

SELECTED PASSAGES FROM W. G. PERRY JR. 1970. FORMS OF
INTELLECTUAL AND ETHICAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE COLLEGE YEARS. HOLT
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S. When I went to my first lecture, what the man said was just like God's word you know. I believe everything he said, because he was a professor and he's a Harvard professor, and this was, this was a respected position. And-ah, ah, people said, "Hell, so what? . . . And I began to ah, realize. (p. 61)

[about Nat. Sci] It's supposed to teach you to-ah, reason better. That seems to be the, the excuse that natural science people give for these courses, they're supposed to teach you to arrive at more logical conclusions and look at things in a more scientific manner. Actually what you get out of that course is you, you get an idea that science is a terrifically confused thing in which nobody knows what's coming off anyway. (P 2, p 74)*

S. I'll tell you the best thing about science courses: their lectures are all right. They're sort of, they say facts. But when you get to a humanities course, especially-oh, they're awful! those lectures. Oh, I can't see any relation. You're reading a book, and, ah, to my way of thinking, anyway, the lecturer is just reading things into it that were never meant to be there. (P 2, p 79)

S. I'd feel (laughs) rather insecure thinking about these philosophical things all the time and not coming up with any definite answers. And definite answers are, well, they, they're sort of my foundation point. In physics you get definite answers to a point. Beyond that point you know there are definite answers, but you can't reach them. (P 3, p 89)

S. I guess I'm thinking specifically of one course I took this year, this required humanities course. It's a literature course, and tries to outline an approach that can be used on almost any kind of literature. I started off a little bit less well than

*P indicates position
p indicates page in Perry

mediocre, because I couldn't see what they were trying to do. In the papers we wrote you were supposed to use this particular approach to reading material that they were trying to outline for you. And as the course went along, my grades got consistently higher as I understood their approach. Finally I came to realize about the middle of the second term that they were trying to get you to look at something in a complex way and to try to weigh more factors than one, and talk about things in a concrete manner. That is, with words that have some meaning and some relevance to the material you were studying. And all of a sudden my grade just shot right up and stayed right up. (P 4, p 101)

S. And now I realize it...as I say, there's a lot of answers for a certain question and ah, by reasoning things out you can come to a variation of the answers/uhuh/and-ah, it depends upon which way you're looking at it. That's right. I mean there's no...you can't come right out and point to one thing and say this caused the Industrial Revolution. And that's what I was looking for last year--one sentence that would tell me what caused the Revolution. I. One cause.

S. But there is no such thing. It's a combination of factors and-ah, people vary on their ah, on looking at it, and ah, that's what I couldn't realize last year, and I can this year. (P 4, p 102)

S. I don't know if complexity itself is always necessary. I'm not sure. But if complexity is not necessary, at least you have to find that it is not necessary before you can decide, "Well, this particular problem needs only the simple approach." (P 4 p 113)

One of the particular passages we selected for his comment was the one quote above. We looked on it as a significant passage, expressed with freshness and charm. His interviewer was dismayed, therefore to find him react with surprise and intense scorn. The interviewer protested, and the student explained his reaction as follows:

S. Well we're talking about...if we're talking about the value of a liberal education, maybe one of the things is that you kind of take complexity for granted, or it teaches you to do this. And therefore you kind of dismiss...You, you can't even talk about taking a simple approach to something, you just kind of, I mean it's just a way of looking at things which is complex and therefore you can't talk about being complex as, as a conscious policy. I mean it's not a conscious policy, it's, it's just something that's been absorbed into you. And this, and that's why this seemed kind of superficial conversation, or seemed just to lack intelligence, because I don't think you can say, well, I'm going to take a simple approach to this problem and a complex approach to that one, I mean, looking at things, if it's just the way you do something. (P 5, p 114)

You know, in the past months, it's been a matter of having reduced to the level where I really wasn't sure there was anything in particular to follow. I, you do begin to wonder on what basis you'd judge any decisions at all, 'cause there really isn't-ah... too much of an absolute you can rely on as to...and even as to whether...there are a lot of levels that you can tear it apart, or you can base an ethical system that's a, presupposes that there are men who...or you can get one that doesn't presuppose that anything exists...and try and figure out of what principles you're going to decide any issue. Well, it's just that right now I'm not sure that...of what the-ah, what those de-, how to make any decision at all.

You can completely forget them [decisions] and go ahead and live a good, quiet life, but that doesn't seem that you can completely ignore...especially when you're here and are having the issues sort of thrust in your face at times. As to, and probably the thing that's-ah most impressed [sic] is...that is, just seeing the thinking of these men who have pushed their thought to the absolute limit to try and find out what was their personal salvation, and just seeing how that fell short of an all-encompassing answer to, for everyone. That those ideas really are individualized. And you begin to have respect for how great their thought could be, without its being absolute. (P 5, p 116)

To observe both an act and its context, one requires an alternate context in which to stand. In offering a plurality of contexts, Relativism provides the ground for detachment and for objectivity. Although the objectivity obtainable is always qualified by the nature of the contexts in which one stands back to observe, it is nonetheless a radical and powerful departure. It may well rank with language as the distinctive triumph of the human mind. (p 126)

1) Theologically speaking, Position 5 represents the point of critical division between "belief" and the possibility of "faith". Belief requires no investment by the person. To become faith it must first be doubted. Only in the face of doubt is the person called upon for that act of commitment that is his contribution, his faith. In Position 5 one can no longer "believe" in the simple unquestioned sense.

2) If one later commits oneself to a faith in an Absolute, there is a criterion which reveals that this commitment has been made in the context of a relativistic world. This criterion is one's attitude toward other people with a belief or a faith in a different Absolute. They cannot appear as alien, as other than human, one must, however paradoxically, respect them. In one sense

they "must" be wrong, but in another sense, no more so than oneself. The moral obligation to convert them or to annihilate them has vanished. (P 5 p, 131)

S. You just have to jump into it, that's all, before, before it can have any effect on you. And the farther in you force yourself to get in the first place, the more possibilities there are, the more ideas and concepts there are that can impinge on you and so the more likely you are to get involved in it. Actually you have to make some kind of an assumption in the first place that it's worthwhile to get into it, but... and that you're capable of doing something once you get into it. (P 6, p 139)

S. there was one other thing I expected--I expected that when I got to Harvard--I was-ah slightly ahead of my time in that I was an atheist before I got here--I came up here expecting that Harvard would teach me one universal truth...(pause). Took me quite a while to figure out...that if I was going for a universal truth or something to believe in, it had to come within me and I don't know whether Harvard taught me that or not. (P 6, p 137-138)

Commitments are creative in that, through choice and affirmation, the individual generates meanings and relationships neither presupposed nor entailed by the structure of the relativistic world itself. The structures of Relativism (as distinct from the chaos of Multiplicity) do provide, by definition, wide opportunity for the exercise of reason. Reason reveals relations within any given context; it can also compare one context with another on the basis of meta-contexts established for the purpose. But there is a limit. In the end, reason itself remains relativistic, a property that turns reason back upon reason's own findings. In even its farthest reaches, then, reason alone will leave the thinker with several legitimate contexts and so way of choosing among them--no way, at least, that he can justify through reason alone...If he is still to honor reason, he must now also transcend it; he must affirm his values, reason may help, but it will not in itself convince him that these values are better than any others he must commit himself through his own faith. In choosing his career, he must risk his life to his own best guess; reason can never tell him fully about the roads not taken. Yet in the nature of the world as he has come to see it, he must commit himself or abrogate responsibility. (p 135-136)

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