

RELATIVELY SPEAKING*The Philosophy of Individualism*

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TALK BACK**5*****ON POLITICS: THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT IN OUR LIVES***

Consider the following analysis of the role of government using the absolute/relative distinction. Consistent with an absolute approach, after establishing the external truth which applies to all people, it follows that government would have the role of ensuring that every man, woman, and child is taught this truth and acts consistently with the truth. That is, it is government's responsibility and thus its duty to bring about the general good and to suppress evil. Freedom is primarily a matter of being free from the grips of evil.

Relatively speaking on the other hand, if you assume that there are no absolute truths, then there is no basis for government to have the role of dictating anything on the grounds that it reflects known external truth. What government can do is to maximize the freedom of every citizen to live his/her own life. This relative role of government is frequently described as a three-pronged task:

1. to protect the individual from the dictates of others (military defense and local law enforcement)—thus, providing the individual freedom to have a life grounded in a belief system of one's own choosing;

2. to maximize the individual's opportunity to see alternatives when choosing his/her own belief system—thus, an educational system and protections such as freedom of speech and association; and

3. to be physically free within one's own physical space (privacy)—thus, the right to own property, and as an extension of the freedom of association, to enter into contracts.

Thus, relatively speaking, freedom is a matter of having the opportunity to create one's own life through one's own choices.

ON POLITICS: VOTING IN THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

[Suggestion, first read "The Role of Government" on page 1.]

Only about 53% of eligible citizens voted in the 1980 election. The explanation frequently given is that Americans are apathetic, lazy, and take their voting rights and freedoms for granted.

Consider an alternative explanation particularly as it applies to voting for members of the two major political parties (Democrats and Republicans). The argument is as follows:

On the one hand, consider that the Democratic Party is quite relative (individual determination) when it comes to issues of morals and ethics and quite absolute (government control) when it comes to issues of business. On the other hand, consider that the Republican Party seems to do it the other way around. When it comes to business, it is relative (maximizing individual freedom); whereas, when it comes to morals and ethics, it tends to be absolute (maximizing government control over the individual).

For example, the Democrats maximize support for individual freedom (relative) on ethical issues relating to sexual behavior, abortion and drug usage; but maximize government or central control over the individual (absolute) on business/financial issues by supporting increased taxation, higher tariffs, and by supporting strong unions which exert considerable control over the individual workers. The Republicans, on the other hand, reverse the positions by maximizing individual freedom (relative) with respect to business issues by advocating lower taxes, lower tariffs, and right-to-work laws which tend to project the individual from union dominance; while maximizing government authority (absolute) over ethical issues by supporting greater government controls which prescribe ethical behavior (e.g., anti-abortion, addition of "One Nation under God" phrase in the *Pledge of Allegiance*—Eisenhower, and prayer in schools).

Given this analysis, the voters are being confronted with a contradictory task or a "Catch 22"—they are asked to increase their freedom in one area and decrease their freedom in another. To vote for either party means to vote to increase individual freedom in one area while agreeing to decrease freedom in the other area. For many reasons, election results are interpreted by government representatives as a public mandate to increase government control (absolute) while largely ignoring the other half of the platform calling for greater individual freedom (relative). Thus, the voters become frustrated as they see their votes being interpreted primarily to support the very things they oppose. A predictable response is simply not to vote at all.

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ON GROWTH: RELATIVITY & CALVIN KLEIN

Not the jeans, but...the 41-year-old founder of the billion-dollar business, Calvin Klein, illustrates an approach to living that is consistent with relativity. Interviewed in *Parade Magazine* (8-26-84), Calvin Klein relates: (1) how he is primarily motivated by an internal sense of challenge rather than an external objective of money; (2) how he sees life as a process of taking one step at a time rather than seeking to have his life laid out neatly and securely before acting; (3) how he constantly competes with himself rather than using others as a standard for personal success; and (4) how he sees his happiness and personal growth as involving a process of learning to deal effectively with stress rather than avoiding stress.

“Relativity” is not a term used by Calvin Klein during the interview, but the relative perspective is a way of organizing Klein’s personal descriptions so that they can be useful to others.

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MORE ON POLITICS : THE CALIFORNIA LOTTERY

“The lottery is a good idea. A lottery is a painless way to raise money for worthwhile services such as public education.” An argument such as this is consistent with the absolute principle of government for the people. The absolutist could also oppose the lottery on the grounds that the gambling would hurt the poor. Basic to the absolute position, whether pro- or con-lottery, is the assumption that government is like a good parent that watches over and takes care of its children.

From the relative perspective, it is nonsense and simple idolatry to view government as doing good. (It is “idolatry” in that people create a “State” and then worship their own creation by pledging allegiance to it and calling its actions “good.”) Consistent with a relative view, the statement government is simply an extension of the people’s will—the concept of state government only makes sense when it carries out the people’s will—to take money from a person for purposes other than to benefit that person is called “robbery.” Thus, it is desirable to have a reasonably close relationship between (1) the reason for the citizenry giving the money and (2) the purpose for which the money is to be spent. This is a check and balance system to periodically remind the citizen what he/she is paying to have the state do in his/her name. This insures a government by the people. A state lottery is undesirable in that it substantially separates the act of contributing from the purpose for which the money is to be used. As such, a lottery breaks down the relationship between the will of the people and the actions of government.

As a closing note, the arguments cited above provide a very practical example of how the absolute/relative distinction can be used to make sense out of the alternatives we are confronted with daily. As for the newsletters, whether you are absolute or relative in your orientation, the primary point is that the absolute/relative distinction is a useful mental tool for clarifying and thus facilitating communication between people.

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MORE ON POLITICS : WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY, JR. AS “MIXED”

In the October (1984) issue of *Reader's Digest*, William F. Buckley authored an article (“Voting is a Civic Sacrament”) in which he seems to mix absolute and relative assumptions.

On the one hand, Buckley has established a conservative reputation for himself by advocating individual rights and minimizing government involvement in tasks that can be reasonably accomplished through private or individual efforts—a position seemingly consistent with a relative perspective.

On the other hand, Buckley argues in the above-cited article for the desirability of “voting for the good of the country [rather than] voting for your own interests”—a position seemingly consistent with an absolute perspective (the individual subservient to the group). Also consistent with an absolute position, Buckley states that “We are endowed by our Creator with great powers of reasoning, and foremost of these is the power to reason [ON OVER TO???] the national good from the personal good [ibid.]” I interpret this from the absolute perspective to mean that Buckley can tell me God’s position on this matter and it follows that we should all be subservient to the truth of God’s will.

Given this characterization of Buckley it follows that his “conservatism” mixes the relative and absolute assumptions making his arguments logically inconsistent and thus unintelligible. Buckley’s efforts could be deleterious to the traditional conservative stand for individual rights in at least two ways. First, he may be taking a lot of raw talent (people who want to seriously consider the views of conservatism) down an endless maze of ambiguity until their energies are wasted. And, secondly, as Buckley presents his “conservatism” as if it were logically consistent, his cadre of followers become increasingly alienated from their own common sense and regress into stillborn rhetoric. (The dynamics of this last point are well developed by John Holt in the last chapter of *How Children Fail*.)

It is clear that the comments regarding Buckley are introductory in nature. The intent is simply to suggest that you may not want to put all of your conservative eggs in Buckley’s basket.

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T A L K B A C K

Gianmarco, Torino, Italy

"I received some of the SOC publications. It's very interesting. It's a way to provoke remarks and, in a world that SEEMS to refuse Thought, it's a great thing...continue."

Jeffrey, Arcadia, CA

"The Newsletter continues to be an unexpected delightful surprise every time it arrives. I look forward to a more frequent version."

Warren, Los Angeles, CA

"Got and read "Relatively Speaking." Enjoyed the stimulation of thought provoking ideas."

Orin, Pasadena, CA

"I don't exactly forget to think but I seldom remember that it is possible to evolve. Being content with present circumstances is where I am at now. That worries me a little, but not enough to change."

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