

The Absolute Folly of Relative Thinking

Romans 1:18-25

Abstract

The article presents a theory that I denote “Relative Thinking Theory,” which claims that people consider relative differences and not only absolute differences when making various economics decisions, even in those cases where the rational model dictates that people should consider only absolute differences. The article reviews experimental evidence for this behavior, summarizing briefly several experiments I conducted, as well as some earlier related literature. It then discusses how we can think about relative thinking and formalize this behavior. Later, the article addresses several related questions: why do people exhibit relative thinking, whether it is beneficial to do so, and whether experience and education can change relative thinking. Finally, the article explains why firms seem to respond to relative thinking of consumers, and raises additional implications of relative thinking for economics and management.

Absolute Truth for a Relative World

In the film *Jurassic Park II - The Lost World*, there is a rather interesting scene, in which a scientist is talking to a businessman. The scientist is relating the facts of an experience to the attorney, who doesn't really believe him. “It's the truth,” states the scientist. “Your version of it,” replies the other. The scientist then responds: “There aren't any ‘versions’ of the truth!”

While at first glance you may agree with the scientist, that there aren't “versions” of the truth, the fact is that with growing frequency, people are abandoning that fact. How often do we hear them say things like, “What you want to believe is fine for you, but don't push it on me!” Or, “I believe all religions lead to God, and if we are sincere, we'll be OK.” (((**Patty says NO!**)))

It is, in fact, considered politically incorrect to believe in Absolutes. “To hold to absolute values may offend someone who holds other values,” we are told. “We need to be tolerant of those with other perceptions of reality and truth.” Ravi Zacharias, a brilliant Christian philosopher, travels the world speaking on College and University Campuses, taking on those who deny the truth of Christ. During one forum, a graduate student stood up and said, “I do not believe there is *any* way to define good and evil. It is all relative.” Zacharias said, “If a young child ran into this hall right now, screaming in terror, and a man followed that child, and began to beat the child to death, would you not stop that man because what he was doing is wrong?” The hall grew silent, as the student pondered. He said, “As improbable as it may seem, I do not think I have the right to judge the deeds of another person as right or wrong.”

The denial of absolutes is a cornerstone of Relative thought. Relativism believes that truth is something that is defined by each individual according to his or her experience, education and personal choice. Relativism teaches that no one has the right to declare something true or false, good or evil, acceptable or criminal. Relativism has told us that the right of one individual to choose is of greater value than the right of another individual to live. It has told us that if a person chooses to sexually abuse children, society has no right to declare them “dangerous.”

In the name of “Individual Freedom,” **relativism** tells us that it’s OK to choose any lifestyle, any form of entertainment – to be and do what ever you desire to do.

Tom Nebel, the head of Church Planting for our District, tells the story of a Philosophy teacher at the UW Madison, who was approached by young female student. She said, “I believe that there are no absolutes.” He thought for a moment, and asked her, “Is that always true?” You see, when the relativist tells you there are no absolutes, he is indeed making an absolute statement!

And as unbelievable as it may seem, relativism has made its way subtly into the church. In his book, *Spiritual Marketplace*, sociologist Wade Clark Roof reports that 25 percent of people who called themselves "born-again" Christians interviewed in a recent study believe in the possibility of communicating with the dead. A third believe in reincarnation and astrology, and half say they believe in psychic powers. Half of those interviewed told Roof that, "the various religions of the world are 'equally good and true.'" As Roof put it, what is true of Americans in general is increasingly true of those who describe themselves as "born again." The problem is that "they trust their own experiences more than anything."

The church has become as Relative as the rest of our culture!

In a relative world, every person becomes the judge of what's true for them. And not only what's true, but also what's right. Right and wrong, like truth, is about what we feel. While it's easy to understand why non-Christians might fall into these traps, why would people who call themselves “born-again Christians” **fall prey to this relativistic thought?** Well, as Roof and others have noted, the past few decades have seen a shift in the way American Christians define being "born again" and "evangelical." Such terms are no longer a matter of *believing certain doctrines or teachings*; rather they're a matter of *having a particular experience* -- an experience that the person says changed his or her life.

Over the last few months **I have felt a deep conviction** that we not fall victim to that trap. I am concerned that we never become a church full of people who share a religious “experience” without a knowledge or belief in basic Biblical doctrine and theology. Please don’t let that word *Theology* frighten you. It is simply the study of God. I can think of no better pursuit for us over then next 10 weeks, or ten years for that matter, than to seek to understand some of the foundational teachings of the Word of God. We are a church that has as its goal the reaching of inquisitive individuals in the Mayville area, and helping them become devoted followers of Christ. We have had some measure of success in reaching people who have been away from church for a while, and we thank God for that. Many here today are new believers, or recently returned “prodigals.” Some here today are actively seeking God, and are not quite sure about all this. Others have been Christians for years. I believe that a study of basic Christian doctrine is appropriate for all of us. **As a believer**, these are the truths we simply must know if we are going to stand strong in the face of trials. **As a seeker**, you need the facts in order to make an informed decision. So let’s dig in. In many ways we are just going to be scratching the surface of many of these issues, but each one is vitally important.

In Romans chapter 1, we have some verses that I think describe our culture as it is today in chilling terms. Please turn there with me. Romans chapter 1, beginning with verse 18.

Romans 1:18-32

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, [19] because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. [20] For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, [21] because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. [22] Professing to be wise, they became fools, [23] and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man--and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.

[24] Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, [25] ***who exchanged the truth of God for the lie***, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

[26] For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. [27] Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due.

[28] And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting; [29] being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, [30] backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, [31] undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful; [32] who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them.

Our culture, and in great measure, *the church* in our culture, is guilty of the sin of exchanging the truth of God for a lie. We have become a people who have created God in our image and denied that we are created in His. We are guilty of allowing the world to force the church to conform to *its* image, rather than the church standing in stark contrast to the world and calling world to righteousness. May God forgive us and call us back to Himself!

Look at this passage of scripture again. It should send chills down the spine of everyone in this room. Because the people Paul is writing about denied the truth, and exchanged the truth of God for a lie, "God gave them up..." (verse 26.) He allowed them to go down the path they had chosen, into the abyss that they desired. And do you see the result? The end of verse 27 reads, "and received in themselves the penalty of their error which was due." And again in verse 32, "That those who practice such things are deserving of death..."

You see, there's a funny thing about truth. Truth is. Truth does not change because of polling data. Truth does not vary with the changing tide of public opinion. Truth simply is.

Back in the 1500's, Copernicus studied the sun, moon, stars and planets. His studies showed that the earth was round, not flat, and that it revolved around the sun. The earth was not the center of the universe, as everyone had been taught. But on March 5, 1616, the Pope issued a decree in which he stated that Copernicus' beliefs were heretical and stated that no Christian was permitted to read his work. The ban was in place until the 19th century. For almost 400 years the truth Copernicus discovered was banned by unbelief. **Galileo understood Copernicus**, and tried to

defend his claims, and almost lost his life in the Inquisition as a result. For 400 years the truth was denied. During those 400 years, did the sun revolve around the earth? No! Was the earth flat due to public opinion? Of course not! The truth was still the truth, even if it was illegal to believe it.

Truth is. I can deny gravity all I want, but if I jump off a ladder, I'm going to fall! **The truth is!**

In 1997 thirty-nine people in California believed that there was a space craft in the tail of the Hale-Bopp comet that was coming to take them away before the end of the world. The only way for them to leave on the spaceship was to commit suicide. **So they did.** They left a video on which their leader said: "We have no hesitation to leave this place, to leave the bodies that we have..." They exchanged the truth for a lie.

There is a word we use in theological discussions to describe those who deny the truth – the word is "fool!" **Look at verse 22:** "Professing to be wise, they became fools." We live in a paradoxical age. Never before has our world had such a wealth of information, and such sophisticated thought, and never before have we worked so hard to deny the truth.

I find it just amazing that with all our enlightenment and education, with the written Word of God more easily accessed than any other culture in history, we choose to listen to people like Shirley McClain for spiritual guidance! How can we, with the truth of God's word before us, deny Him so vehemently?

There is a conspiracy to deny God's existence, because if there is some being greater than us, then we have someone to answer to, and that means that there are some absolute standards by which we must live, and that is simply not what we want to hear. If God is, then we must heed Him. So we deny He exists, or we minimize Him to our level, or when His magnificence is evidenced in His creation, we call him (or her) "nature," or speak of a "spiritual dynamic that pervades all things." Anything but recognize the existence of the Sovereign God of the Bible. I ran across a poem this week that I thought was excellent. **It's called *The Humanist*:**

He exists because he was created.
He's here because he was placed here
He's well and comfortable because divine power keeps him so.
He dines at God's table.
He's sheltered by the roof that God gave him.
He's clothed by God's bounty.
He lives by breathing God's air which keeps him strong and vocal
to go about persuading people that whether God exists or not, only man matters.

Such is the time in which we live. It is as though Paul looked ahead in time 1940 years and saw 21st Century America when he wrote our text. We have substituted the solid absolutes of God with the shifting sands of relativism.

But the truth is. God's Word stands. Jesus said, "Sanctify [my followers] by Your truth, Your word is truth." His decrees do not change, and His standards do not waver. This is not my

version of the truth – this is truth! **May God grant us eyes to see and minds to understand and hearts that will cling to that truth.**

COMMUNION SERVICE

Here are a few Absolutes from the Word of God:

- Each one of us is a sinner. We are all guilty.
- The due punishment for our sin is death. Physical death, yes, but also spiritual death, eternal separation from God in a very real place called Hell.
- God loved you so much that He sent His only Son, Jesus Christ, to pay that penalty for you. You didn't earn it, you don't deserve it. It is a gift of love from God Himself.
- Jesus is the only way to the Father. No other religion, no other person, no matter how sincere, can settle your debt with God.
- To accept that gift, be forgiven of your sin, and have eternal life, you must confess that you are a sinner, ask God to forgive you by the blood of Jesus, and make Him the Lord of your life – that means that this Word becomes your new source of Absolute Truth.

I'm not interested in you sharing some spiritual experience with others. I want you to know the facts. I want you to see the foolishness of rejecting this greatest gift ever given to you. I want you to rationally, with all your senses about you, realize the incredible love that God has for you, and allow Him to create in you a clean heart, that will yearn to please Him.

On the night before He was crucified, Jesus shared a last meal with His disciples. At that meal, He commanded that we gather regularly and share two reminders of the price He paid to purchase our Salvation.

If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, and know that salvation, we ask you to join us at this table. If you are a seeker, the Word of God asks that you wait. But you can settle the issue right now, by asking Him to forgive you and make you His child right now, even as these two reminders are distributed.

Relative Thinking Theory Ofer H. Azar¹ Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

Ofer H. Azar, Department of Business Administration, School of Management, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, P.O.B. 653, Beer Sheva 84105, Israel. Tel.: +972-8-6472675; Fax: +972-8-6477691. E-mail address: azar@som.bgu.ac.il. This article is based on research I conducted towards my Ph.D. at Northwestern University.