

RELATIVELY SPEAKING*The Philosophy of Individualism*

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Editor: Gordon F. Brown, PhD

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GREETINGS! These past eight months have been particularly hectic for me: (1) Last Spring semester, I decided to take a public stand and just said “no” to **the deception** that took place in the college’s recent accreditation. About 80 of my faculty colleagues joined me. (2) On a somewhat related matter, last summer, the **California Supreme Court** denied my Petition for Review on whether the Pasadena City College Trustees are obliged to act when the law says that they “shall” act. I argued that the term “shall” created a mandatory duty to act; the trustees argued that “shall” was only suggestive and that they were free to ignore the “shall” provisions in the law. See “Court Watch” for a general summary. And then, (3) one week before the Fall semester was to begin, a routine medical test indicated that I had a serious prostate problem. I took a **medical leave** from teaching for the Fall semester and have recently requested that it be continued through this current Spring semester. More on this later, but some of you may enjoy this anecdote. As I was about to undergo what the medical establishment now calls a “procedure,” the last thing I heard was the doctor asking in a somewhat perplexed voice, “Has he been anesthetized yet?” The nurse responded, “Yes, but he keeps talking and waking himself up!”

In this newsletter, I have presented the **second in the series on Christianity and relativity**. One reader told me that it appears the absolutists took the Christian message and ran with it. Not to be picky, but it seems to me that, as a matter of historical record, the absolutists achieved a position of social dominance by just killing anyone who disagreed with their point of view. Regardless of the reason, we can probably agree that an absolute perspective, rather than a relative perspective, is the dominant expression of current Christian doctrine. The point of this series is to present the argument that the biblical Christian message is substantially relative. Furthermore, trying to force an absolute perspective upon the biblical message results in a fragmented rendition that is unintelligible overall. I welcome your thoughts.

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Christianity and Relativity**Article #2—The Nature of Relationships**

Let’s begin by summarizing Article #1. The topic was *validating our experiences*. That is, what do we assume regarding the credibility of our own experiences. For the absolutist, there is the claim of knowing absolute Truth. Typically, the absolutist validates his/her experiences by some combination of the following: (a) through a belief in his/her interpretation of a book such as the Bible, (b) guidance by an assumed Truth-inspired person such as a minister or prophet, and (c) reliance upon personally felt revelations of Truth that are assumed to come from God or Nature. For the mixed, the objective is to make everyone happy, and it can be seen to logically follow that the crowd is the best determiner of what makes most people happy. Thus, the crowd validates the truth of the mixed message. If you want to know what to believe, ask the crowd. “Everybody knows that” is a typical mixed message of validation. And, for the relativist, relying on an assumed relationship with God that is essentially private and personal, the validation of one’s own experience is a matter of personal conviction. At the heart of this personal conviction, is the faith in a belief that there is a personal relationship going on between oneself and God. Thus, faith, not an assumed Truth or voice of the crowd, is the rock upon which the relativist’s religion is built. That was the gist of Article #1.

Now, the focus for Article #2 is to consider the *nature of relationships* from each of the three perspectives—absolute, mixed, and relative. Compared with the issue of validity in Article #1, this second issue regarding the nature of relationships is rather simple. It can be seen to flow logically and directly from the position taken on validity, as if by definition—that is, once you define or establish your position on validity, the nature of your relationships can be seen as simply a logical extension of that definition. See if you agree.

Once the absolutist picks his/her Truthgiver—whether that be a sacred book, an established saint,

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reliance on personal revelation, or some combination of these—the next step is to follow that Truth. In as much as Truth covers all matters and applies to all people, this “do-as-the-Truth-directs” approach is rather straightforward. The relationship between God and mankind is one where every person follows the established Truth as it is assumed to have been revealed by God. It is a master-servant relationship where the individual serves God.

For the mixed, good relationships are those that make you feel good. To illustrate, when there is a death, Reverend Feelgood at the local Church of the Mixed Mind, will tell everyone that the departed is with God in a happier place—a place where you feel even happier than you do here! The idea is not rationally questioned because the mixed approach is essentially non-rational; the idea is accepted and validated simply because *expressing* it makes everyone feel good.

Here comes the relativist! All relationships are interactive. “A” interacts with “B”; and “C” is the resultant or the “interactive relationship” between the two participants. All human experience involves interactive relationships. As Krishnamurti put it, “To be is to be related and without relationship there is no existence” (*The First and Last Freedom*, 1954, p. 177). This interactive or relative principle applies whether you are speaking of two particles in physics, two solutions in chemistry, or two people in psychology. And, it applies between God and the individual. Furthermore, if you look at any one of the interacting participants, you will find that their characteristics are resultants of more basic interactions. That is, if you look at “A” you will see that “A” represents a prior resultant of an underlying interaction; and those participants are the resultants of even more basic interactions, ad infinitum. As for human experience, our perceptions are always the results of interactions--interactions between something external and our own individual sensory system. We cannot jump out of our skins and see the characteristics of things as they are unto themselves and independent of our own sensory system. Furthermore, the participants in an interaction are always unknowable. It is the event or the resultant of the interaction that is “knowable.” As stated in Lincoln Barnett’s *The Universe and Dr. Einstein*, “For while telling nothing of the true ‘nature’ of things, [science] nevertheless succeeds in defining their relationships and depicting the events in which they are involved. ‘The event,’ Alfred North

Whitehead declared, ‘is the unit of things real’ (1957, p. 116). Nothing new here. These are the basic ideas of relativity as expressed since the times of the Garden of Eden. We never see anything as it is unto itself; we only experience interactions in which we are always one of the participants. The defining characteristic of the human is not the knowledge of, and conformity to, an absolute Truth; the defining characteristic of the human, from the relative perspective, is the ability of the individual to choose his/her own relationships. We are our choices, and our choices are a function of our freedom to choose. This is the basic assumption giving rise to the concept of freedom and the expression of individual freedom as codified in the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States (the freedom of association). But I digress...

For the relativist, you must take a position in order to interact and thereby have an interactive relationship. The statement “Anything you want is okay by me” lacks any interaction and is perhaps false on its face—the person is intellectually lazy and chooses to let the other person take care of his/her implied interests. We can note that simply asking, or stating a position, is the beginning of the interaction process—but not the end. After we take a position, events occur and different ideas come to mind to which we respond by taking a new position. And so continues the dynamic process of interactive relationships. Here is an example. I tell my spouse that I would like the two of us to visit the Seattle area; she takes the position of agreeing to Seattle on the condition that we visit the Indian Jewelry Outlet; I agree to visiting the Outlet, but with the condition that I am not obliged to join her—I would prefer to visit the farmers market next door and even the farming machine depot across the street; she agrees to this on the condition that she is not obliged to accompany me when I go to engage the “street people” in philosophical discussions. Then, we both agree to a side trip to Vancouver Island; and so on. The point to all of this is that taking a personal position is an essential ingredient to interactive relationships. As for a relationship with God, relatively speaking, it would necessarily involve an interaction. Just as any human relationship requires the individual to take a position for or against a particular matter, taking a position is the first step in establishing a relationship with God. As Jesus put it, “Ask, and it will be given you...For every one who asks receives....” (Matthew 7:7-8). And

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COURT WATCH From the beginning of litigation, I have argued that the term “shall” created a mandatory duty to act; the trustees have argued that “shall” was only suggestive and that they were free to ignore the “shall” provisions in the law. In an attempted end-run, the Appellate Court had previously ruled (February 28, 1997) that I had failed to follow proper procedure. In order to come to this conclusion, the Appellate Court found that even paying hush money to prevent a scandal from becoming public was an appropriate educational expenditure by the trustees. Nevertheless, my legal action did have an effect. During the time the matter was being reviewed by the Appellate Court and the California Supreme Court, the trustees actively worked behind the scenes to bring their actions into compliance with the particular provisions under scrutiny. Even so, the trustees still have a long way to go in fulfilling the intent of the law which was to have been accomplished back in 1991. In the next newsletter, just for fun and space permitting, I will reproduce some of the press coverage on this litigation.

Nature of Relationships--continued

similarly, “Hitherto you have asked nothing in my name; ask, and you will receive...” (John 16:24). References such as these can be seen to support both an interactive approach and a relative perspective. And, references such as these can be seen to be logically contrary to master-servant relationships and the absolute perspective. Interestingly, we can observe that relatively oriented, interactive relationships can mature to a point where the interactions themselves become more significant than the specific content—the decision to travel together becomes more significant than the destination. Each position taken during the interactive process is a sharing of what that person is at that moment—his/her priorities and choices, and taken together, his/her identity as an individual. Whether with God or friends, interactive relationships are dynamic and the positions taken by an individual always make their mark on that individual’s ever-changing self-portrait.

As to the nature of relationships between God and man, we can describe in **sharp contrast** the difference between the absolute and relative approaches. The absolutist prays to God asking for guidance as to what he/she should do with his/her life. No matter is too small because Truth covers everything. Consider that this approach just does not work. Other than a sense of frustration, nothing of significance happens no matter how sincere or self effacing an individual may be. Consequently, there is a tendency to become either cynical about religion or to establish a dependency-type relationship with someone who, at a price, will tell you what God wants for you.

On the other hand, the relativist would get by himself/herself, direct his/her thoughts to a God whose presence is assumed, and state his/her own position on a particular matter. Next, the relativist would become an active “listener” to the thoughts

and/or events that follow; whatever followed or did not follow would then give rise to a new position in this dynamic relationship. Depending on the subject matter, it may be seconds, days, months, or years before a sense of resolution is achieved. And, this sense of resolution may be unexpectedly temporary. It is the relationship rather than the content that becomes primary as the relationship matures. The Bible is replete with numerous examples of this type of one-on-one, interactive relationships. We can address some of them later. For now, we can note interactive relationships are essentially private and personal. As for a relationship with God, we can note that there is an additional payoff in that the skills developed in this relationship with God are also applicable in all other relationships as well—such as those involving family and friends, or issues relating to our job and our role as a citizen.

To summarize the first two articles in this series on Christianity and religion: In Article #1, there was *the matter of validation*. Upon what or whom will the individual rely when assessing the merit of one idea over another? Said another way, what is one’s primary referent? The relativist can contend that every experience would be validated, as a matter of individual conscience, within the context of a personal and private relationship with God. As for Article #2, *The Nature of Relationships*, the focus has been on taking the first step in establishing a relationship with God. A sharp contrast can be made between the absolute and relative approaches. On the one hand, the absolutist tries to become subservient to God’s will; while, on the other hand, the relativist begins a relationship with God by asking for something, and what follows is a dynamic and interactive relationship that can serve as a model for all human experiences. What a Kick!

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“TALK BACK”

From Jeremy in Temple City, CA

Since taking your course in the Spring term of '97, I continually reflect on the topics and concepts you covered in class on a daily basis. I feel a distinct advantage over those who practice the absolute model of thinking, as the relative approach makes the greatest sense to me. I have since transferred to a University and your introductory psychology course has made the greatest impact on my academic education throughout all my years of schooling, for that I am grateful. Thank you for your time, and I look forward to receiving future newsletters, as well as any other information on the philosophy of individualism you offer.

From Ryan in Monterey Park, CA

I would like to renew my subscription ...and receive it as long as you publish it. I would also like a copy of your book if/when you finish it...I took your psychology class about 3 or 4 years ago and really enjoyed it.. But not until recently have I begun to understand the relative perspective better. It seemed to gel together in my mind over the time since I took your course. The relative perspective has definitely changed my whole outlook on life. I find myself thinking much more, and enjoying challenging myself more.

From Shamala in Phoenix, Arizona

I recently went to visit an old friend at my former place of residence and experienced quite a flashback when I found several copies of the “relatively speaking” newsletter waiting there for me. Even though I only took one of your classes, and it was years ago, I have never forgotten the language I was introduced to in your class. It has been of great assistance to me here at Arizona State University and in my personal life as well. Thank you for sharing it with all of us “sentimental” students. (smile)... please continue to send me copies of the newsletter.

From Anthony in Calipatria, CA

I am writing to you because I am interested in your newsletters. I enjoy reading the letters and I find the letter to be great information for everyday questions I have of life. I also would like to thank you for giving me a copy of your book. Every time I read the book I learn something new about myself and my surroundings.

Address up-dating continues. With hesitation, I cut the newsletter mailing list from 800 to 700. The target is to facilitate the mailing preparation time by reducing the number to about 200 or the number of those indicating a continuing interest within the last two years. If you wish to be one of the 200, make sure that the date *96 or later appears after your name on the label. Leave updates or messages on the new phone line which I had installed for that purpose (626) 445-1749; or send a brief note to the return mailing address. If the phone line is busy, I am probably using the line to access data on the Internet. Please try again or leave a message on relspeak@pacbell.net.

A Gordonesque Christmas Message

The Christmas holiday is often associated with gift giving. Consider that the only gift you can ever give is the gift of yourself and that you give that gift to every person with whom you come in contact each moment of every day throughout the year. Christmas “gifts” are merely symbols reflecting the personal characteristics of the giver. However, there is no way in which the receiver would know those characteristics; even the giver may not think about the thought behind his/her gift beyond the expectation created by tradition to give a material object to another at this time. Surely, this is a primitive activity. Higher level gifts include: taking the time to listen to a friend share an idea; having the patience to keep listening to a point of understanding; taking the initiative for sharing one’s thoughts with another; fulfilling the responsibility to keep one’s word; and having the courtesy to achieve one’s goals without preventing others from achieving their goals. These have always been the traditional gifts between humans, and we either give them or not every moment of every day. It would seem to matter little what material gifts are exchanged one the day we call Christmas. And, regarding these material gifts, or rather symbols of gifts, does the calendar tell us when to give the gift? How dehumanizing. Can we not give a gift anytime we feel like it? As for God and Christmas, just as the gifts are material, there is a tendency to make the whole affair physical, such as focusing on a “baby in the manger” or “three wise men bringing gifts.” Making religious activities a matter of calendar scheduling and material exchanges seems to trivialize the practice of religion. I suspect some people actually get depressed as they sense a loss of personal identity as a result of the social pressure to be happy and engage in trivial exchanges simply because it is “that time of year.” Their sense of control over their lives is diminished and significant feelings are feigned to meet the expectations of others. Where do we go from this sorry state of affairs? This Christmas is over, but each of us can begin today to declare our freedom to give gifts anytime we choose, to whomever we choose just because, as humans, we can exercise our individual capacity to choose.