# RELATIVELY SPEAKING

The Philosophy of Individualism

Number 35 Editor: Gordon F. Brown, PhD January 2000

#### **GREETINGS!**

I am still making progress, albeit slowly, on the Book. Curiously, the concepts I am developing and clarifying in my mind will not appear in the book, but they provide the underlying thinking for the perspectives provided in the book. These concepts are similar to the foundation of a house—you don't see it, but the house you do see is only as durable as its foundation.

On a personal note, beginning December 27<sup>th</sup>, I began my 6 weeks of daily radiation treatments. This marks the firing of my second of three silver bullets. The first was surgery, the second is radiation, and the third will be hormone therapy. What a hoot!

In this newsletter, it is my purpose to pull back and review the basic focus of these writings. I have included definitions for the 3 key terms that form the conceptual foundation that I find most useful for organizing human experience. Also, I have included a statement regarding the relevance of religion to these writing.

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#### RELIGION, RELATIVITY, AND THE FUTURE

As I see it, religion will be the most significant social topic under debate during the next 20 years. Absolute views will slowly and painfully give way to relative views on religion. The absolute perspective of man being subservient to God and God's Truths will give way to a relative perspective of religion where a relationship with God is a matter of personal choice and private experience.

Whether or not an individual utilizes religious beliefs as a basis for organizing human experience, there will be an advantage to understanding what is at issue. Whether the application be in law, science, or personal relationships, the impact of changing social policy from absolute perspectives to relative ones will be considerable.

What about the Bible? As I see it, the Bible (both Old and New Testaments) is unique among religious documents in that it presents a relative perspective when taken as a whole. Similarly, it is my position that in the Bible the absolute perspective is identified as the root of all problems, including the inability to engage in a relationship with God. Future newsletters will address these points.

# **DEFINING THE TERMS: ABSOLUTE, RELATIVE, AND MIXED**

Agreed to definitions are essential in establishing and sustaining verbal communications. Considering further the use of language and thinking, psychologist Benjamin Whorf described language as a "mold" into which our experiences are poured (Whorf's hypothesis). From this perspective, our experiences are conceptualized and organized by our language. When a conversation with a friend draws to a close, saying that "I am planning on leaving" is different than saying "I must leave." The former puts me in control while the latter characterizes me as being controlled. Either way, I reveal something about how I am organizing my experiences. As I see it, the first step in making sense out of our world of experiences is to note whether we would classify our experiences as absolute, relative, or mixed. Here is how I define these terms:

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**Absolute:** I <u>know</u> how things are <u>unto themselves</u>, and these things are as I <u>know</u> them. Such knowledge represents absolute "Truth," and Truth applies to everyone and everything. The essence of life is to seek and follow the Truth. And, because Truth applies to everyone, I will seek to have a more perfect society by having everyone follow the Truth. A one-world government with everyone following the Truth would be the ideal.

**Relative:** All I have are <u>relationships</u>. I can tell you how I perceive something at a given moment in time. What I experience is always an interaction between myself and something else. I can know neither myself nor that something else; however, I can know the interaction. I can tell you how I experience a flower, a person, or an idea such as justice. I cannot jump out of my skin and tell you anything about how things exist unto themselves. The essence of life is the capacity to choose those things and ideas, seen and unseen, with which I will interact—with which I will have a relationship. The world of my experience is always relative to my physiology and to my choices. The ideal world would be one in which each individual is able to maximize his/her capacity to choose those relationships that will then make up each individual's world of experience.

**Mixed:** Combining the logically contradictory absolute and relative perspectives, sometimes I claim to have the Truth—particularly when I am talking to a child or to a subordinate; other times, when I am in the presence of people who disagree with me, I claim that things are only a matter of opinion or belief—nobody has the Truth. Such a mix is logically unintelligible. No problem, though, if I simply focus on emotional comfort and avoid thinking. The ideal world would be one in which everyone agrees not to fight and to be nice to one another.

## A NOT-SO FUTURE FACE OFF: ABSOLUTE VERSUS RELATIVE PERSPECTIVES

As I have already pointed out, I see our society undergoing a major change in public policy. Although the alternatives are still ambiguous, over the next 5 years, I believe there will be a general recognition that relative perspectives are incontrovertibly replacing absolute perspectives

in public policy matters. A couple of publications during the last year illustrated this for me.

On the one hand, Barnes and Noble, a major book distributor, printed a \_ page advertisement for

a book titled "Reflections On A Ravaged Century." The author, Robert Conquest, currently serves

at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University as a senior research fellow. An idea attributed to

the book: "The greatest man-made catastrophes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have come not from imper-

sonal economic or social forces such as Marxism or German National Socialism, but from the distortions generated by polluted minds with absolutist ideas." Here,! Here! (For the relativists)

On the other hand, William Bennett, former U.S. Secretary of Education, speaking before a Heritage Foundation conference, stated: "There is no more important task in our time than defending truth against its enemies....If we give up on objective truth, we will not be able to understand and fight authentic evil where we find it." Here! Here! (For the Absolutists)

As I see it, within the next 5 years, we will see advocates coming together to debate the merits of these two perspectives.

## TALK BACK

# From Lynn in Monterey Park, CA

I greatly enjoyed your most recent newsletter (9/99). I believe we are greatly represented by what we utter, so we should utter what we believe. Please change my address....

# From Lovberta in Memphis, TN

Thanks for staying on task. Hope you are doing better. Looking forward to reading your book. My mother died in April. She struggled with living. She struggled with dying. It was difficult for her to embrace that which she could not control. Absolute religion did not seem to bring absolute peace. Lost my mother, lost my brother, lost my aunt, lost my friend. '99 has not been a good year. The struggle goes on and "religion," for what it is worth during this time of considerable grief, remains relative.

# From Anna in Long Beach, CA

I still enjoy receiving your newsletter and would appreciate your continuing to keep me on your mailing list...I find many of your topics to be mentally stimulating...

## From Lori in Newcastle, CA

Keep me on your mailing list. I'm always fascinated by your views. I still ponder 4-5 years after your class—the definitions of absolutist vs relativist. I think as I get older (and a parent), I am more "mixed" as you put it. In my life I insist on certain values and beliefs and through my own experience have found them to be for the best - Am I an absolutist? In some ways, I suppose so.

#### From Robert in San Gabriel, CA

Hello! I realize its been a long time. Over the past few years I've been working towards my urban planning degree...Summer quarter at Cal Poly just ended. I would like to continue receiving the newsletters. Funny, I was just comparing religious carnage in Roman times with today in history....

## From Dan in Bothell, WA

Gordon, I just received your latest newsletter (September 99). Since the previous newsletter, my wife and I have purchased our first home! Please update my address ... I travel to Asia and Europe often for work and really enjoy reading the newsletters on the long flights since I have time to digest the content and reflect. Hope you are enjoying life! Let me know when the book will be available to read. Best Regards.

#### From Paul in Arcadia, CA

It's been more than a year since I talked with you. How are the follow-up visits with your oncologist? I hope all is well. The Internet/World-Wide Web has become all too prevalent in our lives recently. Have you considered making the newsletter available on the web? ...[an] alternative...is to send out the newsletter via e-mail. I typically say that the essence is in the message, but not how the document looks. However, reading some e-mail message that can disappear with a pull of the plug is not the same as having a tangible document in hand...we could create PDF documents and attach them to the e-mail...I'd be more than glad to volunteer my effort. Actually "effort" is too heavy of a word, because it takes only seconds to create a PDF file. As usual, I enjoyed reading the newsletter. Regards.

# TALK BACK (Continued)

#### From Anthony in Brawley, CA

How are you doing? ...I just want to update you on my current address...I would like to get a newsletter sometime in the future...thank you!

## From John in Altadena, CA

I enjoy receiving the newsletter, so please keep me on the mailing list. It is always thought provoking and fun to digest the ideas and then to put the concepts into action. For instance the idea of "correct" spelling (and punctuation for that matter) have from time to time stimulated me to rebel and to purposely spell words as they sound and to disregard rules of punctuation simply because it all seems so arbitrary to me. I wish that you were still teaching at PCC, my daughter now attends classes there and I think your class could be a positive experience for her. I also realize that it is up to me to expose her to the idea of life as a relative experience and I do...I trust you are doing well, relatively speaking.

#### From Kyoko in Los Angeles, CA

Hello, Dr. Brown! I hope I'm not too late...I definitely love to continue receiving the newsletter. Please don't drop me. By the way, how are you? I hope you and your health are doing well. I hope to see your newsletter soon. Best regards.

#### From Elena in Pasadena, CA

Can't wait 'til your book is published. I truly enjoy your newsletters and would like to continue receiving them. I continue to teach my daughter the relative perspective. I am proud of her directness and the ability to get her point across. Until the next newsletter!! God Bless!!

# From Madeleine in Canyon Country, CA

Thank you for your personal message on my newsletter. It made me look to see if I had the dreaded asterisk near my name...AND I DID! Please keep sending me your newsletter. In the years since I took your class (seven years), I have told many people about the Mind-Opening Incidents from Relativity. The concepts of "right and wrong" and the common use in our language of "You're right" instead of "I agree with you." Your class definitely changed the way I look at things. I know that there are usually two sides to each story and that both of them can be "right"...Keep writing....

#### From Michael in Downey, CA

Just wanted to make sure I am on the mailing list...I really enjoy the Talk-Back section.

#### From Sarmad in La Crescenta. CA

Just wanted to say "Hi"...Keep the newsletters going...I like them...If you start a discussion group, please give me a call, I am still interested.

California Interest Updates: Ly in Los Angeles, Laszlo in Alhambra, and Lorraine in Altadena.

Address Update: Call anytime to leave a message at (626)-445-1749 You can also e-mail a message to me at: relspeak@pacbell.net