Relativism and the Problem of Epistemological Loneliness

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Abstract. A commentary on the sense of isolation and estrangement which commonly accompanies the relativism ushered in by the emergence of formal operational thought, and a detailing of several regressive strategies frequently employed by adolescents in their efforts to accommodate to this plurality of solitudes. It is suggested that the stereotypy, cliquishness and press toward conformity common among adolescents, as well as the penchant for abstraction and the susceptibility to secular and nonsecular conversions often characteristic of this age group, can be understood as attempts to cope with the estrangement of social relativism through the imposition of a kind of artificial consensus. Such essentially regressive solutions are viewed as a by-product of a standard of cognitive development which regards maturity as a kind of exclusive trafficking in abstract relativistic thought. This view is contrasted with an alternative construction of cognitive development which rejects the notion that concretism is an intellectual handicap of middle childhood, that centered or figurative thinking is a conceptual stage to be overcome, and that thoughts freed of all contradiction are the mark of conceptual maturity. This second and dialectical view of development is proposed as a perspective which permits a brand of cognitive growth that does not sacrifice the particular to the general nor condemn the adolescent to the vertigo of relativism.

One of the principal accomplishments of adolescents and the emergence of formal operational thought is, according to Piaget (Piaget and Inhelder, 1956), the realization that persons all view the world from individualized and idiosyncratic perspectives and that there is no simple criterion of objectivity by which to arbitrate this diversity of points of view. Instead, each

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person is, as Laing and Cooper (1964) have stated, gradually understood to represent ‘a center of another orientation to the objective world, a center of another arrangement of the universe’. As a consequence of this growing recognition, the child is thought to move closer to the understanding that objectivity, rather than being an as yet undiscovered secret, is instead what Piaget has called, ‘the recognition of the universality of subjectivity’ (Piaget and Inhelder, 1956).

The positive implications of this new relativity of judgment, including the capacity to more fully appreciate the subjective character of all thought, have been considered in detail by Piaget and Inhelder (1956), as well as others (Elkind, 1967; Feffer, 1960; Loof, 1972). Like other ontogenetic changes, however, this developmental achievement is subject to mixed review. The present discussion focuses on the more negative set of consequences which sometimes attend the growing recognition of the arbitrariness of one’s own perspective.

The Vertigo of Relativity

Taken by itself the sense of relativism ushered in by the emergence of formal operational thought often involves a kind of conceptual overkill which achieves objectivity at the expense of conviction, commitment, mutuality and the comfort of participating in a consensus of shared beliefs. The difficulty lies in the fact that the manifold of unique perspectives which the adolescent comes to recognize refuses epistemological unification and comes to constitute the irreducible specificity of life. ‘Each particular perspective, each particular point of view, that is, precisely, each person, is’, according to this view, ‘the center of his own world, but not the center of anyone else’s world – although many people long and strain to make it so’ (Laing and Cooper, 1964, pp. 11–12). The initial recognition of this uncertainty principle is not, consequently, necessarily equivalent to its whole-hearted acceptance, nor is it at all obvious how one is to cope with, let alone take pleasure in, this ultimate relativity. This growing relatization is instead typically accompanied by a sense of uneasiness that is hard to shake off. There is a gradual dawning of an awareness of what Sartre (1965) has called a ‘plurality of solitudes’ – that each person’s point of view relentlessly cancels out the viewpoint of another. This potentially ominous and isolative awareness, which Berger and Luckmann (1966) have characterized as the ‘vertigo of relativity’, heralds in a growing sense of estrangement from others referred to here as epistemological loneliness. It is this double-edged feature of adolescents emerging social decentering skills which serves to dampen the
enthusiasm with which they sometimes embrace their own newly acquired conceptual accomplishments, to discourage them in their attempts to consolidate their intellectual gains, and at times to entirely derail their subsequent developmental progress.

A Range of Regressive Solution

While there is no clear consensus about how one is to come to terms with the solitude of one's own perspective, there are several familiar strategies which have been seized upon by adolescents in sufficient number that an enumeration of them may help in gaining a better understanding of the complexity of this age group. The following list contains some of the most common of these regressive solutions.

Having stumbled upon what is literally a rat's nest of divergent opinion, the adolescent must decide how he is to mediate these divergent views and relate them to his own. One available means of doing so is to search out a group of peers and negotiate an iron-clad consensus with them. The cliquishness and press toward conformity which often characterize groups of adolescents can be partially understood in these terms as a desperate effort to forge a system of absolutes by striking an agreement to always agree.

By binding themselves together into a univocal social collective, and pledging to differ from one another in as few ways as possible, adolescents seek to ward off the sense of estrangement which accompanies their new-won sense of subjective relativity and create by fiat an enclave of common conviction. Sartre describes this process as the creation of a figment part of the self which is defined exclusively in terms of others and which creates a domain in which 'the individual becomes as one with the everybodys and shares their common fate' (Nordstrom et al., 1967, p. 131). Within such an imposed consensus, the peer group becomes the measure of all things, and deviations either by the self or other threatens this delicate group solution. Under such circumstances, any chink in the unified ideological front must be expeditiously dealt with, lest the isolation of being different reassert itself and once again strand everyone in their own individuality.

Efforts to impose an artificial consensus need not, however, always take the form of cliques or claques or other large group solutions, and individual adolescents may instead seek to achieve some less ambitious sense of communality. The search for intimacy which frequently characterizes older adolescents and young adults (Erikson, 1968) may be partially understood as a retreat from a search for group agreement and a retrenchment in a plurality of two. Even children are sometimes valued for their special status
as ‘chips off the old block’ and are sometimes cherished only so long as their views do not differ too much from those of their parents. Polite children, we are told, do not contradict their elders and offspring of all ages commonly regard it as less than politic to impose their own and different vision on the older generation. In this context, one’s own struggles after uniqueness may constitute as serious a threat as the individualizing efforts of others and must be treated with equal harshness. Under such circumstances the self becomes a source of potential public embarrassment to be hidden away or legislated out of existence.

A companion method of warding off the threat imposed by individuality is to blur out of focus the distinctness which characterizes out-group persons who are not a party to our own conspiritorial group and to treat them as abstract, stereotyped entities which are mutually intersubstitutable (Sartre, 1965). People over 30, grown ups in general and all the rest who think they know everything or think they are so smart can, in this fashion, be dispensed with en masse. Stereotypy in this sense is the flipside of the cliquishness described in the previous paragraphs and constitutes a means of bracketing a number of out-group members together into a kind of fictitious social gestalt and relating to that collection as if it were a single individual. Through such stereotyping maneuvers, common among adolescents, the threat of diversity and the alienating sense of conceptual relativity which it implies is warded off through an act of perceptual negation (Elkind, 1967).

The raw materials necessary to construct some artificial enclave of consensus are not, however, only to be found within one’s family or peer group, and individual adolescents may also seek to achieve some sense of mutuality through an appeal to other available cultural resources. A sense of ideological companionship and communality may, for example, be sought by opting into some prepackaged world view which advocates a particular and mutually exclusive set of religious or secular beliefs. What for some adolescents takes the form of a crisis of estrangement, or a struggle for group consensus, becomes for others what Elkind (in press) has described as an endemic search for faith. For some adolescents this takes the form of religious conversion (Heise, 1972) where the fallibility of human judgment is voluntarily exchanged for a direct pipeline to divine wisdom. Such conversion experiences are not, however, limited to the adoption of a formal religious faith, and many adolescents also achieve enlightenment through some more secular, but noncritical conversion to the canons of science, or some humanistic faith such as the perfectibility of infinite adaptability of mankind (Elkind, in press). All of these forms of secular and nonsecular conversion share in the common
assumption that differences in opinion are symptomatic of routine but correctible errors in human judgment which serve to becloud the real truth of the matter. Special guidance, in the form of divine enlightenment, or special caution, in the form of methodological rigor, is assumed to provide an adequate corrective for these human shortcomings and to offer an alternative to unsupportable relativism.

A final and almost universal method employed by adolescents in their efforts to minimize the idiosyncrasies of their world view is to simply do what persons at the formal operational level do best – think abstractly. Abstract thought, through a kind of selective attention and inattention, provides a means of circumventing a variety of potentially disruptive contradictions, and identifies similarities at the cost of obscuring differences. For all of its other much lauded attributes, abstract thinking is a powerful tool for lopping off awkward differences of opinion and imposing a kind of elegant, if somewhat syncretic, consensus.

The difficulty with the preceding list of familiar responses to the vertigo and isolation of relativism is that they all represent attempts to deal with the multiplicity of perspectives by denying their legitimacy out of hand. Whether through cliquishness and stereotypy, religious or scientific intolerance, or simply by adopting a level of abstraction which syncretistically sacrifices important dimensions of difference, all of these partial solutions appear essentially regressive and interfere with further growth and development. What is perhaps even more troubling is that the preceding list may create the impression that no progressive solutions are potentially available, that the resources provided by the culture are inadequate to cope with the problems generated by a sense of social relativity, and that the formal operational thinker is condemned to float awash, alone in a sea of unreconcilable, idiosyncratic perspectives. Some people have concluded that this is so and view any alternative to an unremitting acceptance of one’s own essential estrangement and solitude as a conceptual cop-out which achieves a sense of intellectual companionship at the expense of intellectual honesty. While this is an available perspective on the problem and, consistent with the present bid for a greater tolerance of conceptual diversity, need not be dismissed, it seems cheeky at the very least to write off most of science, religion, human companionship, and abstract thought as mere symptoms of a developmental arrest. Struck by the apparent arbitrariness of developmental views which seem to leave adolescents, and adults for that matter, lost in an apparent hyperspace of abstract relativistic thought, several writers have recently sought to reconceptualize this aspect of cognitive development.
Alternatives to Becoming too Abstract for One's Own Good

Riegel (1973), for example, drawing upon a Hegelian frame of reference, has recently argued against the view that abstract reasoning, with all of its cavalier selectivity, should be regarded as the ultimate in cognitive development. According to this view, a slavish adherence to the classical principle of identity, which maintains that facts or opinions should not contradict one another, is an unnecessary, and peculiarly nonhuman, standard of judgment. Within the more Hegelian model which Riegel proposes, contradiction, rather than being treated as a limitation to be overcome, is seen as a necessary condition of all thought and provides the dynamic necessary to prompt all cognitive growth and development. Riegel argues, although not necessarily against Piaget, that cognitive maturity depends not on abstraction, but upon a new kind of concretism in which all available contradictory views and perspectives are preserved and held in what Carmichael (1966) has described as an ‘awkward embrace’. Within this view, it is not necessary that an individual equilibrate all available conflicts. Instead, it is possible to live with, thrive upon, and eventually come to take pleasure in, these contradictions.

Some of these same concerns appear to lie behind the criticism of and supplements to Piaget's theories detailed by Turner (1973) in his recent review of Genetic Epistemology and Structuralism. As an anthropologist Turner is particularly troubled by what he regards as the exclusionary emphasis on and over-evaluation of the operative as opposed to the more static, figurative aspects of thought. Anthropology is in large part the study of static features of various cultures and, understandably, Turner does not appreciate the fact that the special focus of his own interest seems to be given such short shrift in Piaget's theory of operative thought. As a consequence of these concerns he is invested in reassigning a more central place to the role of figurative thought in normal adult cognition and in so doing offers what appears to be a more balanced view of the structural character of mature thought.

Turner offers two general criticisms of Piaget's accounting of formal operational thought. First, he objects to the essentially pejorative treatment which he feels that Piaget accords to figurative thought. Because of the momentary, static, imitative character which Piaget ascribes to figurative knowing, he has, as Turner points out, chosen to assign it only a modest role in the course of mental development. In addition he also stresses the private, concrete and individual nature of figurative thought. Turner takes issue with each of these points, stressing both the cultural and collective nature of figurative representations and their consequent dynamic rather than static
character. Particularly as expressed in myth, ritual and the arts, Turner sees figurative symbols as providing for culturally sanctioned transformations and as producing important affective, and motivational effects.

Second, Turner questions the ubiquitous character of formal operational thought and challenges its adequacy as an appropriate model for the full range of adult mental activity. While it is important to recognize, as Turner apparently does, that Piaget has been principally interested in accounting for formalized knowledge such as science, mathematics, and logic, the limited scope intended is not always made explicit and a casual reader might easily conclude that operative thought has equal applicability in all quadrants of mental activity. Turner, however, strongly challenges the assumption that decentered thought in its mature, operational form can be appropriately applied to matters of selfhood and affectivity. The basic premise of decentered thought is, as Turner points out, the relative independence of the objects upon which it is focused from the particular identity, feelings, and purposes of the subject. Affect and identity are, however, as Turner reminds us, inherently concrete, particular, and associated with the unique relationship of the self to its objective environment. Knowledge about and the personal relevance of our own feelings is not advanced by filtering these affects through some decentered, abstract, and generalized mode of thought. Similarly, a sense of one's own self demands a turning away from, rather than toward, the multiplicity of alternative points of view.

In response to what he views as inadequacies in Piaget's model, Turner proposes supplementing the theory with a construct which he labels as 'recentering'. Without denying or being intolerant of the plurality of alternative interpretation available, the subject must, in Turner's view, commit to some personalized perspective that frees him from the obsessional hold of subjective relativism, and permits himself to feel and act in ways that allow a self to differentiate out from his own sea of contemplated alternatives.

Although Turner concludes that 'decentering' and 'recentering' are opposites in a structural sense, he nevertheless regards them as complementary and interdependent rather than conflicting or mutually exclusive. By providing and legitimizing a manner in which decentered cognitive systems can be invested with affective and motivational power, Turner sees a way of redressing certain imbalances ascribed to Piaget's essentially culture free theory and compensating for the depersonalization of decentered structures of reality.

A somewhat similar distinction is provided by Harré and Secord (1972), in their recent discussion of formal social episodes. They distinguish between
open interactional systems which have a game-like structure and social episodes which are largely ceremonial or ritualistic in character. Game-like activities, according to their analysis, involve actions or outcomes which are causally related to the acts which bring them about. When such acts are mentalistic in nature, they may be viewed as the outcome-oriented operations of thought for which Piaget intends his theory to be a formal, structural account. Ceremonial or ritualistic acts, by contrast, are seen by Harré and Secord to bear no necessary causal relation to their resulting outcomes. In such ritual episodes the meaning of the acts is the actions performed in doing them. The act of tipping one’s hat, for example, does not result in an outcome, the action is, rather, in the doing of the act. Such self-contained act-action sequences are thought by Harré and Secord to involve ritualistic action structures which are distinct from those of more game-like action structures, the upshot of which is causally related to the acts performed.

Riegel, in his proposed fifth stage of cognitive development, Turner, in his concept of social recentering, and Harré and Secord, in their concern with ritual action structures all appear to share, along with the writer, a conviction that mature thought entails more than the strict application of abstract, relativistic modes of reasoning. Each propose a complementary system of thought which stresses the more concrete, personalized features of experience and which emphasizes the contribution of specific cultural traditions and affectively meaningful events.

Conclusion

The upshot of these alternative proposals is to challenge the common assumption that abstract, formal, decentered modes of thought, and the relativistic view to which they contribute, are equally well suited to all conceptual tasks, or the only means by which mature understanding can be achieved. To the contrary, each argue that certain conceptual problems are best approached through cognitive modes which feature recentered rather than decentered styles of thought, and which partake of action structures which are more figurative or concrete or ritualized than abstract or relativistic. Art and ceremony, affective experiences, and a sense of selfhood are all, in the judgments of these authors, topics of conceptual concern which derive their special meaning from their rootedness in highly individualized or personalized experience. As such, concern about these issues is in no way advanced by dwelling on their abstract features as by stressing the different faces which
they might present to different observers. To be overly relativistic about one's own affective or esthetic experiences, for example, may serve only to rob them of their special virtue of being one's very own reactions. Similarly, to recognize that one's own immediate sense of rage or of indignation may seem childish or wrong thinking when viewed from other perspectives may be temperate, but it is also a bloodless understanding, lacking the gusto of frank, premasticated conviction. To be charmed, or steadfast, or put in awe, or to stout-heartedly set out on some course of action requires a willingness to set aside, or precede in the face of apparent alternatives, and this, as well as a relativistic vision, is part of what is usually regarded as cognitive maturity.

The conclusion to which these arguments lead is that certain kinds of experience and not others are best dealt with in a decentered and relativistic way, and that abstract modes of reasoning are not the exclusive roots to, or the necessary defining features of intellectual maturity. Viewed in these terms the task of the adolescent is not to learn to process all experience through highly formal and decentered modes of relativistic thought. The problem is, rather, to identify those experiences which are best appreciated from multiple perspectives, while preserving as a legitimate option the right to feel a particular way or become committed to a particular view or goal or course of action in the face of available alternatives. In this sense the vertigo of relativism is not an inescapable insight but a common and sometimes chronic malaise of adolescence. Although short cut remedies are sometimes sought in the quackery of cliquishness, prejudice, and syncretistic abstractions, more legitimate cures are to be found in dialectical solutions which do not sacrifice the particular to the general, but preserve both in an common embrace.

References


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