A SOC PUBLICATION

## RELATIVELY SPEAKING

The Philosophy of Individualism

Number 22 Editor: Gordon F. Brown, PhD September 1993

<u>Greetings</u>, I want to be able to tell myself that I got a newsletter out this summer. It has been about 8 years since the last one (Number #21) was sent out. My book is just about completed, and I am looking forward to starting up the SOC newsletters again.

<u>Just for fun</u>, here are a couple of excerpts (minor editing) from last year's end-of-semester "Response Forms." I think they reflect the usefulness of the relative perspective.

"I am much more self-confident in my abilities and in my right to occupy space. I am also more tolerant of the right of others to have an opinion different than my own."

"At first I was very intimidated by your absolute/relative diagrams during class participation but as I became more comfortable with the notion I can now say that it has done wonders for my speech."

## **Philosophy**: Relativity and Banana Bread

Last week, I was looking around for a knife to cut a slice from a fresh loaf of banana bread--I was not willing to use a clean knife for just one cut. I found a fork left over from a previous snack--close enough.

I carefully separated a "slice." I enjoyed doing it! The separation was rough rather than smooth as would have been the case with a knife. This reminded me of an occurrence some 20 years ago.

After the close of the semester, a student asked me to join him on the following Saturday for a 10:00 AM brunch. It was his treat and we would meet at the restaurant in China town---on North Hill Street in Los Angeles.

The quiet and cozy setting created an ambiance conducive to thoughtful and reflective discussion. At one point, I was about to cut a piece of bread off the loaf, but I saw no knife. My benefactor suggested that I use the fork and "separate" a piece of bread. He noted a difference between "cutting" with a knife and "separating" with a fork.

The knife, to a greater degree, imposes its influence on the bread--the cut can be smooth and predictable from the characteristics of the knife. On the other hand, when you use a fork, the result is more of an interaction between the influence from the pressure applied by the fork and the characteristics of the bread itself. The bread yields to the pressure of the fork resulting in a rougher and less predictable line of separation. A parallel can be made between absolute (knife) relationships and relative (fork) relationships.

The absolutist can be seen, like the knife, to impose his or her influence on the other party. Phrases such as "you are Right" and "that is True" impose his or her criterion onto the conversation which cuts cleanly--you are either Right or Wrong or it is True or False. The absolutist can be so dominating as to tell you "what you mean" after initially hearing your idea. He or she tells you that "Plato" or some such person had clearly stated what it is you are talking about; and then, the absolutist goes about telling you clearly what you are talking about while complimenting you for having even touched upon the idea.

On the other hand, the relativist can be seen, like the fork, to interact with the other party. Phrases such as "I tend to agree with your point of view" and "I will support you in your point of view" emphasize interaction. The follow-up is a dialogue wherein each attempts to clarify how he or she perceives the idea at hand and its implications. Relativists are getting to know each other by sharing their unique perceptions. They are relating to each other; they are having a relationship that is unique to them.

The above distinction can be expanded. The absolutist learns over time to enjoy conquering his or her environment--the lawn can be trimmed and the shrubbery manicured; dress can be impeccable; and the car can be clean. A well-ordered and predictable life is fun. In contrast, the relativist learns over time to enjoy interacting with the environment-every interaction is unique to that moment in time. Every action is a creative expression of a developing self--uncertainty is everywhere. Their lawn represents who they are at that moment--their choices and their priorities. There is not a sense of control but of relationships-they develop relationships with their children and friends with a sense of having an influence but without a sense of control. Each day is an experience of re-discovering themselves. The experience is "freedom"-- a freedom that can be agonizing for the certainty-seeking absolutist.

The point is that the absolutist learns to become comfortable with conformity, predictability, and certainty; whereas the relativist learns to become comfortable with change, variety, and uncertainty.

## Address Check:

If you would, drop me a note to confirm the spelling of your name and accuracy of your address. Send to: School of Communication, PO BOX 1211, ARCADIA, CA 91077-1211. If a note is not convenient, leave a message on my answering machine anytime <u>except</u>: 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.]

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