The Social and Moral Implications of Epistemological Relativism: A Study in Postmodernism

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Abstract Before the close of the 20th century, skepticism about the notions of truth and fact had come to its apogee; thence was the emergence of post-modernist thoughts anticipated by Nietzsche which central tenets include: an aesthetic attitude towards the world that sees it as a '*tezt*'; the denial of facts and essences; the celebration of the plurality of interpretations and of the fragmented self as well as the downgrading of reason and politicization of discourse. Against objectivism, therefore, post-modernism thrives on *perspectivism* and relativism—a system on which this article is predicated. Specifically, it explains that any epistemological construct which arrogates primacy to and adulates the place of universalism has serious implications on an ideal ethical theory. Thus by adopting a critical methodology to highlight, analyze and adulates the basic tenets of post-modernism, this work espouses its implications for ethics and morality. Accordingly, the work discovers that despite the adverse advances in communication technology leading up to what might seem an emergent 'world culture', every effective moral standard is a reflection of the values, norms, tradition, and ethos in some culture: time and space. It, consequently, recommends that each society ought work out its enduring or well thought-out but rational pedestal upon which its moral ethos could be justifiable/defendable and evaluated.

Keywords: **Ethics, epistemology, morality, postmodernism, relativism, society.**

I. Introduction

By the late 20th century, skepticism about the notions of truth and fact had come to its apogee; thence was the emergence of post-modernist thoughts anticipated by Frederick

Nietzsche, which central tenets include: an aesthetic attitude towards the world that sees it as a 'text'; the denial of facts; the denial of essences; the celebration of the plurality of interpretations and of the fragmented self as well as the downgrading of reason and politicization of discourse. Thus against objectivism, therefore, post-modernism revives and adulates the place of perspectivism and relativism in any human discourse. If this observation is anything to go by, then this work is predicated on one axiom: that any epistemological construct which arrogates primacy to and adulates (or which opposes) the place of universalism has serious implications on sociopolitical and ethical theory. Hence, there is the need to highlight the basic tenets of post-modernism, and such is the imperative in the following pages of description and analysis—which shall enable us to point out the implications for ethics and morality. This would be achieved once the bounds of epistemological construct are determined.

II. Post-Modernism and Epistemological Relativism

Epistemology, the human quest for the theory of knowledge, is involved in every area of nature and beyond. Its concerns itself with, *inter allia*, the origin, nature and scope (the place of experience or reason in generating) of knowledge; the relationship between knowledge, opinion/belief and certainty; how the new conceptualizations of the world and the changing forms of knowledge evolve; and with the nature of truth. And approaches to these questions take empiricist or rationalist base; that is, either foundationalism or analysis on coherentism/holistic account.

According to Rorty, it might seem that the whole business of 'accounting for' knowledge, of showing our beliefs about the external world can be justified must presuppose that there are certain 'privileged representations'—certain beliefs not themselves in need of justification ('the given' in other words) (Rorty, 1979). If our aim is the philosophical validation of doubtful beliefs, then surely, we need some indubitable beliefs to serve as premises in the validations, to provide a foundation for the superstructure of those beliefs. For the post-modernist, such is what is inferable from the ancient and the Cartesian traditions of foundationalism (Papineau, 1981/83). Truly, traditional philosophers, ever since Plato, tried to discover or establish the ultimate foundations of knowledge, to provide grounding for absolutely certain truth. Most classical responses were experience-base, and the medieval thinkers mystified and rooted that ground on God. Centuries later, analytic philosophers, by contrast, scaled down the enterprise of philosophy to the more modest objective of discovering the foundations of meaningful language, instituting objectivity and verifiability of claims as the yardstick for knowing. Thus several traditional issues were simply eliminated from the agenda and province of philosophy. Although this was as revolutionary as was Socratic adulation of knowledge and moral justice, as was

medieval presuppositions about God, as was the Cartesian requirement of the thinking being, "the I", and as was Kant's distinction of analytic-*apriori* truths, analytic philosophy (as were other strands before it) does not represent a departure from the traditional concerns of philosophy to provide a foundation for knowledge.

However, it had seemed to a number of modern philosophers—Dewey Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Rorty and Quine, amongst others—that once the idea of 'the given' is abdicated, discredited and rejected, then the search for ultimate philosophical justification of knowledge should be abandoned altogether. On his part, Quine (1953) argues that many of the functions of traditional epistemology can still be served if we 'naturalize' the enterprise and conduct it from within accepted scientific theory, rather than as a propaedeutic to science. The aim then is not to stand outside science and show how we can manage, in our interaction with the world, or how to acquire reasonable beliefs. In this consideration, there is no room for unnatural philosophy—to try an epistemological foundation for non-philosophical knowledge (Popkin, 648-650). Yet, before Quine, Dewey, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger had argued even more devastatingly.

John Dewey (1929), following his theory of pragmatism, had some schism and a niche for philosophical praxis, had criticized the historical philosophical traditions as promoting or perpetrating deplorable misuse of intelligence. Dewey emphasized that there exist some biological and psychological aspects involved in thinking; as well, he also recognized the social context in which intellectual problems arise and are resolved. Unfortunately, for Dewey, over the centuries, philosophers have not been diligent or considerate enough to recognize these facts. Instead, philosophers since the medieval time have tried to produce rigid and abstruse theories which they have tried to impose on intellectual activity—without any reference to whether or not they apply. This scheme and attitude, Dewey says, has resulted in philosophy becoming almost entirely useless in terms of actual human needs. Thus philosophers, especially since Descartes have often been carried away with the search for complete assurance not relevant to human situations. Consequently, for Dewey, however, what is needed is a "reconstruction of philosophy", lending back to the role it had in the Greek times—directed towards solving human problems. Dewey believes with Marx that "the aim of philosophy should be not simply to understand the world but to change it **(**Bunnin and Yu, 2004, 179).

Similarly, the II Wittgenstein (1958), and using an analogy of St. Augustine's notion of time, noted that traditional philosophy is a conceptual activity that attempts in non-scientific, non-factual, or non-empirical ways to understand the nature of the world, including its human inhabitants which "essence is hidden from us". For him, philosophy

is not a fact finding discipline but its function is to change one's orientation to and understanding of reality, by calling one's attention to facts one has known but seen as unimportant. Wittgenstein therefore, "sees an alternative to a *mental* picture that has held man captive, and we could not get outside of it, for it by our language, and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably." Hence Wittgenstein declares:

> Philosophy simple puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything…. One might give the name 'philosophy' to what is possible before all new discoveries and inventions. The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose…. We must do away with all explanations, and description alone must take its place (Popkin, 633).

Like Quine and Dewey, Wittgenstein believes the problem of search for explanation resulted from platonic 'Forms' and Cartesian 'mind' ('I' or 'Cogito'), thereby instituting a bases for search for some foundation of knowledge, for certainty. The task now is then how to emerge from those ego-centric predicaments.

Heidegger, in *Being and Time* (1962), argues that self-awareness is not a reflective self-representation of mental life at a moment along Cartesian lines but rather the temporary extended practical end emotional awareness of oneself in terms of one's own possibilities and options. Hence, to Heidegger, the concrete analysis of phenomena involves a "destruction" or "deconstruction" of the tradition that provides the background for the place where we find ourselves today. He argues that it is *being*, and therefore the history context which shapes one's conception. Accordingly, technology, for example, is not a set of human practices or even a basic worldview; it is a form of being itself. Invariably, Heidegger had influenced a shift of philosophical emphasis, away from Cartesian subjectivity to some more dynamic models of human life; away

> from theoretical cognition of reality in favor of practical understanding of possibilities (from knowledge- that to knowing- how –to), from scientific knowledge to everyday familiarity… from truth as correspondence to truth as an event of things becoming manifest, and from an emphasis upon unchanging universal structures to historical and contextual situatedness (Popkin, 645).

In America and elsewhere, Heidegger's attempt to overcome the traditional methods and concepts of philosophy has inspired philosophers to seek new (alternative) ways to philosophize. Of immense importance is the prolifically vehement Richard Rorty.

In his seminal book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), Rorty also try to show the non-systematization of traditional philosophy and the irrelevance of epistemology and metaphysics. Rorty traced the origins of modern usages of the terms (epistemology and metaphysics) to the Cartesian quest to answer the skeptics and thereby, the invention of the mind—for which, though, he criticizes as setting out on a mission or enquiry after setting out the/its goals (Popkin, 10-45). Rorty also traced how Cartesianism has resulted to destructive skepticism and philosophy as epistemologically based discourse just as medieval times was scholastically. He argued and indicated that the metaphysical "problem of consciousness" is no more and no less than the epistemological problem of "privilege access." Rorty (Popkin, 10) does not only view knowledge as a social phenomenon contextually justifiable, he meaningfully used Ryle's (and other analytic tools) to try to reconstruct philosophy by recourse to the past and castigating their "appeals to linguistic habits". Consequently, Rorty holds, all the philosophical aversions, debates, and disputations over the years, however, are not only irrelevant but also unnecessary. He posits that Wittgenstein's "theory of new representation", Heidegger's "new set of philosophical categories", and Dewey's vision of "naturalized history" respectively to reject the 17th century notions of knowledge and mind. To be clear, he says about those his precursors:

> For all three, the notions of "foundations of knowledge "and of philosophy as revolving around the Cartesian attempt to answer the epistemological skeptic are set aside… this is not to say they have alternative "theories of knowledge" or "philosophies of mind". They set aside epistemology and metaphysic as possible disciplines… their attitude towards the traditional problematic is like the attitude of seventeenth century philosophers toward the scholastic problematic (God) (Popkin, 10).

The trajectory of the deconstructionists, Rorty argues, is not skepticism, but is a "reconstruction" of philosophy to suit relevant issues in the world's social, economic, political, science- technological spheres. It is a kind of pragmatic view, away from pseudo-problems and dissipation of intellectual energies on them to confronting palpable social problems; that philosophy as a praxis be a second-order discipline (i.e. at the service of other areas of knowledge and human needs). While projecting such a philosophy, Rorty holds that its epistemological strand whatsoever be discarded. Fortunately for Rorty and

the philosophical post-modernist/deconstructionists, and towards the close of the 20th century, their ideas became congenial to the neo-Marxists and the ideals of hermeneutics.

The hermeneutical writings, particularly those of Dilthey, Riccour, Fucouh, and Gadamer have carried on the relativity arguments of the postmodernists, expressing a method of interpretation of texts vis-à-vis the place of social, historical, cultural, linguistic and psychological contingencies/contexts (Popkin, 706-710). Such is the hallmark of epistemological relativism—a doctrine both about all knowledge or a specific area of judgments of secondary qualities. For whatever the intent, post-modernism has successfully initiated not just an aversion for any formidable grounding/foundation for traditional philosophy, but preference for a philosophy that fascinates culture. Understood this way, one avoids the hermeneutical circle into the abyss and comfort of cultural-value ethics.

III. The Implications of Epistemological Relativism for Morality

Moral concepts and judgments, either of approval or of indignation, originate from emotions. Certain acts are pronounced good or bad on account of the emotions those acts arouse in mind. Hence for all future occurrences, moral concepts are essentially generalizations of tendencies in certain phenomena to call forth moral emotions. In other words, physically or psychologically, because good acts generally produce pleasure and bad acts pain, goodness and badness are always identified with the tendencies of acts to produce pleasure or pain; this subjectivity is the origin of relativism. Both play in accordance with the principle of utility, which point is against the view that morality is eternal and immutable or that they derive all their import from reason, practical or moral. Let it be known also that judgment of emotion is predicated on the fact that reason demands that what pleases should be preferred to what hurts; besides, moral codes need not be conducive to reason. What pleases is both a quantity and a quality. Moreover, whatever possesses the capacity to produce pleasure or pain is further within the scope established in a specific society, a custom, where the lessons are the same for all. Even when one says that moral judgments are pronounced by public opinion, one must also add that public approval or indignation are also prototypes of moral emotions, thought and felt in a language—itself a cultural dictate as against intuitionism. Yes. Certain phenomena could arouse similar or dissimilar emotions in every mind which perceives them clearly; but people's desires ought to conduce to custom and its values…otherwise it is deviant. It is culture which reconciles individuals' to social interest; thus the wisdom in ethical subjectivism is that it connotes an acquisition of moral practice, the existence of social morals in an individual (Westermarck, 1970). Thus is the idea of 'the other', which is contextually/relatively defined—and itself the basis of relative uniformity of moral

opinions. Thus moral opinions graduate from being private to being social at which point they are used to prove everything else (Bentham, 1789).

As also with culture, science is a relative platform for procedure and truth. Unfortunately, it has through its own product, technology, attempted to unite the world as one universal culture; but is such possible? Yet science has also shown "that certain things which were once thought to be absolute are actually relative to culture". Clearly, "something is relative when it varies with and is causally determined by culture: place and time. Clearly, nothing can both be relative to culture and absolute, for to be absolute is to be fixed and invariable, is independent of man and the same for all men" (Wellman, 1970). While sociological studies are committed to the study of such variation in cultural relativity of ethics; anthropological studies commit to values, the values behind those values, the attitudes of the value-holders/social institutions and morals may well also be referred to as the mores of a people to which citizens must conform as the basis of identity and solidarity. For instance, society determines the nature and organization of marriage and the family; but the forms social institutions take vary from society to society; they are relative to culture/organization. .

Relativity theory also seems to apply to mores as well as to institutions—a type of organization which involves a pattern of activity in which two or more people play assigned or recognized roles such as in the church, family, school, or government. If social institutions express and strengthen cultural patterns and values, and are relative to culture, then there is some implication for ethics. In the least, it follows that right or wrong, whether institutional or community is relative to culture.

Similarly, the theory of relativism also implies that ethics, human (social) nature and personality are relative to culture. So by personality is meant "all of the traits and characteristics which make up the person's behavior: his overt habits (such as laziness…smoking), his attitudes (like attraction…or prejudices), his mentality, his conception of himself, and any or all other things about him which affect his interaction with others" (Cuba, 1968, p. 187). A validation of this claim is easily apparent in patterns of dressing, worship, education and politics—vary from culture to culture. This definition implies, for example, that although human biological nature makes eating inevitable, yet what one eats and how and when one eats it is mostly culturally defined; again, otherwise it will be deviance.

Basically, morality is about acts. Yet, the same kind of action can be right in one society and wrong in another. Consider this: euthanasia may be permissible in some society and

a taboo in another. This does mean that the same kind of action may both be right and wrong. An action is right judging by the scheme or paradigm prevalent in the one culture, but which do not obtain in the other. By scheme and paradigm is meant ways of education, conceptualization and perception. Moreover, actions have goals; what people often select as goals varies from society to society depending on what is permissible in a society. This means that feelings and emotions are also relative to culture. Consider, hence some society may value wealth and prestige, and another simply military expedition and security. In this way, people from different societies may apparently experience the same object or situation in different ways depending on the perceptive cultural differences between their respective societies. It follows that the same kind of object or situation can have different values to people from different societies. But the corollary of this is that one of a set of contrary ethical judgments is no more valid or superior to another; all ethical judgments are equally valid. Again, moral judgment and reasoning based on ethical relativity holds sway here.

By and large, following relativism and post-modernist accounts, if there are no objective/scientific truths, there cannot be objective/scientific perfection, morality or moral standard. Once epistemological objectivism is dismantled, then the miseries militating against all other areas of knowledge, including supernaturalism is uncovered. And concerning ethics, even though some civilization and development have seemed to generate world standards in almost every sphere, the applicability of any such achievement is contingent since it must also, first of all, contend with the enduring or extant cultural ethos of a people. Accordingly, one discovers that despite the advances in communication technology leading up to what might seem an emergent 'world culture', every effective moral standard is a reflection of the values, norms, tradition, and ethos in time and space.

IV. Conclusion

Obviously, this work has a theoretical character; its content may be of practical value. Admittedly, the doctrine of relativism could be criticized on the ground that it supports and states standard for belief or judgment outside individual conviction or suasion or propensity for accepting such; or that it does not recognize the universality of morality. Unfortunately, for the critic, there are no common universal values historically; there cannot be common universal morality, but universal moral consciousness. This is because social dynamics is a steady history; it builds on an enduring past. Besides, these purported weaknesses of relativism become untenable once one appreciates the potential it arrogates to place of societal/community values in social engineering and solidarity. Take the instance of the critique itself; does the critique not adulate the standard and place of

individual imputation in believing and judging? Moral judgments are amenable to reason, they are rooted in emotional side of human nature and as a social being.

Thus relativism is not just a doctrine; yes, it is a condition denoting standard and stipulating respect for values, of respect, hospitality, humility, charity, fortitude, steadfastness, prudence, justice, temperance, and love, all of which and many more play-out in the arena of ethics and morality. This is the success base of American pragmatism, African communalism, European individualism, and Christian steadfastness, for instance. The mission of postmodernism is a proper reflection of human nature as a social being; theirs put philosophy to some praxis, away from unrewarding disputations about a universal foundation or ideal, to recognition of the impact of culture on eventing right and wrong. Accordingly, consciously or otherwise, relativism rules the world; hence even hard writers have their versions of relativity as Fletcher (1970) stipulates legalism, antinomianism, and situationism. Consequently, the conclusion here is an optimism that what is left for the interested academia is a possible devolution of the practical pedestal upon which his relative moral ethos could be justifiable/defendable and evaluated.

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