

The Spirit of Inquiry in Conflict by Julia Menard, B.A., Certificate in Conflict Resolution

"Perspectivism encourages humility, since each perspective is limited and only part of the truth... None of which is to suggest that perspectivism is the same thing as relativism, as though I have the truth and you have yours. There is one paramount reality out there. We must collaborate in order to understand it better." ... Nathan Harter, Clearings in the Forest: On the Study of Leadership.

A word I've been enjoying lately is: "perspectivism." Through this word, I've noticed how conflict can become an opportunity to gather more information – to engage in a "spirit of inquiry."

To be able to see how conflict could be an opportunity for inquiry, let's start with looking a bit more closely at perspectivism – and in particular, how it is not relativism.

According to the Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion (Resse, 1980), perspectivism is a term meaning "every point of view is in some sense true and offers a valuable and unique perspective of the universe".

That sounds an awful like relativism, however, relativism believes we **each** have **the** truth and rejects the idea of an absolute truth: "There is no unique truth, no unique objective reality" (Ernest Gellner, Relativism and the Social Sciences).

This is a key distinction. If, as a relativist, I believe we each are entitled to our own perspectives, that leaves me with no appetite to find out about your perspective. I've got mine – you've got yours. Let's agree to disagree!

However, perspectivism is more rewarding than that. It's an idea that has been around a long time and grows on you with time.

In Indian philosophy:
"It manifests itself as an apparent paradox in Indian thought - which believes, on the one hand, in the universality of modes of thinking, worship, art, and so forth, which all strive to attain one truth. Yet, on the other hand, it maintains that each individual has his/her own perspective on truth. This doctrine is known as syadvada, which means "up to a point."
(<http://www.db.dk/jni/lifeboat/Positions/Perspectivism.htm>).

Syadvada! I'd never heard of that word before doing this research on this delightful little word "perspectivism." What exactly is Syadvada? As outlined in this website: (<http://www.jainpushp.org/syadvada.htm>), it means:

"Absolute truth is the sum total of all the different-view points (more than one point of view). Absolute truth cannot be grasped from any particular view point alone.

Let us have an example. Five blind persons were asked to touch, feel and explain the elephant that was standing near by. The first person who was standing near the tail of the elephant said it is like a rope. The second man who touched the legs of the elephant said it is like pillars. The third person who was standing in the middle and had touched the belly of the elephant stated that it looks like a drum. The next person who touched the ears of the elephant said that it is the blade of a fan like thing and the last one who touched the trunk said it is some thing like hose pipe (flexible tube). Thus if we consider the attributes individually we can not draw the shape of an elephant but when we join all the statements the shape of elephant emerges."

I'd heard that fable before but had not realized how it held at its core the philosophy of perspectivism.

If one adopts the belief of "perspectivism" in engaging in conflict – we can more easily come from a place of true inquiry.

For example, as I find myself getting caught up in yet another difference, am I looking to prove my perspective is the right (and only) one? From a perspectivist point of view, and in the face of the elephant story, this is like finding all kinds of reason why the elephant (truth) is really a hose pipe (my perspective on truth).

When faced with conflict, can I become curious because I want to find out more of "the truth"? Can I become a "lover of truth" as Gandhi has said?

What an exciting invitation perspectivism offers! It opens up a whole new world of curiosity, framed as this search for truth.

Conflict becomes an invitation to search out more of the truth as it resides in me, and in you - and in others.

"Why is uninhibited wonder something we generally restrict to children? If doing good inquiry is at the heart of organizational development, why then so little talk of things like awe, curiosity, veneration, surprise, delight, amazement, and wonder -- in short, everything that serves to infuse what OD has traditionally referred to as the 'spirit of inquiry.'" ... David Cooperride

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