

Relativity and History

Going back in time is not as easy as we think. Some people today have dreamed of a time when we can actually travel back and visit previous times and then return. Our scientific skill at this time is not capable of giving us this opportunity. That, however, has not prevented us from believing that we can go back in time by studying history. I would suggest that this does not work as well as we might think either. Let me try to explain.

First, let's start with history itself. The dictionary gives several definitions for this noun: "1. *the discipline that records and interprets past events involving human beings*, 2. *all that is remembered of the past as preserved in writing*, 3. *a record or narrative description of past events*." Allow me to explain what may be seen in these various definitions. In the first, we note it as a discipline that not only records but also interprets past events that involve humans. This is probably a statement of what we understand history to be in recent times, accurate records with an interpretation of past human involvement in life events. This concept of history is a more current understanding and cannot include the bulk of human history of the longer past. The second definition alludes to recording history more casually, in a time before history became a discipline, as we now know it. Past happenings were remembered but not copiously written down with immediacy nor with attention to accuracy. The third definition speaks of time when events were just oral stories even before writing existed. When writing began the oral tradition may have continued a pattern until written records became customary. This third definition is reminiscent of the Gospel writings about Jesus. Jesus died around thirty years after the common era, but the Gospels were not written for decades later, from about seventy to over one hundred years after the common era.

Relatively speaking then, history has not always been the disciplined and accurate interpretation of human events that we understand it to be today. Today we can see such problems with history when you consider the recent revelations about the school board in Texas when "editing" what would become the latest volumes for schools in most of America. According to news articles, the conservative members of this board, in May 2010, were able to make sure that their version of history that emphasizes the roles of Capitalist enterprise, the military, Christianity, and modern Republican political figures would be published. [<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/21/education/21textbooks.html>] Another area of similar concern for accuracy is the World Wide Web, the Internet. Despite the fact that the Internet has enormous growing volumes of information, not all of them are authentically reliable. All information today should be checked and double checked to make sure that, when we use this information, we speak as accurately as possible.

Sharing our ideas with one another is appropriate. What is not fine is when we are told that our ideas may not be totally correct or valid, as we have presented them. Discovering which view may be most accurate has often been a controversial process. An example for me is the history of Galileo and his relationship with his church. He was an Italian physicist, mathematician, astronomer and philosopher who played a major role in the Scientific Revolution and, perhaps more than any other single person, was responsible for the birth of modern science. When most people, even other scientists, thought that the earth was the center of the universe in about 1610 he began to say that the Sun was in fact the center of the universe. In a few years opposition came to a head when the Roman Catholic Church declared his teaching to be contrary to their interpretation of the scriptures. "*When he later defended his views in his most famous work, Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems, published in 1632, he was tried by the Inquisition, found "vehemently suspect of heresy", forced to recant, and spent the rest of his life under house arrest.*" [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Galileo_Galilei] Change is difficult for most people and too often it is the case for respected groups like the Roman Catholic Church. Perhaps this is especially true today when knowledge and understanding changes so rapidly.

The Theory of Relativity is rather well known today in the fields of Physics and Cosmology, but might a theory of relativity also apply to our facts and discoveries? By definition, relativity is *"the quality of being relative and having significance only in relation to something else."* The Theory of Relativity, in physics, is that *"space and time are relative concepts rather than absolute concepts"*. In one of his recent lectures, The Rt. Rev. John Shelby Spong made this statement; *"There is no such thing, I asserted, as unchanging truth since truth must always be expressed in ever-changing human propositional statements. Whenever any understanding or perception of reality is put into words, these words are captured by the level of knowledge and even the always subjective words of the one speaking and, thus, inevitably that person's words share in a time-bound and time warped view of the world. There is no possibility that human propositional statements could ever become eternally true."* [from an article distributed on December 10, 2010, "An Adventure at a Law School" in A New Christianity for a New World series] I think this same understanding of relativity should be applied concerning statements or words of history when comparing statements or words used today. I also believe that propositional statements can never become eternally true, similar to the notion in the laws of science the same notion should apply in our moral ethical codes.

The laws of Physics, for instance, have certainty about them because, *"Laws of nature are observable. Scientific laws are empirical, describing observable patterns. Empirical laws are typically conclusions based on repeated scientific experiments and simple observations, over many years, and which have become accepted universally within the scientific community."* [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Physical_law] *"Words have precise meanings in science. For example, 'theory', 'law', and 'hypothesis' don't all mean the same thing. Outside of science, you might say something is 'just a theory', meaning it's supposition that may or may not be true. In science, a theory is an explanation that generally is accepted to be true."* [<http://chemistry.about.com/od/chemistry101/a/lawtheory.htm>] *"A scientific theory is a type of inductive theory, in that its content (i.e. empirical data) could be expressed within some formal system of logic whose elementary rules (i.e. scientific laws) are taken as axioms. In a deductive theory, any sentence which is a logical consequence of one or more of the axioms is also a sentence of that theory."* [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scientific_theory] I hope this makes it absolutely clear that a theory in science is a fact as surely as anything can be fact!

"In the humanities, one finds theories whose subject matter does not (only) concern empirical data, but rather ideas. Such theories are in the realm of philosophical theories as contrasted with scientific theories. A philosophical theory is not necessarily scientifically testable through experiment." [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scientific_theory] Here is where we begin to see the basic difference with most of our thinking outside of science. Subjects outside the realm of science do not have such observable rigorous testing and retesting of thoughtful propositions so that they are unable to claim the same empirical veracity. Correspondingly however, most propositions and ideas from earlier centuries are also updated and or discarded when they become outmoded with current knowledge and understanding. There is an attempt to keep up-to-date the philosophical theories of life concerning development and growth toward greater maturity and well being. When considering principles and laws that come from earlier times shouldn't we also follow a similar continuum as we develop our progressive thoughts and ideas for today? Since we define a principle as *"a basic truth or law or assumption"* and regard law as *"a rule or body of rules of conduct inherent in human nature and essential to or binding upon human society"*, we need to certify their integrity.

While science has experiments and observations that facilitate their determinations, they still have differences of opinions among them. Realizing that the humanities do not have or claim such empirical observations, why should we be surprised that there might be more apparent discrepancies? The fact that we have so much agreement about principles that have accumulated to set forth basic credentials for our ethics today we might be appropriately pleased. Here is such a list:

Non-malficence: Do not harm yourself or other people.

Beneficence: Help yourself and other people.

Autonomy: Allow rational individuals to make free and informed choices.

Justice: Treat people fairly: treat equals equally, unequals unequally.

Utility: Maximize the ratio of benefits to harms for all people.

Fidelity: Keep your promises and agreements.

Honesty: Do not lie, defraud, deceive or mislead.

Privacy: Respect personal privacy and confidentiality.

(Resnik, David B., "The Ethics of Science: An Introduction". Routledge, New York 1998.)

With the relativity of history then, in all areas of life, we live forward to a new day one day at a time. *"The moral life, then, is not simply a matter of following moral rules and of learning to apply them to specific situations. The moral life is also a matter of trying to determine the kind of people we should be and of attending to the development of character within our communities and ourselves."* [<http://www.scu.edu/ethics/practicing/decision/ethicsandvirtue.html>] We want virtue and ethics to encourage and foster a better humanity and, with that prowess, enable a better world in which to live.

Relatively speaking then, history is something from which we should learn if we do not wish to repeat it. History is an important foundation to one's future life that is in the past. We all know that change is inevitable, that is what makes every day and every moment new. How sad it is when anyone tries to live in the past instead of living in the present with the excitement of tomorrow. This reminds me of a line written by an American poet, James Russel Lowell, who writes, *"New occasions teach new duties; time makes ancient good uncouth; They must upward still and onward who would keep abreast of truth."* We must keep in mind that truth is never stagnant. When we try to pretend that it is we also become uncouth - *"lacking refinement or cultivation or taste"*. Furthermore, to quote a Yiddish proverb, *"a half truth is a whole lie."* A vibrant and complete life requires transparency and truthfulness and as Jesus said, *"the truth will set you free"*.

Truth then, when spoken or written, is relative to the time in which it is expressed. As times change so do concept and understanding move forward. It is true in everyone's life as Saint Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13:11, *"When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me."* It is similar to that which is expressed in the mathematical equation of the Theory of Relativity wherein energy and matter remain equal according to the movement of the speed of light squared. All of our universe, including the aging of each one of us, is related to the time and space of our maturity. Similarly, as one grows older, time seems to move faster than what we perceived when we were young. As the years of time move forward we learn more at a faster pace than in the century prior. If we do not keep up, we feel the pressure of this change and sometimes wish that we could return to an easier time. Because time never stands still this becomes an impossible dream. There is no turning back to a former time or century and therefore we are forced to leave it all behind and move forward toward another day. The past is gone and we must put it aside. Learning from the past will help us improve today and support us to a better tomorrow.

I believe that religious people have difficulty acknowledging relativity and history. This does not imply that religious belief in older centuries was not appropriate for its time in history but it must be recognized that it cannot claim the same validity today. If this concept were considered more often perhaps religious fundamentalism would diminish. It should be very clear that words used to define truth in former centuries might not bear that same truth today. As noted earlier, truth is always changing as time moves forward and, like everything else in the universe, the words used in former times must be redefined or new words will be necessary to restate that truth for today. Even if we use the same words we are forced to realize our new understanding of those words. We may still say that the sun rises, but we actually recognize that the sun no

longer is understood to revolve around the earth. Today's understanding is clear that, while the sun rises above the horizon, it is because the earth is round and spinning every twenty-four hours as it moves about the sun. We see that time itself is never the same everywhere at once but changes according to distance and speed. Even our days and evenings grow relatively longer and shorter in the cycle of the Spring and Winters solstice. This fundamental truth about the universe and its inhabitants is that change is inevitable and sure. No one can be a genuinely correct without applying this fundamental understanding of life in our universe.

Relativity and history have at least two primary areas that may remain fairly stable in their evolution in the course of time, scientific laws and moral principles. To pretend they can never change will cause them to be out of date and ineffective since everything else changes. In the equation of Relativity it seems to be the magic of the speed of light squared that drives everything regarding energy and matter. To be alive, relevant and consistent we must realize there is nothing wrong with change because change is essential to life. Recognizing that time never stays the same we acknowledge that change is natural and necessary. We must realize that without time changing us we diminish and die. I am sure that you know the saying, "use it or loose it". In every hospital today, no matter how sick or how extensive the operation, they attempt to get you out of bed and moving about as quickly as possible. Clearly movement and change are necessary to a healthy life.

I close with a thought of mine about God and light. As Christians we speak of God as Light, "*This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.*" (1 John 1:5 NIV) While I do not qualify as a scientist or a theologian, I enjoy dabbling in Quantum Physics and have personally developed a concept of God as that light in creation in a unique way. While I have no evidence or "proof" for such an opinion I do sense this mystical activity or presence in my own life. I personally have no need to even prove the existence of God but I do recognize something that has been a part of me to optimize my productivity for living well. I wrote a paper on this several years ago and, should you be interested, you may find it here: <http://janddhealth.intuitwebsites.com/ArtRelativityofGodandPeople.pdf>

May the caring peace of God that goes beyond human comprehension, declare God's love for you in your heart and mind as we see it in Jesus Christ; and may the blessing of God, loving Creator, gracious Liberator, and life giving Spirit keep you steadfast now and always. Amen.