

RELATIVELY SPEAKING

The Philosophy of Individualism

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ON POLITICS: CARTER IS "MIXED"

In his last major address to the nation, President Jimmy Carter may be seen as giving a logically inconsistent message by "mixing" absolute and relative assumptions—appealing to emotions rather than increasing understanding.

Consistent with a relative point of view, Carter analyzes the country's problem as a crisis in "meaning." We are all stymied by the problem of personal meaning—Who are we? Where are we going? And, what difference does it make?

Carter suggested that the result of such a conflict is lower production rates and so increased inflation, and also a loss of confidence in ourselves and consequently a sense of insecurity.

On the other hand, Carter suggests an answer that is quite consistent with an absolute approach involving united loyalty to him. He has the answers that are best for us. Our role is to follow his leadership.

The logical inconsistencies in Carter's message can be isolated as follows: (1) If the experts at the top have the answers that justify his call for "loyalty," "unity," and the loss of freedom they imply, why is Carter visiting the common folk to get insight—how do you ask for loyalty and insight from the same people at the same time? And, (2), if the problem is a crisis involving personal meaning, how would strong leadership and loyalty to Carter be helpful? How can he demonstrate strong representative leadership when he argues that the people do not know what they want?

ON POLITICS: CARTER IS “MIXED” (Continued)

It may be reasonable to believe that Carter is just giving contradictor messages knowing that people tend to hear what they want to hear. The part they disagree with will not be heard at all but will be experienced as being vague or complex and explained away as being “over their heads, thus attributing the contradictory messages to Carter’s brilliance and their own limitations (John Holt describes this style of communicating in his 1964 book, *How Children Fail*).

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ON SEMANTICS: THE “MIXED” INDIVIDUAL

One reader asks: “Do you believe that people are either absolutist or relativist”?

In these newsletters, statements are frequently categorized (by this writer) as “absolute” or “relative” in that they are seen (by this writer) as being logically consistent with how these two views of reality have been defined in these newsletters.

In like manner, an “idealized” person may be referred to as an “absolutist” or a “relativist” in that s/he embodies the particular idea. However, like the idea of the “average man,” neither the “relativist” nor the “absolutist” exists except as a mental concept or model.

In actual practice most people probably maintain contradictory beliefs to some degree with reference to these two models. Some of the time they act consistently with an absolute model and other times with a relative model. As a person gets older, he may tend to increase his integrity (reduce inconsistency) by choosing to act more consistently with either a relative or absolute view of reality.

On the other hand, a person may choose to be consistent, and intentionally maintain two contradictory views of reality. I can see such a person receiving many social rewards for being “mixed.” (See the article on “On Growth” in this issue for some of these rewards.)

In conclusion, we now have three models: Relative, Absolute, and Mixed making the acronym “RAM.”

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ON GROWTH: ADVANTAGES OF BEING “MIXED” (Student and Employee)

First consider the COLLEGE STUDENT. His task may be that of

1. going from class-to-class picking up the views of numerous instructors, and reciting them back as if they were his own. If done successfully, then
2. he receives rewards in the form of higher grades, scholarships, and verbal praise from the institution and parents alike.

Since instructors differ philosophically from each other (including their views of reality), the task for the student is to spend several years identifying with inconsistent beliefs. Some students will sense the inconsistencies, but will generally consider them to be a problem of their own limited knowledge. They will be sustained by a strong faith that it will all come together in the end.

After a few years in the system, students may find it to their advantage to avoid any serious questioning of their faith, since it is useful in getting the reward that they and their parents value.

THE EMPLOYEE may be under similar pressure to pledge loyalty to conflicting views of reality. When he gives verbal agreement to conflicting demands and beliefs of supervisors, he may be complimented for his ability to “get along with others,” “being a team player,” “working well with others,” “being liked,” being “tactful and a gentleman,” etc.

Some years ago, Robert Townsend (“the man who turned Avis around”) wrote the best seller, *Up the Organization*. Among other things, he argued that unfortunately the way to the top of most corporations is by supporting your superiors, rather than by being innovative and effective.

Like the student situation, the employee’s evaluators will have different belief systems, and consequently the eager employee may find himself routinely supporting contradictory belief systems. In closing, being “mixed” (conforming to contradictory belief systems particularly with reference to views of reality) may bring high social rewards and social security, but there may be a corresponding cost in terms of loneliness from not having an identity, and a sense of isolation because there is no identity to communicate to others.

T A L K B A C K
Dialogue

OJ, Pasadena (Re: "Growth & Sex")

Your reference to the cartoon, "Really, I'm shallow too," was at least an effort to communicate—let's give credit for that.

Regarding your article on sex, it was my experience that in the 1950s, we macho-male teenagers asked questions such as: "Are you getting any?" "Is it good?" "Do you make her holler?" In the 1960s, we tended to decide our personal worth depending on our sexual value to another person. Now, in the 1970s (I'm in my 40s), it seems that the most rewarding aspects of a relationship are not directly the sexual ones. Any comments?

Thanks OJ for your letter. I grant your first point—any effort to communicate is significant, and those first efforts are perhaps the most difficult.

As to your second point, I am also impressed with changing sex roles. Perhaps consistent with your own views, I also see a changing female role: (a) Before either of our times, it seemed that the female was seen as an "appendage" to the male—she would be an ornament to show the wealth and power of the male; and she would be a "person" that would raise his kids and keep his house. (b) More recently, the female has had a dual role: the "sexy" role of being pretty, popular, virgin, etc., and the "serious" role of being sensitive, communicating, etc. Rarely did these two roles get integrated within the same female (she may be one or the other, or "serious" with her husband and "sexy" with her tennis instructor). And (c), the challenge I see today is developing a concept of the female that is integrated. Recent movements to make females "equal" to males by calling everyone a "person" seems to circumvent rather than resolve the issue.

I am hopeful about the future on this issue. Just as we are learning to *interact* in a somewhat symbiotic (mutually advantageous interaction) relationship with "nature" and we have stopped trying to "conquer" it, we will eventually learn to see males and females in such a way as to facilitate the personal development of each. The only question is how much suffering and exploitation will go on before we decide to identify the variables and search our resolutions.

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S E X: Next in Series

**The series on “sex” will continue in the next newsletter,
which is planned for mailing in 2 weeks.**

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ADDRESS CHECK: 3RD CALL

The mailing list is slowly getting updated. One reader wrote, “Thank you for giving me a second chance to respond. At the time of your first address check, I was preoccupied with many personal challenges. I do not agree with extreme viewpoints (either direction). However, I realize the value of having been exposed to extremes.”

In general, we are setting up two types of mailings: (1) first-class mailing to those who have received at least one mailing and have chosen to communicate an interest in receiving more. And, (2), third-class mailing for those who indicated an interest in receiving the newsletter prior to receiving any (perhaps recommended by friends or a personal association with a subscriber).

We are randomly phasing out those addresses that we have not heard from for 2 years or have no reason to assume that they are current. One problem in phasing anyone out is the infrequency of the newsletter (efforts are being made to increase the continuity of thought by more frequent newsletters).

If you received this newsletter by third-class mail, consider choosing to respond and receive future newsletters by first-class mail (no staple to open, and they are forwarded if you move.) The only “cost” is the effort expended in the act of choosing.

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