

RELATIVELY SPEAKING*The Philosophy of Individualism*

Number 32

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August 1998

GREETINGS! For me, it continues to be a time of focusing on priorities and putting secondary projects to bed. Writing these newsletters is one of my top 5 priorities, except that distribution will be reduced to only those with a continuing interest in receiving them (see “Address Update”). Some personal health considerations give me a unique opportunity to discuss “health and relativity” (see “Health Watch”). The main article is the third in the “relativity and religion series” and addresses the question “What does a person ask for in a relationship?” I am behind on printing excerpts from letters for the “Talk Back” section, but I will just keep rolling them forward to the next newsletter while keeping a two page, double sided, newsletter.

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“HERE I AM”

Recently, I received a letter from a reader, with whom I have had several conversations in the past but had not heard from recently. In his letter, he stated that his time and thoughts were presently so organized that he was available for further communications. After he made his point, he then capsulized his thoughts in the phrase “Here I am.” This struck a chord in me.

“Here I am” invites communication; this, in turn, is the basis for establishing relationships; and, finally, our chosen relationships make up the substance of our personal identity. Each of us can be defined in terms of our choice of relationships. Consider that the beginning point and continuing point for all relationships is an expression of “Here I am.”

Several contributors to the Old Testament apparently share this view. Characteristic of their relationship with God, the beginning and continuing point for communication was an expression of “Here I am!” (Abraham, see Genesis 22:1; Moses, see Exodus 3:4; Samuel, see 1 Samuel 3:8.)

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Christianity and Relativity**Article #3—What to Ask For**

As noted in the previous newsletter, from a relative perspective, “asking” can be seen as the initial step for establishing any relationship, whether with God or with a person. When there are two parties with each asking the other for something, there is the basis for an interactive relationship.

This brings us to the question, “What would a person ask for?” We can describe 3 different approaches to asking—each approach corresponding to either the mixed, absolute, or relative perspective.

Consistent with the mixed perspective, “asking” is related to achieving emotional satisfaction either by increasing pleasure or decreasing pain: “Let’s party, what do you say?” or “Will you come and bail me out of my latest problem?” Within a religious context, perhaps the most frequent request to God is to eliminate some painful situation such as finding a way to pay overdue bills or to resolve a conflict with a significant other. Somewhere in second place is to ask for some physical/emotional gratification such as “God bless our marriage” or “God bless our baseball team”—of course, “with all the glory going to God.” Similarly, when we are helped by another person, we may say “God bless you” as if God will bless those who make us feel good. From the mixed perspective, God is important, but as a means to an end. Feeling good is the goal and God can be *used* to achieve that end. Even heaven is viewed as a place prepared by God to make us feel happy and free from worldly trials and tribulations.

Consistent with the absolute perspective, “asking” is a matter of getting yourself Right with the Truth. A commonly observed way to get it Right is for a “lower-ranking person” to ask for guidance from a “higher-ranking person.” Children ask their parents, employees ask their employers, citizens ask their state officials, and everyone can ask God. Even among peers, there is an incessant desire to be

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confirmed as being either Right or Wrong. During a conversation, the speaker expects—and the listener provides—an ample sprinkling of confirming-type statements such as “you are Right” or “that’s True.” As for religion, the objective of asking for anything is for the purpose of either (a) getting on the Right track or (b) asking forgiveness for time spent on the Wrong track. When asking, sometimes the individual can be seen to ask God *directly* for Truths and guidance applicable to everyday living. Perhaps more commonly, the individual looks to a book or mediator, such as the Bible or a minister, and interprets the “word” in such a way so as to provide absolute Truths for daily living. However, whether asking God directly or achieving knowledge of the Truth through written or verbal mediators, the individual *submits* to the “revealed” Truth. The task could be characterized as “less me and more God” or as seeking to be or become “The Right Stuff.” Submission to God and Truth is thought to provide a sense of security, and relief from a sense of individual responsibility for daily decision making.

Now comes the relativist! “I want a relationship.” We can climb the highest mountain or plant rye grass in the back yard; we can go to the library or sit and meditate under a full moon. We can agree or disagree on every matter under the sun, but whatever it is we do, I want to do it together. The relationship itself is primary. Of course, this type of relationship is established incrementally over time. Commitment is to the relationship and it is a “one step at a time” process. As it is in a marriage, it takes time and considerable skill and perseverance to learn to walk and talk interactively.

As for religion, relatively speaking, the focus is on one’s top priority—that relationship out of which all

other relationships are nurtured and achieve relevance. As I see it, the Bible makes the argument that the most satisfying life is the result of choosing a personal relationship with God as a top priority. Some people refer to their relationship with God as ongoing—“God As My Copilot.” Other people seem to describe a relationship with preset focus-times—“I walk through the garden alone while the dew is still on the roses....” Either way, there is a sense of a one-on-one relationship that is interactive. At first it may only be taking a private moment to direct one’s thoughts to an assumed presence. In time, some people come to a point of conviction that something significant is going on; that there is a personal relationship with a Force, a Force many people have referred to as God. As the relationship matures, the desire for safety and certainty can be seen to be replaced by a satisfying sense of faith and trust.

So you say, “Nothing new here!” Perhaps you would join with me and say that, more than any other philosophical claim by humanity, the claim to a personal relationship with God has endured and been renewed throughout the written history of mankind. However, as I see it, society is maturing and the present focus is on the nature of such a relationship. Furthermore, as I see it, the absolute-relative-mixed distinction is a very effective mental tool for discussing the alternatives available to each of us. Curiously, at least to me, the Bible describes a God that is prepared to interact with any individual at any level of asking—but with the caveat that “each has his/her own reward.”

More on this topic later. As always, I appreciate your comments.

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HEALTH WATCH. I have a window of opportunity to share with you some thoughts that occur to a person who, last February, said “goodbye” to his prostate and “hello” to a 4-year survival rate. Our culture tends to avoid talking about death; for that reason, if for no other, Gordon Brown will talk about it. However, as I see it, a philosophy that does not adequately accommodate death does not adequately address life. What an opportunity! Modern medical technology has provided me with the necessary lead time to address first-hand the matter of “death and relativity.” I cannot tell you about tomorrow, but as I see it presently, I am looking forward to sharing with you my front-row-center perceptions. I anticipate that this commentary titled “Health Watch” will complement the current series on “relativity and religion,” which I plan to continue.

TALK BACK

From Lisa in Burbank, CA

I always enjoy your Newsletter as it always makes me think. Please continue to send it to my new address....

From Katie in Buena Park, CA

For the longest time, I thought my entire family was made up of absolute thinkers and that I was much more receptive. After reading your newsletters, I know I've been a true-blue absolute thinking machine....

From George in Paradise, CA

Your Article [#31] was a real lift to me. The 'seek and you shall find,' I have read that passage a hundred times or more...yet I never applied it to myself and to my past seeking...the act of going into meditation alone and reviewing one's relationship with one's Supreme Being, seeking out which acts seemed to gain favor and which did not, works for me...It sure feels good to tell you how your insight has helped me find help within myself....

From Nicole in Alhambra, CA

I'd definitely appreciate your keeping my name on your mailing list. Your newsletter seems to arrive at my address at the most perfect times! Just this past week, I was engaged in a conversation regarding teachers and classes that have gotten the 'juices flowing' (that have helped me to actually think!) I explained your class technique and your demand for total Focus and keeping our minds there in class. I still find myself practicing this in and out of the classroom....With appreciation.

From Diana in Pasadena, CA

Thank you for your newsletters. I've been reading the Dalai Lama's autobiography and I ran across a few passages that I just had to share with you. He strikes me as a person who deeply understands and lives the relative point of view....

[An excerpt: "Overall I have found much that is impressive about western society...I admire its energy and creativity and hunger for knowledge. On the other hand, a number of things about the western way of life cause me concern...an inclination for people to think in terms of 'black and white' and 'either, or', which ignores the facts of interdependence and relativity."]

[Another excerpt: "Another observation is that many of the people I talk to, especially in the West, have a highly skeptical cast of mind. This can be very positive, I feel, but with the proviso that it is used as the basis for further inquiry."]

From Donald in Duarte, CA

It [relative thinking] is...preparation for...the next evolutionary shift in thinking.

From Vergine in Glendale, CA

Please continue sending me your newsletters as I find them very interesting and without them I would feel that there is something very important missing out of my life.

From Warren in Solvang, CA

Thanks for the latest 'Relatively Speaking.' As usual, it was stimulating. I am still [working at clarifying] my religious orientation. Hardly a day or two goes by without thinking of your medical condition. If time permits, shape some of your thoughts and stop working yourself up [over that school stuff]!

From Sharon in South Cle Elum, WA

Thanks. I would like to continue to receive [future newsletters] if possible. I look forward to having my thoughts taken in a different direction. I liked the article looking at religion/Christianity and realized when I read it that it was something I had been thinking about long ago when I left the Church. I wanted to know God instead of knowing about God. Because Shamanism is so experiential, it has helped me do that without endless rules! I have come full circle now to find some understanding of Christianity—it does not seem so foreign. I especially have liked reading books on creation spirituality.

From Merrick in Arcata, CA

I particularly enjoyed the last newsletter. I had the opportunity to really digest it on a long train ride while reading Alan Watts. For some reason the two perspectives combined with my own thought and experiences quite well. I can recall a unique sense of alive-ness on that trip. I think the idea that I cannot know myself just as I cannot know God, but only my relations, allowed me to enter the focus of the present moment (which is the focus of Watt's book) more than usual.

From Pei-Ching in Alhambra, CA

I am one of your Spring '95 students...just starting at UCLA...you had a significant influence on my choosing psychology as a major. Your class was an eye-opener for me...Thank you for your continuing effort in the newsletter and education.

From John in Montebello, CA

I would just like you to know I enjoyed reading your newsletters and I would like to continue receiving them...I now have a new mailing address....

Address Update. After recent events, I have decided to send the newsletters only to those who indicate their interest at least once every 2 years by mail or telephone (626-445-1749). I figure the effect will be to reduce the mailing list to a manageable 150. With natural attrition, the number will reduce to a more manageable list of 100 recipients. Also, I plan on sending the newsletters first class to eliminate many hours of sorting time.

Two years may sound like a long time, but the ideas presented seem to take three or even four years to germinate. Also, as a few of you have stated, you are focusing on the ideas presented and your responses to them, and it simply does not occur to you to indicate your interest in receiving them. Said another way, the ideas presented and your responses to them take on a life of their own which is largely removed from your indicating an interest in receiving more newsletters. My point is, let me know at least once every two years if you would like to continue receiving the newsletters. If you have *96 after your name, think about responding within the next 6 months; if you have *95 after your name, think about responding immediately if you wish to continue receiving the newsletters.