

Postmodern Thoughts on Relativism: A Critical Study

Dr. Asha Nimali Fernando, Senior Lecturer
Department of Philosophy and Psychology
University of Sri Jayewardenepura
Sri Lanka

Abstract

Relativism is a multi-faceted conceptual phenomenon that ranges over a vast array of areas of human inquiry. From the beginning of human civilization to the modern metropolitan society man and his basic norms were based and developed depending on the nature of society and its changes from period to period. This fact of relative and dependent development of normative ideologies was, perhaps, the foundation on which the relativist philosophizing might have germinated. In an attempt of developing a general statement of what relativism is, it may be useful to examine some definitions of relativism. Michael Krausz mentions that 'there are dual thesis on the concept of relativism that is truth, goodness, or beauty, for example, are relative- relative to some frame of reference; and no absolute standards to adjudicate between competing reference frames exist'.¹ This definition brings up several philosophical questions. For instance, it arouses curiosity on the exact assertion of relativism? Does relativism apply to all domains of inquiry? Does it apply to all claims of truth, goodness, and beauty or to some but not all such values? Does it apply to what there is, or to our knowledge of what there is? What counts as a reference frames? In this sense relativism seems to cover a vast area of human knowledge. The term "relativism" has, of course, been used in a bewildering variety of senses and it is not our aim to discuss each and every one of those sense here. Rather, we would identify what is the basic notion on relativism as an access to an in-depth study of the concept of moral relativism in postmodern philosophical debate. This study is an evaluation of the postmodern philosophical ideals on relativism in comparative manner. The methodology of this research will be conceptual analysis therefore the qualitative methods is involved in this study.

Key words: Relativism, postmodern thinking, truth, beauty.

Introduction

The concept of relativism has many faces because it has a focus on a vast area of human knowledge. It is not an easy task to provide accurate classification in relation to this complicated concept. However, in attempting a philosophical analysis on various forms of relativism, different philosophers have proposed classifications of relativism mainly focusing the relativized object and context referred to. According to Susan Haack:

Meaning is relative to language., Reference is relative to conceptual schemes., Truth is relative to theory; Metaphysical commitment is relative to scientific paradigm; Ontology is relative to version,

¹Edit. Krausz, Michael. (2010). *Relativism: A Contemporary Anthology*, Colombia University Press, p.1

depiction, and description; Reality is relative to culture; Epistemic values are relative to community; Moral values are relative to individuals; Aesthetic values are relative to historical periods.²

Based on the above domain's relativism come to us with different faces. According to the Haack, on the ground of above domains many forms of relativism can be identified, such as, cognitive relativism, epistemic relativism, moral relativism, aesthetic relativism, conceptual relativism, cultural relativism etc. Cognitive relativism is the view that what is true or false, rational, or irrational, valid, or invalid can vary from one society, culture, or historical epoch to another and that we have no trans-cultural or a-historical methods or standard for adjudicating between the conflicting norms and practices. Relativism about truth and relativism of logic is the strongest form of cognitive relativism. Moral relativism claims that the truth or falsity, the appropriateness or inappropriateness of an ethical belief is relative to its socio-historical background, and therefore, moral beliefs cannot be assessed independently of their social framework. Moral relativists point to the existence of diverse moral systems and maintain that moral values are grounded on societal conventions, historical conditions, and metaphysical beliefs etc., which vary from one society or social grouping to another and argue that there are no neutral standards available to adjudicate between these competing claims.

Cultural relativism, inspired by the work of social anthropologists who conducted fieldwork among the different tribal groups, argued that there can be no such thing as culturally neutral criterion for adjudicating between conflicting claims arising from different cultural contexts. There is so much of diversity of taste in the realm of aesthetics, of what people believe as ugly or beautiful. This seems to imply that being beautiful or beauty itself is simply relative to a person's own preference or desire. The relativism of aesthetics is based on such contentions. Ontological relativism is a type of relativism that may seem far removed from one's normal everyday experiences. Ontological or metaphysical relativism is a version of relativism where the very nature of reality or specific things that are thought to be real derive their existence or their natures from some activity of the human mind or beliefs or practices from within a particular culture.

Conceptual relativists argue that the world does not present itself to us ready-made or ready-carved, rather we supply the different ways of categorizing and conceptualizing it. Our knowledge of the world is mediated through a language, a theory or scheme and there is a plurality of such mediatory schemes. Conceptual relativism, when appropriately specified, can entail cognitive relativism, for it could be argued that acts of cognition are shaped, if not determined, by the conceptual scheme or

² Haack Susan. (1996). *'Deviant Logic: Some Philosophical Issues*, Cambridge University Press, p.5

framework within which they take place. Even though those branches of relativism exist independently interlink of this different aspect of relativism is evident. Therefore, in our exercise of depicting a clear picture of moral relativism within the postmodern thinking.

Relativism in Postmodern Thinking

The philosophical movement of postmodernism has positively influenced to develop the concept of relativism in current day philosophy. The Term ‘postmodern’ was first used by the architect Joseph Hudunt, in the title of his 1945 article ‘the post-modern house’. The term became popular in 1970s and within the 1980s this term spread the other areas like arts, literature, and political theory and philosophy. Anthony Appiah defines postmodernism in philosophy in following words:

Postmodernism is the rejection of the mainstream consensus from Descartes through Kant to logical positivism on foundationalism (there is one route to knowledge, which is exclusivism in epistemology) and of metaphysical realism (there is one truth, which is exclusivism in ontology), each underwritten by a unitary notion of reason; it thus celebrates such figures as Nietzsche (no metaphysical realist) and Dewey (no foundationalism). The modernity that is opposed here can thus be Cartesian (France), Kantian (in Germany), and logical positivist (in America).³

But the above definition is a general one as it has not highlighted in depth what is post modernism - because postmodernist philosophers do not simply reject traditional philosophical doctrines such as realism or foundationalism; rather, they attempt to show that all systematic thought and metaphysical system-building involve hierarchical presuppositions, which one lay bare, undermine themselves or deconstruct. It has become a truism among many analytic philosophers that postmodernism is nothing but a jumble of incoherent, self-refuting relativistic claims. As we shall see, however, not all postmodernists’ philosophers explicitly adopt relativism as a doctrine, or state it as a thesis, in their approach to questions of truth; objectivity and reason makes their position often indistinguishable from some form of relativism. However, we can single out some main philosophical currents that contribute to the establishment of a relativistic ethos in the humanities in the past twenty years. The key ideas of postmodernism were propagated by several post-structuralist French Philosophers in the 1970s - prominent among them Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Jen-Francois Lyotard. The postmodernists trace their intellectual genealogy to Marx, Heidegger, Saussure and above all, Nietzsche.

Nietzsche’s concept of perspectivism and the Linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure were the greatest source of inspiration to postmodern theorists⁴. According to Saussure, meaning in a

³ Appiah, A. (1992). *In My Father’s House*, Oxford University Press, p. 142

⁴ Putnam, H. (1992). *Renewing Philosophy*, Cambridge Press, p. 125

language is given only by way of contrast to other meanings in the same language; ‘in language there are only differences’⁵. Language, he tells us, should be understood, and analyzed in terms of sets of binary oppositions (man/women, up/down, Large/small, etc.) and he uses binary oppositions such as signifier and signified and language and parole to explain the workings of language itself. Different languages, however, do not necessarily have the same set of oppositions or contrasts and therefore they will not express the same meanings.⁶ This view makes significant support to structuralist anthropologist Claude Levi- Strauss to see this concept beyond the language and applied it to the study of human societies.

Steve Fuller says that ‘postmodernism emerged in the late 1970s to capture the changed character of the sciences in the 20th century, which called into question the idea that the organized pursuit of knowledge has a unique and natural course of development that, in turn, can provide the basis for the general improvement of humanity, typically in the form of rational statecraft... The term *enlightenment* is increasingly used for the tendency in the history of western thought that postmodernism is said to have undermined’.⁷ In this statement we can see postmodernism scorns the quest for universal values, cognitive and moral, as a manifestation of the will to power masquerading as objectivity. The enlightenment is seen as a monolithic, authoritarian movement closely allied with Western imperialism, and colonialism, while postmodernism is an ally in the fight for emancipation from tyrannies of all sorts.

Michel Foucault on the Debate on Relativism

One of the major figures in postmodernist thought is Michel Foucault. Foucault denies the role of truth as an objective and neutral criterion for interpretation of texts. Truth, according to him, is always located in particular social relations; in this he is following Nietzsche’s lead in questioning the value of truth and its problematic link with power. According to Foucault, Nietzsche is the philosopher to uncover the essential connections between power and philosophical discourse. Nietzsche argues that it is now impossible to believe that ‘in the rending of the veil, truth remains truthful; we have lived long

⁵ Saussure, F. (1974). *Course in General Linguistics*, London, p. 120

⁶ Baghramian, M. (2004). *The Problem of Philosophy: Relativism*, Routledge Publisher, p. 80

⁷ Fuller, M. (2000). *The Re-enchantment of Science: A Fit End to the Science Wars*, in K.M.Ashman and P.S Baringer, (ed.) *After the Science Wars*, London, p.3

enough not to be taken in’⁸. Truth is undoubtedly the sort of error that cannot be refuted because it was hardened into an unalterable form in the long baking process of history.⁹

According to Foucault the will to (hold to) truth is always bounded up with particular social, cultural, economic, and political hegemonies, and philosophers discussing traditional ideas of truth inevitably share the presuppositions of such power structures. Reason and rationality are one aspect of the attempt to dominate. The historical analysis of reason and knowledge shows that, ‘all knowledge rests upon injustice that there is no right, not even in the act of knowing, to truth or a foundation for truth and that the instinct for knowledge is malicious’¹⁰. In different historical and political periods, claims to power, and hence to knowledge and truth, take different forms. Each society or locus power generates its own truths and moral imperatives. Foucault singles out the renaissance, the classical age or the seventeenth and eighteenth and the modern age or the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as three key historical periods when distinct conceptions of knowledge or ‘episteme’ were produced. These conceptions, in turn, were based on implicit but distinct views on how ‘the order’ or the relationship between things is construed. For example, the renaissance emphasized the relationship of resemblance, while the classical age prioritized the relationship of identity. Conceptions of truth would vary according to ‘the order of things’ or the historically constituted epistemes¹¹. Foucault’s views may, properly speaking, be seen as historicist as he relativizes knowledge and truth to historical epochs. Foucault is one of main character who makes special attention to the Enlightenment project of prioritizing reason and rationality and of the subsequent emphasis on the scientific methods as the most secure was of attaining objective knowledge. The Enlightenment is seen as a source of the ills of modern rational-liberal cultures. In *Discipline and Punish* (1975) Foucault argues that modern sciences, particularly in the form of social sciences, is an instrument of social control to such an extent that its very constitution is inseparable from the exercise of social and political power. Thus, the revolt against the ideas of objectivity, truth, reason, or the ideal of the Enlightenment becomes a revolutionary political act rather than a simple intellectual exercise.

Derrida’s ideology on Relativism

Derrida is another major figure who made significant contributions to develop postmodern thoughts. He has launched a full-scale attack on Western metaphysics or ‘the metaphysics of presence’.

⁸ Nietzsche Contra Wagner:99

⁹ Foucault, M. (1977). *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*, trans. D.Bouchard and S.Sherry, in D.Bouchard (ed). Langauge, Counter- Memory, Practise, Ithaca, NY. P.143

¹⁰ Ibid.p.160

¹¹ Further information sees Foucault. (1970). *The Order of the Things*, trans.A. Sheridan, London.

His favorite terminological innovations, ‘*difference*’, ‘*trace*’, ‘*logocentrism*’, ‘*phonologism*’, ‘*supplementarity*’ have become signposts in the postmodernist rejection of the Enlightenment ideas of the authority of reason and the possibility of context-transcendence. As crucial step in the denunciation of metaphysics is Derrida’s rejection of classical logic, which, by emphasizing binary thinking and the law of excluded middle, as he claims, excludes difference. And prevalent thinking within binary oppositions gives the illusion that there are hierarchies of moral and epistemic values, and such hierarchies reflect foundational or metaphysical truths. The privileging of speech over writing (phonologism) and of absence over presence are examples of such logocentric thought. The laws of binary logic, the principle of identity (P=P), the laws of non-contradiction – (P&P) and excluded middle (Pv-P) suppress ‘the logic of supplementarity’, where ‘supplementarity’, he claims, ‘is nothing, neither a presence nor an absence, is neither a substance nor an essence of man’.¹² And ‘we designate the impossibility of formulating the movement of supplementarity within the classical logic, within the logic of identity’.¹³ Similarly, it seems to be a virtue of the concept of trace that it ‘is in fact contradictory and not acceptable within the logic of identity’¹⁴. It is difficult to know that what to make of these, and other similar, statements. Derrida, like many other French philosophers, seems to take pleasure in paradoxical and extreme formulations *pour epater la bourgeoisie*, and yet he frequently qualifies his more extreme pronouncements to such an extent that he renders them almost trivial.

Derrida, infamously, announces that there is nothing outside the text, by which he seems to mean that we are not able to access reality directly without language and the context within which it is embedded. Within language, no one vocabulary is privileged; we are not able to prefer one set of interpretations over another, because we have no grounds for such a decision.¹⁵ Language is infinite ‘play’, and meaning is created afresh in the act of reading a text. The meaning of a text is at least partly fashioned by the reader and is dependent of the context of reading. There is then no room left for the idea of an ultimately correct or legitimate interpretation. Derrida has objected to what he sees as misunderstandings arising from careless readings of such remarks. For instance, he complains that the idea of undecidability as complete free play was used by American literary theorists in ways that did

¹² Derrida, J, (1967). *Of Grammatology*, trans.G.C.Spivak, Baltimore, MD, Johnes Hopkins University Press, p. 244

¹³ Ibid. p. 94

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 61

¹⁵ Hekman, S.J. (1986). *Hermeneutics and the Sociology of knowledge*, Oxford, p. 19

not reflect his original use of the word ‘*jeu*’.¹⁶ He complains that his remark ‘there is nothing outside the text’ is singularly misused. He says:

The phrase, which for some has become a sort of slogan, in general so badly understood, of deconstruction (‘there is nothing outside the text’), means nothing else, there is nothing outside context. In this form, which says exactly the same thing, the formula would doubtless have been less shocking. I am not certain that it would have provided more to think about...what I call ‘text’ implies all the structures call ‘real’, ‘economic’, ‘historical’, ‘socio-institutional’, in short: all possible references. Another way of recalling once again is that ‘there is nothing outside the text’. That does not mean that references are suspended, denied, or enclosed in a book, as people have claimed, or have been naïve enough to believe and to have accused me of believing. But it does mean that every referent, all reality has the structure of a deferential trace, and that one cannot refer to this ‘real’ except in an interpretative experience.¹⁷

According to the above statements Derrida's seeming involvement on relativism becomes evident. In one hand it is clear that he seems to be advancing a version of anti-realism or the claim that we cannot have access to a mind-independent reality and that all our descriptions of ‘what their is’ bear the mark of our conceptual schemes and interpretative frameworks coupled with conceptual relativism arising from the belief that there exists a multiplicity of such networks. In other hand he seems to be emphasizing the context-dependence of all our judgments and the absence of a context-neutral criterion for adjudicating between them. But Derrida himself has insisted in several places that it is a ‘radical’ misunderstanding to see him as a relativist. Derrida state that.

I am shocked by the debate around this question of relativism. What is relativism? Are you a relativist simply because you say, for instance, the other is the other, and that every other is other than other? I want to pay attention to the singularity of the other, the singularity of the situation, the singularity of the language, is that relativism?. relativism is a doctrine, which has its own history in which there are only points of view with no absolute necessity, or no reference to absolutes. That is the opposite of what I have to say. Relativism is, in classical philosophy, a way of referring to the absolute and denying it. It states that there are only cultures and that there is no pure science of truth. I have never said such a thing. Neither have I ever used the word relativism.¹⁸

Derrida himself wishes to dissociate not just from relativism but also from the postmodernist movement. But he has, emphasized that in order to give an account of the logocentric and phonocentric tradition, expressions like ‘epoch’ and ‘historical genealogy’ must be removed ‘from all relativism’¹⁹ and has supported Husserl’s criticism of relativism and historicism, arguing: ‘the critique of historicism in all its forms seems to me indispensable’²⁰. Derrida’s views and his criticisms on

¹⁶ Derrida, J. (1988). *The Ear of the Other; Autobiography*, Transference, Translation: Texts and Discussions with Jacques Derrida, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, p. 115

¹⁷ Ibid: pp. 136-148

¹⁸ Derrida, J. (1999), ‘*Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility*’, in M.Dooley and R.Kearney(ed) , (1999) *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*, London: Routledge, p.78

¹⁹ Derrida, J. (1997), *Of Grammatology*, trans.G.C.Spivak, Baltimore, MD, Johns Hopkins University Press, p.14

²⁰ Derrida, J. (1981), *Positions, Trans*, A.Bass, Chicago University Press, pp. 104-5

relativism and other debating philosophical ideals gave massive support to see the different aspects of relativism in modern-day philosophers.

Jean- Francois Lyotard on the Debate on Relativism

Jean-Francois Lyotard is the third major figure in postmodernist thoughts. Lyotard has railed against what he calls ‘Grand Narratives’, or the ideology of Total –Theory, particularly the Enlightenment accounts of a universal human nature and historical progress. He defines ‘*postmodern*’ as ‘incredulity toward metanarratives’ which he believes is ‘the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies.’²¹The modern legitimates itself by appealing to a meta-discourse, a grand narrative such as that of the Enlightenment. It is unwarranted metaphysical hubris, however, to think that theories or narratives refer to an independent reality. Rather, their referent is simple other narratives or theories. All grand narratives or meta-discourse-Marxist, Kantian, Hegelian, Enlightenment-which were presented as self-validating and universal perspectives and which were the defining feature of *the modern*, have been shown to be perspectival and culture-bound. Instead, the emphasis should be on the multiplicity of irreducible texts, discourses, practices, and interpretations. Borrowing Wittgenstein’s key idea of multiplicity of language-game, he maintains that different narratives are not amenable to reduction into a single overarching system of meaning, for language-games are ‘heteromorphous, subject to heterogeneous sets of pragmatic rules.’²²The value placed on the idea of consensus within various language-games is also suspect and outmoded. The recognition of the heteromorphous nature of language-games leads to the conclusion that: ‘Any consensus of the rules defining a game and the “moves” playable within it *must* be local, in other words, agreed on by the present players and subject to eventual cancellation’²³. Moral ideals, such as justice, should be defined provisionally and locally in the context of the rules specific to the game at hand. There is no neutral standpoint to assess the varied and conflicting claims made by this multiplicity of viewpoints.

According to Lyotard, all we can do is to avoid any attempt to override the specific interests, motives, or criteria of judgments inherent within those narratives. In other words, no one is ever able to act as an objective independent arbiter of the truth or reasonableness of a claim. That means, there is a good deal of disagreement over the ‘correct’ interpretation of these seminal postmodern writers. Not least, because the frequently willful obscurity of their styles and their unwillingness to explain or

²¹ Lyotard, J. F. (1984), *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi, Manchester University Press. P. xxiii f.

²² Ibid: p.66

²³ Ibid :.pp 66-7

expand their views in terms other than the neologism coined by them. However, what is beyond doubt is the impact of the work of French poststructuralists on relativistic currents of thinking in the humanities in English-speaking countries. For instance, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, one of the main exponents of postmodernism in American academia, proclaims: ‘the credibility of all beliefs, including those currently regarded as true, reasonable, self-evident, and so forth, is equally contingent: in other words, equally the products of conditions (experiential, contextual, institutional, and so forth) that are fundamentally variable and, to some extent, always unpredictable and uncontrollable’²⁴. Hence, no judgment could be objective in a context-independent or subject-transcendent sense.²⁵ The relativistic implications of deconstruction are also evident in the writings of historiographers such as Hayden White who has claimed that ‘There is an inexpugnable relativity in every representation of historical phenomena. The relativity of representation is a function of the language used to describe and thereby constitute past events as possible objects of explanation and understanding’²⁶. Postmodernists deny the distinction between fictive, poetic, and imaginary styles of writing on one hand and on the other hand, scientific, historical, theoretic, and sociological claims. And consequently, it has no room for assessing truth-claims based on such considerations as evidence or logical consistency.

Furthermore, by linking the idea of truth and objectivity with relationships of power, domination, and control, they obliterate the traditional distinction between reason and coercion, and simultaneously assign an emancipatory role to their approach that, in liberal circles, has made their message difficult to resist. Postmodernism has proven particularly recalcitrant to arguments by analytic philosophers for the very presuppositions of rational argument-objectivity, truth, consistency, logic, etc., are questioned by them. Recent debates about truth and objectivity between Richard Rorty and his critics, for instance, have sharpened our grasp of what is involved in traditional views of truth and knowledge. As Robert Nozick argues, ‘even someone who rejects postmodernist theories can welcome their existence, for they force us to look anew at some fundamental notions -a quintessential philosophers’ task’.²⁷ Those disputes on postmodernism, at least, indirectly opened new ways to the debate of relativism.

Stanley Fish pointed out the social aspect of the relativism in postmodern society. Because of the development of media and other public communication, cultural and political plurality has made

²⁴ Smith, B.H, (1997), *Belief and Resistance: Dynamics of Contemporary Intellectual Controversy*, Cambridge University Press., p. xvi-xvii

²⁵ Ibid., p. 6

²⁶ White, H. (1977), ‘*Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth*’, in K. Jenkins (ed.) *Postmodern History Reader*, London, p. 392

²⁷ Nozick, R. (2001), *Invariances: The Structure of the Objective World*, Cambridge University press, p.55

man and his social environment broad and vast, so that all modern-day tragedy meant to implication of relativism or postmodernism. Stanley Fish has also shed interesting light on the postmodern understanding of relativism. He says:

If by relativism one means the practice of putting yourself in your adversary's shoes, not to wear them as your own but in order to have some understanding (for short of approval) of why someone else - in our view, a deluded someone - might want to wear them, then relativism will not and should not end because it is simply another name for serious thought.²⁸

Fish's definition of relativism turns a heady and radical doctrine into a variant of the fair minded but common place intension to adopt an unbiased approach to interpreting other people's beliefs and actions or to fallibilities. If this is relativism, then we are all relativists or ought to be. In the light of recent events, postmodernism may appear to be a transitory intellectual fad, but it would be a mistake to think that with the demise of postmodernism relativism will also disappear from the intellectual scene. As we shall see, relativism is a varied and multifaceted doctrine which is not dependent for its motivation and justification on cultural theorists.

Conclusion

In this study we characterized relativism as the philosophical position that holds what is right or wrong and good or bad is not absolute but variable and relative, depending on the person, circumstance, or social situation. Relativism used to cover a vast area of human knowledge. So that it has identified many faces or different types of relativism, such as Epistemic, Conceptual, cultural, Truth, Aesthetics etc. This study examines the philosophical views from Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Jen-Francois Lyotard. Derrida's views and his criticisms on relativism and other debating philosophical ideals gave massive support to see the different aspects of relativism in modern-day philosophers. As well, because of the development of media and other public communication, cultural and political plurality has made man and his social environment broad and vast, so that all modern-day tragedy meant to implication of relativism or postmodernism.

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²⁸ Fish, S. (2002). 'Do not Blame Relativism': <http://www.comunitarian%20netwrok.org/>, p.27-31

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