

RELATIVELY SPEAKING

The Philosophy of Individualism

Number 27

Editor: Gordon F. Brown, PhD

June 1996

Greetings! Another semester is over and I hope to get out 2 or 3 more newsletters during the summer. My lawsuit against PCC trustees and administrators for "Waste of Taxpayers' Funds" (hundreds of thousands of dollars in travel and entertainment perks) is continuing and presently before the California Appellate Court. Progress is being made on the Relativity Book which was in the final editing stages 6 months ago. However, a few commentators persuaded me to consider rewriting the chapter on sex to make it easier to read, perhaps skipping 50% of the detailed examples. That also will be a priority this summer. I welcome your comments if you received one of those earlier drafts.

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Just for fun, here are 3 excerpts from the Spring 1996 end-of semester "Response Forms."

"The model of data coming in as opposed to "looking out" is the most liberating realization a person can have. That along with your stressing the point of reading and analyzing what you have read as opposed to just reading words have been my major enjoyment of the semester."

"Out of all the classes I've taken at PCC, this has actually turned out to be my favorite...enabled me to better deal with more cognitive thinking and issues...'learning' on my own was the best experience I ever received from any college course...inspired me to better understand my own boundaries and limitations...thank you for the realization that education is not someone else doing your learning, but the discipline to comprehend on my own."

"I realized how helpful and fun it is to think."

These responses are typical of those received and they support the idea that the relative approach provides a unique opportunity to engage in thinking and that most people actually enjoy thinking if friends or circumstances provide the opportunity.

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Personal Growth: Steps 2 and 3 for Becoming Human

In the last newsletter (January 1996), I proposed that "the first step in becoming human is to choose your top priority in life." I argued that, relatively speaking, only after you choose your top priority are you in a position to make rationally integrated decisions which, in turn, give rise to an intelligible sense of identity as a human being.

I likened the human experience to that of being a ship's captain--who also is the owner. Just as this captain chooses the ship's top priority (its destination); as individuals, it is the responsibility

of each one of us to choose a personal top priority (one's goal in life). It is this specific act of choosing that makes us uniquely human and distinguishes us from animals. Thus, choosing a top priority was described in the last newsletter as the first step for becoming human. Now, continuing this argument, the ship's captain can again serve as a metaphor to illustrate the second of three steps for becoming human. Each day, if not more frequently, the captain performs the navigational task of comparing the ship's past location with its current location, and then establishing the present day's heading or "plan of the day." Similarly, as individuals, each one of us can begin the day with an assessment: where have I been, where am I presently, and what shall I do today to move me toward my chosen goal or to achieve greater integrity between my daily activities and my top priority. This second step is largely a mental process involving the task of assessing my past performance and, in the light of my present top priority, planning my future actions.

The third and final step is a physical one--just doing it. The captain maneuvers the ship throughout the day according to the "plan of the day." As individuals, we can strive to carry out our daily activities in a way that maximizes our progress toward our chosen goal. Whether captain or individual, this third task involves the moment-by-moment equating of my goal on the one hand with my immediate actions on the other. Of course, there are all sorts of ancillary interactions that I take into consideration such as new information, emergency situations, and maintenance requirements.

The three steps cited here for becoming human can be seen as parallel to the Greek idea of human experience being subdivided into body (physical action), mind (reason), and spirit (choosing). Within this context, the mature individual can be seen as a person who has developed a stable identity (consistent priority) that can accommodate a wide variety of human experiences.

Given these three steps, clearly the most basic change for either the captain of the ship, or the individual and his or her life, would be a change in destination (or top priority). Where are you going? That is the basic question on which personal identity and, consequently, all interpersonal relationships are based. If a person's top priority changes, everything changes. Thus, selecting one's top priority becomes the fundamental challenge for anyone choosing to develop his or her potential for becoming human. As a practical application to illustrate this point, the stability of a marriage would be a function of the degree to which each party has (a) developed and identified a stable top priority, and (2) the degree of compatibility between the priorities of the two parties.

Returning to the main point, we can restate in a slightly different way this view on becoming human: Choosing one's top priority enables decisions to be made in an integrated manner; integrated behavior provides a basis for the concept of personal identity; and having an identity resulting from your choices is the unique characteristic attributed to humans and not to animals.

We can note that the relativist has the responsibility for choosing his or her own top priority and literally creating his or her own human identity by doing so. This is a life where the individual is continually striving for integrity in a constantly changing world of personal experience.

In contrast, the absolutist's first task is to establish the Truth and then to determine what he or she thinks is required by the Truth. This is a life of constantly pledging loyalty and service to that Truth which he or she has most recently created. As for being human, it is just a biological description distinguishing one animal from another animal, and does not involve the concept of freedom to choose. The Truth determines everything.

Then, there are the mixed. The two contradictory approaches (absolute and relative) are mixed with the apparent payoff being emotional satisfaction, but at the sacrifice of rational integrity. There is only the striving to feel good. Do and say anything in order to get what you think will make you feel good. The mixed person can be seen as "brain dead" but still having a "heart." There are no worries or thoughts regarding rational goals or intellectual integrity. There is only the constant striving to feel good. "I just want everyone to be happy," they say. As for being human, calling people "human" is a compliment just as calling them an "animal" can be an insult. "Human" is a term used to convey emotions rather than ideas.

Furthermore, we can see that it is the relativist, and only the relativist, who has the task of struggling to set his or her top priority as a personal matter of choice. The absolutist has his or her top priority set by God and/or Truth. For the mixed, the top priority is feeling good; however, this is not thoughtfully chosen, but a genetically programmed default for those choosing not to be human by refusing to exercise their potential to think. Only the relativist has the task of being captain and owner of the ship. It is not surprising that an absolute-oriented society does not prepare its citizenry to deal with the difficult relative task of being free to choose.

So what? From a relative perspective, this type of analysis supports the common practice of "a quiet time." This is a time, typically the first thing every morning (driving or busing home from work is a close second), when an individual gets by himself or herself and spends at least 15 to 30 minutes in reflecting on his/her past, present, and immediate future. The basic questions are: What do I choose to do with my life? What did I do yesterday, last week, and the last couple of years? What do I choose to do today, next week, during the next 5 years? This is no easy task, but to avoid setting the course for your life is to abandon one's role as captain of the ship and to drift aimlessly which carries with it a most painful sense of emptiness, meaninglessness, and superficialness. There is no self-esteem or self assertion simply because there is no "self."

In future newsletters, I plan to address the issue of choosing a top priority--the first step for the relativist. I welcome, in advance, your comments whether they are similar or different to the views presented in these newsletters.

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Relativist's Quotes of the Month:

"Thinking is the hardest work there is, which is probably the reason so few engage in it." Henry Ford (*Reader's Digest*, April 1996)

"Someone who enjoys ideas has a very inexpensive source for entertainment." Gordon Brown (*Relatively Speaking* (SOC Newsletter), June 1996)

[Both quotes emphasize that it is the individual who is in control.]

We Could Choose to have a Summer "Get-Together"

We could informally get together and share our thoughts on this relativity idea as it applies to everyday living. I am particularly interested in whether it lasts after the class and what are the hurdles. I can reserve a room at Pasadena City College--perhaps on a Saturday or Sunday morning. If you so choose, leave a message on my voice mail (818-585-7498). I will suggest, somewhat arbitrarily, Saturday, July 13, 9:30 to 11:30 A.M.; or Sunday, July 14, 9:30 to 11:30 A.M. Feel free to suggest a time that is more convenient for you. I will get back to those responding, so leave your name and I will use your newsletter mailing address unless you say differently. [PCC contact number does not apply after 1998.]

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**T A L K      B A C K**

From Nguyet in Pasadena, CA

*"I am happy to receive your newsletter. I enjoy reading it. Since taking your class almost 3 years ago, I have had many opportunities to apply the concept of relative thinking. I am at UCLA right now and I will graduate with a BS in chemistry this coming June. Please continue sending me your newsletter."*

From Kimberly in Laguna Beach, CA

*"I received some pleasure contemplating the relative/absolute debate and find myself curious regarding the mixed approach--very interesting thoughts. I suspect the relative thinkers find themselves non-judgmental and flexible in nature while the absolute thinkers find themselves committed and morally righteous. Mixing the two philosophies seems rather difficult especially when speaking of "God, Sex and Politics."*

From Kaye in Phoenix, AZ

*"I read your recent issue (Number 26) with interest. Not having taken your class, some of the comments intrigue me and I want to know more--for example, what do you teach regarding how to read a book and how to concentrate? I'd love to teach those things myself! I'd hate for my students to be wasting 20 years of their lives, and the lives of students they teach. I hope you can share that concisely! The apartment complex which is profit-making for the occupants is also fascinating. Looking forward to your next issue for the additional basic steps in becoming human."*

From Marcia in Long Beach, CA

*"Thank you for putting my name on the list to receive the newsletter. I found the issue you sent interesting and thought provoking. My brain actually did a little work to understand the concepts. How exhilarating!!!"*

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Address Check:

This is a continuing process. If you do not have a *94 (or later) on your mailing label and you would like to continue receiving the newsletter, confirm your address and interest by either sending a note to: School of Communication, PO BOX 1211, Arcadia, CA 91077; or simply by leaving a message on my answering machine anytime. The number is (818) 585-7498. [PCC contact number does not apply after 1998.]

When I verify your name and address, I will put a "*96" on your label. Work with me on this. Occasionally, a call will be erased before I hear it -- something to do with PCC's automatic erasing of "old" messages. If the "*94," "*95," or "*96" does not appear on your label even though you called in, please call or write again.

Feel free to request that your newsletter be sent to a temporary, college address.

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