

## INSANITY, RELATIVITY, AND GROUP-FORMATION

BY THOMAS D. ELIOT

WITHOUT pretending to comprehend the mathematics of Einstein, it is possible for one to recognize in several current fields of thought, behavior and culture, certain parallel trends moving as if in relation to the concept of "relativity" as a point of reference.

Certain basic conceptions of relativity seem to help in grasping certain phenomena of group-formation and group behavior.

Among the illustrations of relativity offered by its alleged popularizers, one of the most familiar is that of the moving platforms. Each platform is moving with relation to the others but in such a way that whether any point or any platform is to be judged as moving back, forth, up, down, in, out, or as fixed depends entirely upon the point of view; that is, which platform is taken "as if" it were a fixed point of reference and departure.

Instead of a platform we may substitute in the metaphor a passenger-ship, a landslide, a glacier, a floating island (cf. Dean Swift's "Laputa"), a self-consistent "cake of custom," or a geocentric, anthropocentric planet. The rest of the landscape or of the heavens or of humanity may then be viewed *as if* it were *terra incognita*; an outer darkness of ignored or distorted or confused "moving platforms," subject to no known law; a barbarian *chaos*, outside of an oasis of cosmos ruled by absolute conceptions.

Let us bring into focus in rapid succession some of the non-mathematical phenomena in which the principle of relativity has seemed operative or applicable. Many of the examples are, of course, examples also of the familiar concept of "in-groups and out-groups." They also illustrate "consciousness of kind." But the emphasis in the present paper is upon the independence, self-

sufficiency and self-corroborative nature of the culture patterns in each in-group, and upon the chaotic state in which all out-groups logically appear once the internally-consistent cultural scheme of any particular in-group is accepted as an absolute point of reference.

\* \* \*

Proverbs (which so often reflect profound concepts) give us relativity in homely phrase: "One man's meat is another man's poison." "It's a poor wind that blows nobody good." "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." Even our fathers recognized the relativity of morals.<sup>1</sup>

In religion the early tolerance of the Pagan world gave way to the absolutism of historic Christianity. Early Christianity, typified by the story of the Good Samaritan, by Peter's vision and by Jesus' "many mansions," announced doctrines of relativity. But Rome emerged as a victor in a conflict of gods. Even henotheism is more apt to be more tolerant than absolute monotheism. The absolutistic attitude of Catholicism was carried over by the "reformed" sects, despite the doctrines of individualism somewhat inconsistently claimed by some of the Protestants. Relativism reappears with the beginnings of the modern liberal movement, and missionary zeal seems to vary inversely with the recognition of relativity in religion.

In psychology, too, the principle of relativity is applicable. We have the *mot* attributed to a French diagnostician: "This man is normal in the Vosges, feeble-minded in Paris." In a relativistic universe, who shall say which mind is absolutely slow and which fast? Tolstoi's "Ivan, the Fool" is a parable *à propos*.

The principle is even more clear when we come to the so-called psychoses and geniuses. Dozens of geniuses in every field have been locally, or popularly, or temporarily, psychopathic or even legally insane; for both genius and insanity are social judgments, depending upon the capacity of the individual *and of those who sit in judgment*, to communicate with each other, to find some sufficient common denominator in their universes of discourse; some common platform, *understanding*. "Judging not, that ye be not judged."

William Blake referred once to his appreciation of "the fires of

<sup>1</sup> Cf. in this connection Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, XV.

Hell . . . which to the Angels look like torment and insanity.”

It is, of course, possible for a divided or disintegrated self to develop internal cleavages like the separately moving platforms of the Einsteinian illustration. In which case, much that was said above of groups and individuals applies to isolated or conflicting complexes, each setting up a claim to an absolute sovereignty, and thus thwarting any higher integration by their incapacity to occupy any point of reference outside their own closed circuits of behavior.

In education, we have the familiar contrast between “propaganda” and so-called “true education.” Too often, to be sure, this contrast is drawn between the inculcation of two conflicting systems of thought or mores, each of which is essentially as absolutistic as the other. There is, however, a common element in many of the “modern” or “experimental” schemes implying the impermanence of any existing so-called order in society, insisting upon the independent validity of each child’s world or the world created by the activity of the child’s own group, and stressing the undesirability of attempting to conform the child to the accepted mold. If “in My Father’s House are many mansions,” verily also in the “modern school” are many “moving platforms.”

In the arts there are many schools, especially in the 20th century, which have set up for themselves self-sufficient platforms of principle (or lack of principle!) and canons of appreciation. Within closed circles the artists of each such group constitute themselves a mutual admiration society, actually or feignedly as contemptuous of all other alleged music, painting, or poetry as Hellenes were of “βαρβαροι,” the “chosen people” of the “goyim” or the Musselmans of the Christians.

A cultivated Greek or Roman, or an uncultivated American, would declare stark madness the elaborate construct represented by a Wagner opera or symphony concert: the forgotten irrelevancies of staging, applause, the *beau monde*, the class distinctions, the incongruity of the union orchestra and the Niebelungs or the Arthurian phantasies; the divorced soloist singing Walther’s prize song; the esotericism of the program, the cult of the higher mathematics of musical theory and criticism. Only those who have grown up in the given milieu or analyzed the historic sources of an intricate culture complex can be expected to share or even understand it.

In anthropology we find the increasing tendency to refuse the Euro-panic or Nordo-centric points of absolute reference in appraising civilizations and race-traits. Western "civilization" is no longer acceptable as the norm in setting scales of evolution for given techniques and institutions, nor for civilization in general.<sup>2</sup> The cultures of "outlandish" peoples are now judged from the point of view of their own origins, resources, adaptive needs and satisfactions, and the imposition or imitation of alien "improvements" is recognized as often a misfortune. One culture-pattern will only absorb such traits of another area as are capable of congruity with its own system. The attempt to keep cultures water-tight, however, is as futile as the attempt to civilize by storm. Projective (resistant) absolutism is as futile as introjective (missionary and persecutive) absolutism.<sup>3</sup>

In politics the doctrine of absolute sovereignty once claimed by the self-sufficient autocrats of ancient empires, self-styled "Lords of the Universe," yielded gradually to the obvious facts of rival sovereignties, but finds modern counterparts in the self-sufficient majorities of modern democracies and the arrogant nationalism of militaristic cultures. But here, too, we find relativity; first, in the degrees of local autonomy yielded to provinces and dominions in the great empires; later, in federalism; still later in internationalism and cosmopolitanism as theories of the political future. Even more clearly are the theories of plural sovereignty put forward by Laski, *et al.*, and the proposals of Syndicalists and guildsmen, doctrines of political relativity. The modern public is no longer homogeneous, and cannot be intelligently represented on a merely geographic basis. "A public is, in fact, organized on the basis of a universe of discourse, and within the limits of this universe of discourse, language, statements of fact, news, will have, for all practical purposes, the same meanings. It is this circle of mutual in-

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Goldenweiser, A. A., *Early Civilizations*, Knopf, N. Y., 1922; Tagore, Rabindranath, "Nationalism in the West," *Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 119, March, 1917, pp. 289-301; Dickinson, G. Lowes, *Letters of a Chinese Official*, McClure, Phillips, N. Y., 1906.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. discussion of the projective and introjective phases of identification and group behavior, *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, June-September, 1927.

fluence within which there is a universe of discourse that defines the limits of the public."<sup>4</sup>

Closely related to this organization of publics is the isolation of classes—not merely the quasi-mythical cleavage between Capital and Labor, but between the many levels and "social sets" with which we are all familiar. The barriers between such groups lead, within each in-group, to closed circles of self-corroborating ideas, beliefs, attitudes and prejudices which perpetuate the isolation. This is presumably still more the case in caste systems. The constituencies of certain churches, periodicals, universities and clubs are of similar absolutist character, producing attitudes noticeable to outsiders as naïvete, but to insiders as the earmarks of "our kind."

\* \* \*

To grasp the relativity of closed systems of consensus, an observer must be sufficiently objective not to be drawn into the circle of influence of such groups,—not even to the extent of hating them. For hate, a typical out-group sentiment, entangles one in the same web of values within which the isolated clique or class has withdrawn.

It should be noted that it is the naïve absolutism of individuals or of small groups which gives the outside observer the opportunity to recognize the principle of sociological relativity. One recalls the Scotswoman who thought "All the world's a bit quare save masel' and the Meenister, and sometimes A ha'e ma doobts o' the Meenister." Relativity is perhaps most easily seen as between conflicting groups, with *neither one* of which the observer is identified. The participant is apt to be, consciously or unconsciously, an absolutist, especially in a conflict group. It is also easier to see the relativity of the alleged absolutism of a small group than that of a whole society in whose culture system one has been born and is immersed.

These errors and biases are familiar, however, to all students of inductive logic. The difficulties in maintaining the objectivity of observation have been noted by scholars from Bacon to Mill and Spencer, and are critical in the discussion of sociological, as of any relativity.

Can man be a "participant observer," or is this an antinomy? Is our capacity to conceive of being such a combination, a creative

<sup>4</sup> Park and Burgess, *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1921, p. 791.

earnest of our capacity actually to *be* it? One can only try out the personal equation by attempting to live *as if* X were known: i. e., *as if* he were at once observer *and* participant. Or, if not simultaneously, at least in alternating current, so that the momentum of participation (introjection) is not destroyed by the inhibition of aloofness (projection), and the margin of error is not so great as to be considered biased. If, then, the equation works out, why, it works out!

To some extent, of course, differences, as well as likenesses, are projected upon the out-group. Because certain traits or behaviors are alien to our culture pattern we assume that their platform is not as our platform. *This assumption, tho illusory, may prove self-corroborative.* Systematic illusions are very real forces, whether in individuals or in groups, and serve both to bind and to isolate. Titania and Bottom are a symbol of situations of which Lear and Cordelia represent the ambivalent opposite.

"One day Cyrano de Bergerac heard two birds conversing in a tree. One of them said, 'The souls of birds are immortal.' 'There can be no doubt of it,' replied the other. 'But it is inconceivable that beings who possess neither bills nor feathers, who have no wings and walk on two legs, should believe that they, like the birds, have an immortal soul.'"<sup>5</sup>

\* \* \*

So long as one's necessary controls and adjustments are limited to one "platform" or self-consistent systematized basis of action, a theory or picture of the other platforms based upon one's point of view, and accepted as part of the common basis of reference by other occupants of the same platform, will be quite satisfactory to all concerned. It will be pragmatically true, for it will work and corroborate itself so long as no one attempts to do anything involving the other platforms. Montagues and Capulets, Jews and Samaritans, must pass each other by, on the other side. It is only when some one tries to *step off* his platform, or to enlarge it by annexing part of the surrounding "chaos," or when one platform actually collides with another, that trouble arises. Then, either the accepted system has to be modified to include the facts of the annexed area, or a new system based upon the new more inclusive point of reference, has to be established. This actually

<sup>5</sup>Attributed to Anatole France.

happened when Columbus, Copernicus and Galileo literally revolutionized the medieval and Ptolemaic worlds.

Absolutist systems, possibly excepting metaphysical monisms, either ignore chaos or create it by contrast with cosmos. Now an absolutism may be held by one person or many. The acceptability of it depends upon the size of the "platform." A single person with systematized conceptions of the rest of the world at odds with those of every one else, may show great heroism in defense of his own world in which he has absolute faith; but the commonly accepted absolutism of the group or community within the limits of which his behavior must move and have its being, will declare him comic, fanatic or dangerous.

If, like Quixote, one has even a single Sancho to say yea, yea, to his illusions, he may be confirmed and carried away therein,—unless his confidant be a psychiatrist with "one foot on shore" in what the rest of us call reality, so as to rescue him. Leopold and Loeb were not technically insane: possibly this is because their pathological trends had proved *communicable*, at least to each other, in a real world; and law does not recognize *insanity a deus*. Martin has shown that crowds show behavior patterns analogous to neurosis, and Miller has written of collective psychoses; but it is not easy to diagnose a whole group. Wells, in *Christina Alberta's Father*, pointed out that the only essential difference between the deluded Mr. Preemby, who thought he was an emperor, and the King of England, was that a few more people had agreed to tell the King of England so.

Marked ability to communicate, to adjust and to adapt or modify one's environment, and to influence others, may accompany an unusual mental variation. Such an individual is naturally less apt to be dubbed pathological. It is easier to appreciate the contributions of such persons, to see the "method in their madness," to tolerate their "eccentricities" rather than fear their "symptoms." There are doubtless also persons whose minds are of such character that no one could find in their vagaries anything worth salvaging. No one could communicate an experience that had *no* common element to share: it is like the impact of rays for which there is no receptor-mechanism. But the principle of relativity should make it easier for us to be always watching variate individuals and

groups, as receptively as possible, for the mutations which are the raw material of social selection and progress.

There were those who said, "Naught of good can come out of Nazareth."

Wherever a considerable number of persons have been subjected to similar strains or thwarts, by changes of environment, but have no ready-at-hand behavior patterns to enable them to neutralize these tensions, there is unrest, a "milling of the herd," and the situation is ripe for the arrival of a prophet—a divinely mad person whose experience has been enough like that of the rest, but whose sensitivity and expressiveness are greater. His explanation, his rationalization, his formula of salvation or slogan of action, will fall upon the welcoming ears of those who have been saying, "Lo, here!" and "Lo, there!"

Similarly, the history of such efforts as those of Akhnaton, Akbar, Plato, Jesus (so far as Judaism was concerned), Julian the Apostate, even of Cromwell, seems to demonstrate the "strain toward consistency" which binds the various culture traits into a tissue resistant of elements from any other universe of discourse. This tendency of habits to call each other back in spite of superficial social revolution is, of course, rooted in the conditioned response mechanisms of the interconditioned individuals which form the group. The prophet may be without honor in his own country, not only because no man is an expert or hero in his home town, but because it is only in some other culture area that a group with attitudes and cravings ripe for his "message" may be found.

An interesting thesis might be written upon a study of all those personages who, relatively unrecognized at home, have achieved fame abroad. Apparently human beings behave a little as molecules are supposed to under "the quantum theory;" a civilization does not easily jump from one platform to another moving at right angles to it; it is only when there is an inner strain toward inconsistency that we can say that "*Natura humana saltum facit.*"

\* \* \*

There is a sense in which "hopelessly sane" is equivalent to "hopelessly insane:" both are absolutist, and the only difference is that the word sanity implies acceptance by the carriers of the group culture or milieu in which the observed behavior is included. The



hopelessly sane person is one who cannot imagine any universe or system other than his own (whether in taste, morals, theology, politics, industry or science) as having any possible claim to validity based upon the experience of sentient beings.

Even Cromwell could say, "Remember always that it is barely conceivable that we may be in the wrong," and the Puritan Pastor Robinson's farewell sermon to the Pilgrim Fathers was on the text "The Lord hath yet more light to break forth from his holy word."<sup>7</sup>

Liberalism and tolerance are policies of relativity. The liberal who is "willing to imagine himself believing anything" can by a voluntary introjection of the other group's ideas and attitudes virtually *step onto the other platform* and temporarily sympathize with the other's *Weltanschauung*. Most liberals, however, are not radically liberal. They are not tolerant of intolerance.

\* \* \*

The idealist-monist posits a sentient Absolute to which all relative experience (which is to say all experience) must refer and relate for its ultimate significance. The *Als Ob* philosophy says virtually what Voltaire said of God, that whether or not there be such an Absolute, men must live as if there were some point of reference fixed, final for them, about which (*at least for their own group-system or platform*) their universe revolves and organizes itself. Most men, however, tend to identify this sort of Absolute with their own scale of values and horizon.

If, as Jane Harrison's work suggests, the group-spirit *is* the group-god, Trigant Burrow might add at this point that the Community creates man in its own Image, tho man rebels and sets up his own images from time to time.

"The other day I furnished a sentiment in response to a man's request—to-wit:

"'The noblest work of God?' Man.

"'Who found it out?' Man.

"I thought it was very good and smart, but the other person didn't."<sup>8</sup>

Absolute relativity, by contrast with private absolutism, would assume a God inclusive of every possible viewpoint. Our nearest finite approach to this is a capacity to assume as many as possible

<sup>7</sup> These quotations have not been verbally verified.—T. D. E.

<sup>8</sup> Attributed to Mark Twain.

of the actual points of view represented in our experience of our world, and thus gradually to expand our own horizons of discourse.

Men feel that they must have common *termini ab quo* and *ad quem*. It was the offer of such *termini* that converted to Christianity the Teutonic chieftain, to whom human life had seemed as a bird flying across the rafters of the lighted hall, out of the dark, into the dark. Omar Khayyám, on the other hand, had a very relativistic Fate as God:<sup>9</sup>

“Into this Universe, and *why* not knowing,  
Nor *whence*, like water willy-nilly flowing:  
And out of it, as wind along the waste,  
I know not whither, willy-nilly blowing.”

\* \* \*

Any normative concept easily acquires an absolutistic bias. Evolution, Progress, Normality, Justice, viewed absolutely must refer to some fixed platform of values from which the parade of life is to be judged.

A *relative* concept of justice, on the other hand, recognizes no final or preconceived Platonic ideal, but a situation within which elements of interest are in relative harmony. If other individuals then claim injustice, that shows that the situation has enlarged because some new element, previously outside the harmonized situation, had intruded. A reorganization of the new situation must then be undertaken, with the new element harmonized, before the concept “justice” can again be used to describe it. A problem is a situation which cannot find reasonably harmonious adjustment without the enlarging of the situation by introducing some new element (such as a doctor or social worker or arbitrator or receiver or dictator),<sup>10</sup> who throws out some disturbing factor, or makes possible some rearrangement or adjustment.

Progress, like justice, too often seems illusory because it is appraised from the absolutist “platform” of some special interest, age, or system. Conservatives and reactionaries feel that the modern world is slipping, or even moving, rapidly down grade. Henry Adams was, by his own admission, born in the nineteenth century into the culture of the eighteenth, and forced to face the juggernaut

<sup>9</sup> Rubáiyát Stanza XXIX.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. “A Limbo for Cruel Words,” *The Survey*, June 15, 1922; “Cures and Cure-Alls,” *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, June, 1928.

of the twentieth. But he would have preferred the thirteenth century to that twenty-first upon which he speculated, and for him all history was as a clock running down, faster and faster.

Both by going "back" in time and also by going to the "backward" spaces of the earth one could find codes and practices similarly "primitive." In this fact, moreover, one can feel a foreshadowing of the Einsteinian "spatialization of time." In America one's thought-forms for the decades are tiers of states following the frontier back to the colonies. The archaeologist of the Orient *digs* from age to age. In Rome or Egypt one can *step* from century to century.

To Lord Dunsany is attributed a witty relativism: that in a truly civilized world, any man should have the right to live in any century he pleases. Here, again, is the "spatialization of time."

For the relativist, as for those cultures to whom the idea of "progress" is alien, time brings only *change*, which begs no questions. Special progress, for special groups or interests, is obviously possible, even for the relativist. Is he, however, so absolutistic about his relativism as to deny the possibility of *general* progress, as an economist might deny the possibility of a general rise in values? So long as progress is conceived in relation to a point internal to one's social system, it means merely a revolving, with motion equal and opposite, the advance of one group at the expense of another. Progress is conceivable only within a given universe of discourse which is itself considered as passing a point placed *external* to itself, in a direction the value of which is agreed upon. The generality of progress is, then, dependent upon how large a group can be got to agree on a scale of values. Generality itself is seen to be not absolute, but relative to scope and agreement. Social progress itself may be considered as the gradual or sudden enlargement of the sphere or platform of group integration, i. e., of the social universe of discourse in which contact and interaction and reciprocal adjustment are possible.

There is a danger that relativity may become an "ism"—that it will itself acquire a positive normative or absolutistic value, so that any smack of absolutism will be considered a taint. But absolutisms (radical or reactionary) may also have their function, which liberals should be the first to recognize. Without some ab-

solutism this would become a relativist's paradise—"the best of all possible worlds"—a drifting hell.

Relativity, once accepted, is, however, itself conducive to self-corroborative attitudes: the creative "as if" applies again here. People who believe in relativity will act *as if* their own and other cultural complexes and reciprocally independent validity, and such validity may thus arrive in actuality. Separate cultures may thus develop a new type of relative isolation or isolated relativity.

To adopt the relative attitude need not mean the abandoning of all differences, nor of all participation, any more than, in art, the appreciation *en semble* involves an ignoring or abolishing of parts. Internationalism, again, does not necessarily mean cosmopolitanism or panmixia.<sup>11</sup>

The paradox with which to close is this:

The only "absolute" worth seeking or recognizing is one that can or will see all finite systems as relative.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Royce, Josiah, *The Philosophy of Loyalty*.

---

Additional materials will be found in the following directions: Pirandello's "Right You Are (If You Think You Are)"; the separate and reciprocally isolated universes of discourse of scientists and fundamentalists, of Roman Catholics and Christian Scientists; Swedenborg, Wagner, Strindberg, James Joyce, etc., before and after being understood and accepted; lovers' "madness," the "madness" of warring peoples, and the "madness of the crowd," as looked at by the in-group and by the out-group, respectively; the accepted bases of imaginary worlds in children's play-groups, and the canons or accepted assumptions of the arts (especially of drama) and of religious and magic rites. Also: "This Foreman," by Thomas Hornsby Ferril, *The Nation*, Vol. CXXIV, No. 3215, February 16, 1927, pp. 173-4; "Invisible Presences" by James H. Leuba, *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. CXXXIX, No. 1, January, 1927, pp. 71-81 The Work of Trigant Burrow, M. D., I find paralleling my own line of thought in some respects, especially "The Heroic Rôle," New York Academy of Medicine, March 26, 1925, reprint, page 12; "Psychoanalytic Improvisations and The Personal Equation," *The Psychoanalytic Review*, Vol. XIII, No. 2, April 1926, pp. 173, 180; "Our Mass Neurosis," *The Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. XXIII, No. 6, June 1926, p. 305; "Insanity a Social Problem," *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. XXXII, No. 1, Part 1, July 1926, p. 85.

"Thus Spake Zarathustra" by Friedrich Nietzsche. New York: Boni & Liveright, Inc., 1917; pp. 72-3-4-5.