

RELATIVELY SPEAKING

The Philosophy of Individualism

Number 38

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December 2003

GREETINGS!

Before the end of the year, I wanted to send out a newsletter and keep in touch with those of you choosing to keep the communications going. My discretionary time continues to be committed to researching the absolute versus relative approaches to living. As for my book, progress is slow but rewarding. My recent focus has been on refining my thoughts regarding “politics” in the book’s “God-Sex-Politics” triad.

Consistent with this focus on politics, the primary article in this newsletter has to do with applying the absolute-relative distinction to the term “democracy”—particularly as it relates to the US objectives in Iraq. However, this distinction between absolute and relative democracy can be seen as applicable to interpersonal relationships in general, including those found within the settings of families, businesses and churches. The common denominator has to do with the role and significance of the individual.

For variety, I will describe briefly how I would organize a few recent “Stories in the News” around the absolute-relative distinction. I have included the SEC vs Martha Stewart case, the Supreme Court’s ruling on affirmative action, the Pledge challenge, Alabama Judge Moore’s exalting God’s law over man’s law, and General Boykin’s idol battle.

Best wishes, and I look forward to keeping in touch with those of you who so choose.

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Statue of Liberty Plaque

They that can give up essential liberty to obtain a little safety deserve neither liberty nor safety.

Benjamin Franklin

DEMOCRACY:

ABSOLUTE AND RELATIVE PERSPECTIVES

Recently, President Bush reiterated his contention that the US objective in Iraq is to establish a democratic government. As I see it, the concept of “democracy” is used in two distinctly different ways, one consistent with absolute thinking and the other consistent with relative thinking. Applying the absolute-relative distinction to Bush’s statements may provide some insight into the agony and ambiguity associated with the US presence in Iraq.

Absolute-Oriented Democracy

Absolute thinking requires (a) a means for identifying something as true, and (b) an assumption that it is good (or necessary) to be obedient to the truth. By definition, absolute truth applies to everyone. Consequently, every individual has a primary duty to personally conform to the truth and to see that others do so as well. Once the truth is established, the rest is academic.

One absolute approach to governance is to use the democratic process as a means for establishing truth. Whether it is within a secular or religious context, the individual is bound by the results of a majority vote. When this occurs in government, the citizens are often required to pledge their allegiance to the government, rather than the other way around. The primary duty of government is to identify those truths (or “compelling state interests”) gleaned from the democratic process or revealed by God to the leadership. In the latter case, the citizenry may be directed to think of their government as actually being “under God.”

As for President Bush, when he talks about the US objective in Iraq as being to establish a democratic government, he sounds absolutely oriented. When he describes the conflict as a war between “good and evil,” he sounds absolutely oriented. When he describes his religion as that organized under Christian doctrine, he sounds absolutely oriented. Or, so it seems to me.

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DEMOCRACY: ABSOLUTE and RELATIVE PERSPECTIVES

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It would be no surprise to find President Bush's sense of goodness to be in conflict with those individuals in Iraq committed to alternative sources of truth, namely the prophets and books of Islam.

What we have are absolutes in conflict. When absolutes are in conflict, the truths of each side are not negotiable and tolerance of evil is never a virtue. Therefore, it can be seen that absolute truths are maintained solely by force or the threat of force. But fortunately, there is an alternative to this absolute perspective.

Relative-Oriented Democracy

As used here, relative thinking is rooted in the idea that only relationships are knowable. That is, while I can't know you as you exist independently of me, I can know the "you" that results after interacting with me. That is, I can know you "in relationship to me" or "relative to me." And, that is the only way I can know you—or anything else. Absolute knowledge (or knowledge existing independently of the individual perceiver) is outside the realm of human experience. Furthermore, human experience is always an individual matter. You can't jump into my world of conscious experience and I can't jump into yours. And, neither of us can jump out of our bodies to see how the world looks "out there"—as it exists independently of our individual sensory systems. It can be seen to follow that the unit of reality in human experience is the personal and private experience of the individual.

Consistent with the relative perspective, the sole function of government is to maximize the freedom of every individual. Democratic-type procedures can be used, in some situations, as a means for maximizing the freedom of every individual. Specifically, the intent of a democratic-type voting procedure is to provide a means for choosing among alternatives that option which is seen as best suited for maximizing the freedom of every individual.

This relative view of democracy can be seen as fundamental to the founding documents of the United States. In both the Declaration of Independence and those constitutional amendments known as the Bill of Rights, the primary objective can be seen as maximizing the freedom of every individual. To achieve this objective, the body of

the Constitution provides for democratic-type procedures that are embedded in an elaborate system of checks-and-balances.

Summary and Conclusions

The purpose here is not to argue the merits of US involvement in Iraq, but to address the current objectives of the US presence in Iraq. The view that the primary objective of the US in Iraq is to set up a democratic government, can be seen as critically flawed. It represents the rational flaws of absolute thinking, it is an objective that can be achieved and maintained only by physical force, and it creates a conflict of absolutes historically associated with a heavy toll in both money spent and lives lost.

The most serious possibility currently facing the people of Iraq may be that the US will establish a "democratic government" and leave. The problem was foreseen about 2400 years ago by the Greek Philosopher Plato. As stated in the Republic, "And so tyranny naturally arises out of democracy, and the most aggravated form of tyranny and slavery out of the most extreme form of liberty" (about 80% into Book 8). And, lest we forget, it was within the context of democracy that the United States engaged in its bloodiest war—the Civil War. Certainly, one issue in dissension was the matter of maximizing freedom for every individual.

As for today, we can see the extensive use of initiatives in California, along with its recent recall of its governor, as expressions of a public frustrated with being held hostage to a democratic process that has become separated from a commitment to individual liberty.

Relatively speaking, the primary problem in Iraq is not that the US is an occupying force—but that it is an occupying truth. Consequently, the first step toward resolving the US engagement in Iraq is for the US to clarify its primary objective. On the absolute side, we could seek to establish a democratic government to which all the people are expected to be loyal; on the relative side, we could seek to establish a government constitutionally committed to the principle of maximizing the rights of every Iraqi citizen, and to this principle the government is expected to be loyal.

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STORIES IN THE NEWS

Here are five applications of the absolute-relative distinction to recent events making headlines.

- Relatively speaking, we have Martha Stewart—whose trial starts next month. She can be seen as reflecting an icon of individual effort, focused attention, and considerable success in achieving her self-set goals. Absolutely, we have the Security and Exchange Commission (SEC) demonstrating how bureaucrats can use government to bring down any individual. While ignoring the big money managers for years—what New York Attorney General Eliot Spitzer called “an outrageous betrayal of the public trust by this agency”—the SEC argued, in part, that Stewart had committed a crime when she declared her “innocence” to the allegations brought by the SEC. The SEC appears to have found a higher calling than the legal and traditional principle of “innocent until found guilty.”
- It’s an absolute win as individual freedom takes a 5-4 beating by US Supreme Court Justices voting to support a little racism in college admissions. Writing for the majority, Justice Sandra Day O’Connor can be seen to argue that a majority of the Court—in the name of democracy—can create the absolute truth of a “compelling state interest” to override the US Constitution. On the other hand, writing with the four justices in the minority, Justice Antonin Scalia appeared to reflect more of a relatively-oriented respect for individual rights when he said: “I find it hard to take seriously the State of Michigan’s contention that racial diversity is a compelling state interest, compelling enough to warrant ignoring the Constitution’s prohibition of discrimination on the basis of race.” More relative would be to say that there is no basis for the justices to ignore the Constitution—the “compelling state interest” used to justify denying “due process” is simply a creation of the justices to ignore the Constitution when they so choose. By creating a doctrine of “compelling state interest,” the Court establishes the tyranny of democracy by uncoupling democracy from its service to the objective of individual liberty.

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T A L K B A C K

From Lorraine in Pasadena, CA

Please keep the newsletters coming. I enjoy them very much. Best wishes.

From Andrew in Covina, CA

...renew my address...send me the previous letter...any recommendations to read more about the absolutism/relativity concept. I have lost a bit of the meaning...quite interested in learning more....

From Jim in Glendale, CA

...enjoy reading the newsletters...Since being introduced to the “relativistic perspective” some thirty-two years ago—I have found my understanding of it to be of immense value in my effort to make sense of my life and relationships....

From Casey in Santa Cruz, CA

...I save your newsletters and refer to them at times...while I am teaching my classes....

From Michael in Downey, CA

I really enjoy reading Relatively Speaking, and I would not want to miss out on any...Please keep sending them....

Relativity—A Prescription for World Peace

The first step toward establishing peace is to find a common denominator among the participants. Relatively speaking, “the individual” is the basic unit for human experience. Most basically—we are neither Jew, Muslim, nor Christian—we are individuals. It is our basic status as individuals that creates the common objective of maximizing individual liberty, and it is this common objective that provides the foundation for building a road to peace.

STORIES IN THE NEWS

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- Currently before the US Supreme Court, there is the matter of the “one nation under God” phrase in the Pledge of Allegiance. Absolutely speaking, if our government represents goodness then it is our individual duty to be loyal to the government and, as it was with the King of England, to worship this government as being under God. In contrast, from a relative (individual rights) position, one could argue that it is contrary to the principle of “separation of church and state” to oblige any citizen to declare that our nation is under God, and—given the vagueness in defining the term “God”—such a pledge is tantamount to using God’s name in vain. Even further, any pledge of allegiance to the government turns upside down the principle of “a government for and by the people.” And, that is serious—as expressed in the Declaration of Independence, it is the “duty” of each and every citizen to revolt against their government when it abuses the public trust of protecting individual liberty.
- For absolute foolishness exposed, we have the position taken by Alabama Supreme Court Chief Justice Roy Moore, who had a 2-ton monument of the Ten Commandments installed in the rotunda of the state courthouse during the middle of the night 2 years ago. When US District Judge Myron Thompson recently ordered the monument removed, Moore accused Thompson of putting himself “above God.” As reported in the media, Moore, who had helped design and install the monument, apparently encouraged the associate justices and his citizen supporters to defy the federal order in the name of God. About 2 weeks ago, the Alabama Court of the Judiciary—after a one day trial—unanimously voted to remove Moore from office for willfully and publicly ignoring the federal court order and placing himself “above the law.”
- For additional absolute foolishness, we have top Pentagon official Lt. General Boykin, the Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence, being quoted by the *Los Angeles Times* as saying Muslims worship an “idol” [and apparently Christians do not]. Perhaps absolutely muddying the water was his superior, Marine General Peter Pace, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, explaining that Boykin “does not see this battle as a battle between religions, he sees this as a battle between good and evil, the evil being the acts of individuals.” This may be a distinction without a difference; both descriptions can be seen as absolutely flawed.

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Address Update

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