

RELATIVELY SPEAKING*The Philosophy of Individualism*

Number 26

Editor: Gordon F. Brown, PhD

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Greetings! I was involved in several activities last year: (a) there were 3 Newsletters (January, April, and August); (b) a student discussion group met about 10 times; (c) another discussion group began to meet with a focus on religion and relativity; (d) I continued my efforts to affect the educational establishment at PCC by filing a lawsuit for Waste of Public Funds; (e) the absolute/relative distinction was again presented in my classes; (f) seemingly unclear portions of the book on relativity were rewritten and it is now in final draft form; and (g) I have been pursuing a few community efforts that greatly interest me, e.g., setting up of an apartment complex (occupied by relative-minded problem solvers) that would be self-managing and profit-making for the occupants.

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Just for fun, here are four excerpts (minor editing) from the Fall 1995 end-of-semester "Response Forms." These responses are typical of those received.

"I learned how to read a book and how to concentrate--first time in my life. It really affected my performances in other classes, and I started getting good grades in those classes. It was a simple technique, but it really hit me and made me realize how I've been wasting my time for 20 years."

"It was a really interesting class in the aspect that it helped me understand myself and how to deal with other people. It is one of the best classes I have ever taken because it helped me to think critically and apply it to everyday life."

"I am just starting my journey through college, your class being one of my first. I found it to be a great learning experience in regards to thinking. It will positively affect the rest of my college experience, and my life. Thank you."

"I enjoyed being challenged in my responses to questions. Normally, my profs are thrilled to have a student contribute to the lecture by giving one word answers. In this class I was asked, What are you saying? What do you mean by that? Which caused me to really think about my answers and expand. This helped in many aspects of my life. I also enjoyed not being fed the book. Usually, I can bring my books to class and highlight as the prof lectures, not in this class. I read the entire book this semester. This was the 1st time in all 3 years I have been in college that I read the text book from start to finish. And I am not a Psych major. Initially, I was really annoyed with Dr. Brown's format. I felt like class time didn't accomplish much of anything. Now I appreciate class times. They are our time, the students, I could think in class and contribute to the lecture. This is a class that I complained about, but now I realize that I was given more opportunities for personal and academic growth in this class than any other class in my entire college career. Thanks"

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Personal Growth: The First Step on Becoming Human

Consider the following. Life is dynamic. Every second of our lives is involved with decision making -- and, the current moment is both a product of our past decisions and an ingredient of our future decisions. Furthermore, in order to make decisions, we must have a goal in mind. The absolutist will argue that there is a Right goal for which you should strive, and your only alternative is to do that which is Right or to do that which is Wrong. On the other hand, the relativist will argue that you are free to pick your own goal, and it is your choice that defines you as an individual. We shall pursue the relativist's argument.

It is as if you are the captain of a ship. Every moment involves decision making. However, there is no one to tell you what decisions you should make--you are the captain. After careful thought, you realize that decisions can only be made within the context of a chosen destination or goal. Thus, your primary task, and the task that will establish your identity as a captain, is that of choosing your ship's destination or goal.

And, relatively speaking, so it is with life. Nature has provided you with a body over which you are the captain. Your identity as an individual is established by your choice of goals, and it is your chosen goals that enable you to make decisions from moment-to-moment.

Rather than "goals," the term "priorities" is often used in this context. Instead of asking what are your goals in life, we ask what are your priorities in life. Commonly chosen priorities can be seen to relate to family, material accumulation, friends, an idea, a cause, or a religious belief. For example, if you choose family as a priority, you are now in a position to make decisions from moment to moment--alternatives can be seen as either helping the family, interfering with the family, or as unimportant because they do not relate to the family. You have now established a basis for decision making, and it is your choice of a top priority which identifies you as an individual--a family man or woman.

In addition, just as a ship can have only one primary destination, you can have only one priority at any one time. If both family and friends are chosen, it will only be a matter of time when a decision will have to be made where the interests of either family or friends will be maximized. This dynamic of setting one top priority seems to reflect a natural maturational process inclined toward integrity and self definition.

Thus, the first step in becoming human is to choose your top priority in life. Only then are you in a position to make intelligible decisions. And, only then are you in a position to intelligibly talk about your identity as a human being and to share that identity with another person with whom you would like to establish a social relationship.

We can apply this principle to everyday living. Our task in life is to define ourselves by first choosing our top priority and then to establish our integrity by making decisions consistent with that top priority. This is the all-consuming and inescapable task of being human -- it is awesome. Parents could be cautioned against suggesting to their children that happiness in life can be obtained through: loyalty to family or friends; accumulation of material wealth achieved by getting high grades in school leading to a high paying job; or by commitment to a cause such as saving the whales or rain forests. While trying to avoid sounding cynical, we

can note that common observation and reason suggests that these approaches are inherently flawed. We can discuss these arguments in future newsletters. For whatever it is worth to you, it appears to me that the most promising arguments involve some sort of religious belief -- a relatively oriented religious belief, I might add. Unfortunately, from my perspective, discussions regarding religion seem to address only absolute approaches. Like crime in the streets, it may not be what most people are experiencing, but it is what most people are hearing about. In future newsletters, I will address some of these relatively oriented, religious-type approaches to living. The strongest arguments that I am aware of support this type of approach; however, I will "talk" with you -- I will pursue this approach at a pace approximating that set by those of you who indicate an interest by your write-in comments.

In the next newsletter, I will suggest two more basic steps in becoming human. The idea is that without these three steps, there is no significant difference between people and animals, except that a person has the potential of becoming human.

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Meetings:

Last month, I began meeting with a few individuals to discuss "religion and relativity." Just before the winter break, we decided to continue meeting during the current semester. Arbitrarily, I will set Monday, January 22, from 5:00 to 5:45 P.M. as the time for the next meeting in room 401C (Pasadena City College) -- our former classroom. Anyone interested is invited to join us for this and subsequent meetings. Feel free to call me (818) 585-7498 if you have any questions or wish to confirm the meeting time. [PCC contact number does not apply after 1998.]

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**Relativist's Quotes of the Month:**

"This above all; to thine own self be true,  
And it must follow, as the night the day,  
Thou canst not then be false to any man."

*Hamlet -- Act I, Scene III*  
William Shakespeare (circa 1600 at the age of 36)

"...you shall love your neighbor as yourself...."

*Bible: Lev 19:18, Mat 19:19, Mat 22:39, Mark 12:31*

[Both quotes emphasize the individual's own experience as the beginning referent point.]

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T A L K B A C K

From Casey in Felton, CA

"I enjoyed your recent Newsletter. Claudia [Editor's spouse] told me she had placed my name on your mailing list. I am a former graduate student of CSU, Long Beach. Claudia is my former statistics and Thesis professor and she is still a favorite of mine. She thought I might be interested in your work and your newsletter. I am, so please place me on your 'Perm List.' Thank you"

From Erika in Temple City, CA

"I would like to congratulate you on your newsletter. I was waiting to receive my first issue, and it was worth waiting for. I really enjoyed reading it because it brought forth many issues to think about. I literally couldn't put it down. And after reading through it, I found myself just sitting down, contemplating over what I had just read for quite some time. I'm looking forward to receiving more newsletters, and I again congratulate you on your newsletter."

From James in San Diego, CA

"I am writing to inform you that my address has changed. It is now.... I am attending U.C. San Diego. I agree with many, if not most of your concepts regarding relativity. However, I can't see how a society, any society, can function if there aren't certain axioms that the vast majority agree on. They may not believe it's the 'Truth,' but they must abide by certain rules to co-exist peacefully. For example, not murdering each other. Perhaps I don't understand relativity. On another subject, what became of your book? Will it be available soon? Sincerely"

[Response to James:] I agree that a vast majority of individuals must abide by a set of rules in order to co-exist peacefully. The absolute/relative distinction I make is whether those rules are assumed to reflect Truth or simply an agreement between the participants. As individuals, we can establish agreements covering everything from not murdering each other to driving on the right side of the street. However, relatively speaking, we can avoid making the assumption that such rules reflect some Truth existing independently of ourselves. Taken together, these rules represent a "social contract" among the individuals. We are not Good if we abide by the rules; we are simply law abiding. Our social contract will generally include provisions for dealing with those persons who are found to violate the rules which, they themselves, have agreed to abide by. When dealing with those who violate the social contract, the focus is on clarifying the rules in question and/or removing from society those persons who do not choose to abide by a social contract. There would be an emphasis on instructing each generation of youth in the provisions of the social contract and the rationale underlining social contracts. On the other hand, absolutely speaking, if the rules are assumed to reflect Truth, obeying the law is expected and those who violate the law are to be punished.

TALK BACK (Continued)

Here, the individual is subservient to the law just as he/she is subservient to the Truth. Also, individuals with absolute religions, may argue that they will be obedient only to those laws that are consistent with their religious Truths -- God's Truth takes priority over man's Truth. Relatively speaking, the individual is fundamentally important but no individual more important than any other -- American styled "democracy." Absolutely speaking, the individual is subservient to the Truth as reflected in the law and the individual can become Good by obeying the law -- traditional authoritarianism.

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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 leaving a message on my answering machine anytime except during my office hours which are: 8:00-9:00 A.M. on Tuesday or Thursday; and 5:00-6:00 P.M. on Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday. 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" or "\*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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