

RELATIVELY SPEAKING

The Philosophy of Individualism

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AN INTRODUCTORY NOTE:

Assume that we are all interested in peace. Our focus may be international with concern over nuclear or chemical warfare, domestic with a concern over crime rates and racial strife, social with a concern over family conflicts or employment adjustments, or personal with a concern over the meaning and purpose of our lives.

Consider the following views of peace from the perspective of the absolute-relative model. Reading the section on "Semantics" first, "Growth" second, and "Philosophy" last is recommended.

As always, I welcome your comment. GFB

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SEMANTICS: PEACE DEFINED

From an absolute perspective, "peace" could be thought of as an external state of calm or quiet, or an internal state free from disturbing thoughts. Perhaps that is what parents mean when they tell the kids, "Let's have a little peace around here"; what the fisherman means when he says he found a peaceful spot; and what anti-war demonstrators mean when they advocate world peace.

As for a relative approach, the definition of the word "peace" could rest on the assumption that disruptions will occur as a natural and an integral part of living [covered in "Philosophy"]. Thus, a definition of the word "peace" could refer to whether or not an individual can choose the type, place, and item of the disruption.

SEMANTICS: Peace Defined (continued)

From the relative perspective, the peace process in a family setting could be demonstrated when members agree to discuss their differences, while assuming that such differences are inevitable and that there is no way to establish the truth of one position over another in terms of an external or absolute criterion.

Therefore, the objective in discussing differences within a relative context is not to create a peaceful external environment where individual differences are dissolved. Instead, discussing differences can be useful in clarifying one's own position, increasing understanding and tolerance for alternative positions, providing an opportunity for learning to live with differences, and affording a greater awareness of one's own personal identity (created by one's choices.)

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GROWTH: TEACHING PEACE

In our childhood, we were probably taught a concept of "peace" from our parents and teachers. As adults, we are now teaching a concept of "peace" to children and youth with whom we come in contact. Thus, understanding our current concept of peace is significant to appreciating the biases passed on to us as well as the biases we are passing on to others.

From an absolute perspective, parents may teach a concept of peace (meaning "calm") by encouraging the child to avoid conflicts, particularly when emotions are involved. Common phrases include: "If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all"; "Shake hands and make up"; "Let's not argue"; "Don't raise your voice"; "Disagree without being disagreeable"; "Show respect to your elders."

Such phrases do not address the particular merits of the issue at hand, but they do convey a general message to avoid conflicts. Thus, the goal of social interactions is peace, and "peace" is the absence of fighting and disruptions.

With the emphasis on getting the right answers which are assumed to lead to peace, the absolute parent may "help" and "care for" the child by jumping in and giving the right answer when the child is confronted with a frustrating problem.

In contrast, the relative parent may teach a concept of peace (ability to pick your own challenges) by encouraging the child to reflect on different problems available and develop strategies for selecting one problem to work on. For example, just asking the child what he or she wants today may encourage conscious recognition of alternatives, and thus, conscious recognition of the dynamics of choosing. When the child is frustrated with a task that does not seem to be "working out," the relative parent may encourage the child to take a short rest and return with a "fresh" perspective.

GROWTH: Teaching Peace (continued)

Also, the child may be permitted to see the parents disagree and continue to communicate using skills designed to maximize personal growth (clarifying one’s own view point, seeing alternative view points, and reflecting on personal preferences).

Contrasting the absolute and relative view, absolutist parents may say that the problems their children will deal with may be different, but no less significant than the problems they had as children. Such parents may pass on problem-solving skills to their children and an understanding that personal identity is significantly related to problem selection, and personal self-worth is related to perceived success of those problems.

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ON PHILOSOPHY: PEACE AND WAR

Absolute: Assuming a knowable, external world, “living” is a matter of finding the truth and guiding your behavior according to it. “Peace,” to the “absolutists,” will be achieved when everyone acts consistently with the truth. Consequently, when everyone is acting consistently with the truth they will be acting in harmony with each other.

To achieve peace, we must ensure that everyone is trained in the truth and protected from exposure to false ideas. We can predict a world of war and violence as long as there are some people who insist on talking and acting contrary to the established truth.

Relative: Given the relative assumption that there is no such thing as a knowable, external world, “living” is choosing—we choose our jobs, friends, reading materials, etc. The choices are not right or wrong according to an external truth, but they are significant in that they give rise to the experiences, which, when added together, give each of us a unique world.

“Peace,” to the “relativist,” may be achieved between individuals who see themselves as substantially maximizing their individual freedom of choice.

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WAR

First, consider that both the absolutist and relativist are similar in that violence can be predicted when “living” is threatened.

Absolute: “Living” is living according to the truth which in turn makes you free. Thus, violence is likely to be chosen as a means of achieving peace by punishing or eliminating

WAR (Continued)

those persons acting contrary to the truth (a parent spanking a child for being “bad” or Iran’s Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini putting thousands of people to death for “bringing evil on earth”).

Relative: “Living” is the freedom to choose between alternatives. You could predict violence when anyone is seen as eliminating alternatives (or reducing one’s ability to choose between already existing alternatives). For example, choice is restricted when a parent tells a child to go to bed at 8:00 PM or be back from a date at midnight, or when alternative candidates to government office are eliminated as in Afghanistan.

To summarize, it logically follows that the absolutist can justify forcing the truth on others or burning them alive at the stake. On the other hand, it is logically inconsistent for the relativist to argue that his neighbor’s beliefs are equally valid to his own and then violently force the neighbor to comply with his beliefs.

Also, for the absolutist, it is the truth that brings the good life by freeing the individual from the pain of ignorance (war, cancer, etc.). The proper role of government is to compel people to follow the truth or be punished for disruption. For the relativist, the good life is having the freedom to pick one’s own life’s experiences—to be is to choose. The proper role of government is to enforce laws which maximize the freedom of every individual to practice his or her own beliefs.

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The Absolutist’s Quote of the Month:

“Today the destructive potential of the nuclear powers threatens the sovereignty of God over the world he has brought into being. We could destroy his work.”

Catholics Bishops’ Committee (October, 1982)

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VIOLENCE

Absolute: Given that peace is the absence of violence, children are taught to be nice and avoid fighting. when they do fight, children are told to “shake hands and say you’re sorry.”

Regarding television, parents may express concern that their children will learn to be violent by modeling the characters on their favorite programs. Censorship of violent programs

VIOLENCE (Continued)

would be a logical alternative for the absolute parent. The emphasis is on something “out there” that makes the child “good” or “bad,” Thus, “good” programs bring about “good” behavior in children.

Relative: Peace is the ability to pick the time, place, and type of violence one chooses to engage in.

Adults can teach the child to distinguish between violence between consenting people such as in boxing and football, and violence between non-consenting persons such as in typical cases of child abuse and military aggression.

Children can be encouraged to express violence only with consenting participants. In addition, children can be taught that violence toward an unwilling participant is a crude form of problem solving common to the jungle. The issue is one of effectiveness rather than values.

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HUMAN RIGHTS

A current absolute-relative conflict involves the relative view of State sovereignty versus an absolute view on human rights.

The relative concept of State sovereignty provides that the State is not subject to any force outside the State. In contrast, the absolute view of human rights is that State laws and practices are subject to universal truths regarding the rights of individuals.

Compared with the relativist who supports a concept of State sovereignty, the absolutist advocating “human rights” could be much more inclined to influence the domestic policies of another country or judge the members of a society by an outside criterion.

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LEGAL IDOLATRY

You form a pot out of clay—you proclaim the pot is God—then you worship the pot as God.

It’s not quite that simple. Generally, pot makers say that they were inspired by God, and that they are worshipping the reflections of God’s beauty in the pot. They were only an instrument used by God. In any event, you make something with your hands and then you turn around and worship it (become subject to it).

Relative: It is simple idolatry for people to make some laws and then turn around and argue that people are “good” if they follow the laws and “bad” if they violate the laws. Equally repulsive are adoration-seeking judges and law-makers who see themselves as representatives of God and truth, rather than of the citizenry.

There is not a problem with “guilt” or “innocence”; there is a problem in associating “good” with innocence and “bad” with guilt—to do so, is to create the value for your own products.

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LAW AND VIOLENCE

A jury has just convicted a man of first-degree murder. the question is raised as to whether the jury will recommend the death penalty. The problem is to distinguish the convicted man’s premeditated decision to kill from the jury’s premeditated decision to have him killed.

Absolute: Two variations on the them of good and bad can be made.

Focusing on the external act, the absolutist could argue that premeditated killing is premeditated killing. Killing is wrong—“Though shalt not kill”...“two wrongs don’t make a right”...“what is gained by the sword shall be taken away by the sword.” Thus, it could be argued that a death sentence is wrong even if by a jury.

However, the absolutist could focus on his mission in life of encouraging good and eliminating evil. Whether you are talking about the Crusades, Inquisitions, or Iran’s Khomeini, it has always been the duty of good people to eliminate bad people. Therefore, if you argue that the convicted murderer is evil, then it is good to eliminate him.

Relative: First, there is no issue of external good or bad. Members of a society make agreements (contracts or laws) to guide the behavior of their own members and anyone else who happens to enter their turf.

“You don’t kill me and I don’t kill you,” is the social agreement in question. It is the jury’s job to simply establish whether or not a contract was broken. The contract itself provides for the penalty.

If the law provides for a death penalty under certain circumstances, and a jury or judge is opposed to a death penalty, this is a reason for either of them to work to change the law, but not a reason to find the party innocent of breaking the contract.

For a judge or jury to intentionally modify a finding of guilt because they are opposed to the death penalty is a betrayal of their public trust to a point approaching treason. That is, they

LAW AND VIOLENCE (Continued)

used their position as a judge or jury to undermine the social contract they were entrusted to fulfill. Consistent with a relative view, it is the social contract (whether the US Constitution or a local ordinance) that is the basis of a society. In contrast, the absolutist frequently argues that he is responding to a "higher authority" when he choose to violate the law.

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T A L K B A C K

PB, Connecticut

"When's SOC coming out with another newsletter? I'm provided by them and enjoy that."

ST, San Luis Obispo, CA

"...absolutes repel me, and yet there is a built in yearning for the 'benefits' of them.... My frustration in talking with you is similar to others talking with me...it is like dealing with someone whose foundation is a sliding scale versus a rock."

PH, Pasadena, CA

"Terrific—please continue."

JM, Arcadia, CA

" Receiving the newsletter is always a pleasant surprise...."

HC, Torrance, CA

"Thank you for the continued distribution of your "relative" newsletter. I look forward to receiving future editions."

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