change in my outlook on matters of life in general."

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TALK BACK (Continued)

Dialogue

Paul, Arcadia, CA

“An argument for a relative way of thinking is a television program Hot Seat hosted by Wally George. His absolute philosophy is at most comical, but scary when viewing his audience. Gordon, I’d like to see Wally and you debate any of his regular issues.”

Paul,

I have watched *Hot Seat*. In all fairness to Host Wally George, I find it hard to tell when he is talking seriously and when he is simply trying to entertain. In any event, I think the show is significant because its popularity tells us something about our society. Here are some of my thoughts. First, Wally George is likable in that he reflects a child-like image of rugged individualism. He appears to speak his mind and seems to know clearly where he stands on issues. Regardless of its intellectual validity, his style is emotionally satisfying—something like a political *Gong Show*.

Second, Wally is preferable to some alternatives. Consider that this is a tough time for teenagers to grow up due to a fragmented society. Alienated from their society and themselves, teenagers are looking for the type of peace and order that Wally seems to characterize. It could be argued that a mental retreat into the simple world of Wally George is preferable to alternatives such as drugs, alcohol, gambling, and suicidal and homicidal abuses.

Third, from a more critical perspective, Wally could be seen as an example of more cultural double-talk. On the one hand, Wally represents himself as a flag-waving, god-fearing, loyal American. However, on the other hand, Wally seems to advocate beliefs and practices which would seem to undermine the very virtues for which the flag is a symbol, a belief in God would reflect, and what a loyal American would espouse. For example, fundamental to the American system is a reverence for the right of others to hold views different than your own. Perhaps the most evident characteristic of Wally George’s program is his irreverence for people holding views different than his own. In one recent show, Wally used the terms “creep,” “jerk,” “stupid,” “weirdo,” “fat-head,” and “dim-wit” to characterize specific individuals holding views different from his own. On another occasion, Wally declared that specific individuals holding views contrary to his own should not remain in this country.

Lastly, Wally’s assumption of having trust applicable to all people, and his intolerance for differences seems to be consistent with an absolute philosophy. Just as I am convinced that absolute views are giving way to relative views, Wally’s show may be serving the same social function as that served by *All in the Family*. Just as Archie Bunker helped us to see the foolishness of racial bigotry, so Wally is helping us to see the foolishness of nationalistic bigotry. Author, Dr. Samuel Johnson may have had a Wally George in mind when he wrote that “Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel.”