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Two Perspectives on the “Us” and Postmodern Thought**

مدخلان لمناقشة موضوع “نحن” والفكر ما بعد الحداثي

Abstract: This study offers a critical reading of the implications of importing postmodern thought into a non-Western context. It argues that postmodern claims on the relativity of truth, the deconstruction of grand narratives, the transcendence of the authority of universal reason, and scepticism toward human agency are grounded conditions of Western modernity that remain absent in partially modernized societies. The study shows that the adoption of postmodern critique in a modern/premodern context can contribute to the erosion of scientific objectivity, the justification of moral relativism, and the reinforcement of modes of traditional authority. This study focuses on the domains of science and ethics by deconstructing postmodernist arguments regarding scientific discourse and ethical standards. In addition, the study clarifies the differences between scientific, philosophical, and religious truths, as well as those between universal moral values and moral rules, and between theories of ethics and scientific theories.

Keywords: Postmodernism; Relativism; Scientific Objectivity; Universal Ethics; Morality; Scientific Theories.

الملخص: تقدّم هذه الدراسة قراءة نقدية لأثر استيراد فكر ما بعد الحداثية إلى السياق العربي، وتبين أن مقولاته حول نسبية الحقيقة، وتفكيك السرديات الكبرى، وتجاوز سلطة العقل الكوني، والتشكيك في فاعلية الذات الإنسانية، تتأسس على شروط حداثية غربية لا تتوافر في مجتمعات لم تستكمل مشروع التحديث. وتُظهر أن اعتماد النقد ما بعد الحداثي في بيئة حداثية/ ما بعد حداثية قد يؤديان إلى إضعاف الموضوعية العلمية، وتبرير النسبوية الأخلاقية، وتثبيت أنماط السلطة التقليدية. وتركّز الدراسة على محوري العلم والأخلاق من خلال تفكيك أطروحات ما بعد الحداثية حول الخطاب العلمي والمعايير الأخلاقية. وتبين الدراسة الفرق بين الحقيقة العلمية والحقيقة الفلسفية والحقيقة الدينية، كما تبين الفرق بين القيم الأخلاقية الكونية والقواعد الأخلاقية، وبين الأخلاق ونظريات الأخلاق والنظريات العلمية.

كلمات مفتاحية: ما بعد الحداثية؛ النسبوية؛ الموضوعية العلمية؛ الأخلاق الكونية؛ النظريات العلمية.

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** This study was originally published in Arabic in: Azmi Bishara, “Madkhalān li-Munāqashat Mawḍū‘: ‘Naḥn’ wa-l-Fikr mā Ba’d al-Ḥadāthī,” *Tabayyun*, vol. 14, no. 55 (Winter 2026), pp. 7-42

Introduction

This study engages with postmodernism from the perspective of a presumed “we”, which connects the author with his audience of readers in Arabic language without further definition. Readers may determine the extent to which they belong to this “we”. The aim is not to affirm a national identity, but to emphasize membership in a society whose cultural, political, and civilizational reality differs from that of the stage of development that Western postmodernist thinkers call *postmodernity*. As the prefix “post-” suggests, the term refers to Western societies that have moved beyond the stage of modernity, which these thinkers associate with industrial capitalism, technological development, the modern state, and the dominance of what they call the Enlightenment narrative and the authority of “universal reason”, among other defining features. The presumed “we”, by contrast, has not moved beyond the modernity thus described, nor has its narrative become dominant in its countries. While the standards of science and technology have been applied in many areas of life, these societies remain caught in a struggle between premodern sociocultural phenomena and a truncated modernity stemming from an asymmetrical relationship with modern, developed countries – a relationship that marginalized the organic processes of modernization that were underway in these societies.

The study discusses the potential impact of postmodernism in science and ethics. It proceeds from the conviction that these fields, taken together, constitute the primary intellectual and cultural challenge facing societies (label them Third World, Global South, or any other term) that have experienced Western modernity only in a partial and fragmented manner. This manifests itself in the instrumental use of modernity’s achievements, consumerism, conflicts between indigenous and imported values, and the production of identity struggles. Science and ethics here are closely intertwined with questions of human development and social justice. Moreover, they constitute the foundation for transcending modes of interactions rooted in the dualism of dependency on the one hand, and authenticity and identity, on the other. The study is driven by the concern that certain postmodern ideas, critical of modernity and imported ready-made into “our” countries, do not help the shift from modernity to postmodernity – assuming for argument’s sake that this negative condition of “post-ness” does exist in its European countries of origin. Instead, they are deployed to justify the perpetuation of pre-modernity in “our” societies. This recalls the readiness of authoritarian regimes to appropriate arguments that appear radical in their critique of liberal democracy and import them from democratic countries into ones that have either not experienced democracy or have known forms of illiberal regimes claiming to be democratic.

Defending the objectivity of science and recognizing the moral autonomy of the individual and public ethics assume great importance in countries where scientific production plays no significant role in the economy, where the state allocates negligible budgets for research, and Gnostics coexists with the latest imported technologies, without culturally absorbing the scientific mode of thinking that produced them. The theoretical sciences are neglected, research is restricted and censored, and a culture prevails in which the validity of an analysis is judged according to the author’s political orientation, or by the answer to the question: “Whom does this analysis serve?”, as determined by the political interests, ideology, or faith of the inquirer. Likewise, a real struggle goes on with the position that measures the justice or moral worth of a political position according to calculations informed by the interests of the evaluator, its compatibility with a religious ideology, kinship ties, partisan affiliation, or other considerations with little to do with ethical principles. Within identity groups, moral values are affirmed as though they were social customs, while ethical conduct in the public sphere is treated with disdain. While there are important exceptions and considerable resistance to this condition, it nevertheless poses profound problems and challenges. Yet these concerns and challenges lie beyond the horizon of postmodern theorists in Western academia.

What unites ideas associated with postmodernism is the assertion that a qualitative shift has taken place from modernity to postmodernity, because the world can no longer be understood in the same ways that previously prevailed. Understanding this postmodern condition begins by interrogating the so-called grand narratives of progress and universal truths grounded in reason. This also entails challenging the existence of a unified, knowing human subject that interacts, in that capacity, with an objective world or objects external to itself.

Most postmodern theorists agree that reality is the product of the perspectives, interests, and power relations that generate its representations and conceptions. They also emphasize the disconnect between the world of representations and the reality it represents. This has given rise to accusations of relativism, as it denies the existence of any fixed point of reference by which truth can be distinguished from illusion. Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont define it as “an intellectual current characterized by the more-or-less explicit rejection of the rationalist tradition of the Enlightenment, by theoretical discourses disconnected from any empirical test, and by a cognitive and cultural relativism that regards science as nothing more than a ‘narration’, a ‘myth’ or a social construction among many others”.¹

Some scholars identify one particular issue as a defining feature of postmodern thought. According to Linda Hutcheon, the Italian novelist and scholar Umberto Eco (1932-2016) regarded the acceptance of Michel Foucault’s contention that power is not something unitary that exists outside us, but rather permeates all social domains, as the defining criterion of postmodern thought. Hutcheon also points to the existence of multiple “postmodernities”, ranging from Jacques Derrida’s notions of textuality, *différance*, and the deconstructing impulse of poststructuralist theory, to Jean-François Lyotard’s (1924-1998) conditions of knowledge in advanced capitalist societies to Jean Baudrillard’s (1929-2007) concepts of simulacra and the substitution of representations of reality for reality itself.²

The terminology of postmodern thought is characterized by ambiguity and obscurity, allowing for multiple interpretations. This made it possible for non-rational ideas and practices to acquire academic legitimacy under the label of postmodernism, once they had gained acceptance in the social sciences and humanities, especially in the fields of literary criticism, philosophy, anthropology, and feminist studies. This is especially true of the second generation of postmodernists. The writings of the first generation, especially the non-philosophical ones, are generally intelligible and contain meaningful ideas – including critiques of Western rationalism – that are open to rational debate. By contrast, some second generation’s texts appear profound precisely because they are difficult to understand, blurring the difference between the difficulty arising from the complexity of the texts and the incomprehensibility resulting from their vacuity. This is compounded by their moral and scientific relativism.

Before the term “postmodernism” became associated with intellectual currents in the social sciences, it had been applied to an architectural movement that rebelled against dominant styles of modernist architecture beginning in the 1950s. This movement embraced stylistic pluralism, rejected functional simplicity, and welcomed contradiction and complexity. Before long, this rebellious approach found its way into literature and the fine arts.³ Postmodern thought drew on the philosophical ideas and terminology

¹ Alan Sokal & Jean Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals’ Abuse of Science* (New York: Picador, 1999), p. 1.

² Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernity* (London/New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 16-18.

³ The Egyptian-born American scholar Ihab Hassan (1925-2015) wrote two seminal books on the postmodern turn in culture and literary production during the 1960s. It was primarily characterized by a subjective perspective, instability of meaning, hybridization, genre fluidity, interpretive multiplicity, reader participation in meaning, and a mistrust of conventional wisdom. See: Ihab Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature*, 2nd ed. (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 1982 [1971]); Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987). For a key reference on postmodern architecture, see: Charles Jencks, *The Language of Postmodern Architecture* (London: Academy Editions, 1977). See also this interview in *Style*: Frank L. Cioffi, “Postmodernism, Etc.: An Interview with Ihab Hassan,” *Style*, vol. 33, no. 3, Postmodernism and Other Distractions: Situations and Directions for Critical Theory (1999), pp. 357-371.

of Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, but the term did not enter the philosophical lexicon until Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (*La condition postmoderne*; 1979), in which he offers the following definition: “I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it”.⁴ Lyotard also employs Ludwig Wittgenstein's (1889-1951) model of language games in emphasizing the “close link between the kind of language called science and the kind called ethics and politics”. Foucauldian scholars refer to these types of language as types of discourse.⁵

With the decline of the “grand narratives” (*les grands récits*) – to use Lyotard's terminology –, together with the rise of specialized disciplines with their own frameworks of reference, and the growing dependence of scientific research on funding due to the technologies it employs, science became subject to the institutions and administrations that controlled the budgets. Thus, grand narratives no longer served as the source of scientific legitimacy; instead, legitimacy came to rest on the consensus of scholars within each discipline. Consequently, freeing science from control and monopoly became one of the central concerns of the postmodern condition.

In my book *Religion and Secularism in a Historical Context*, I distinguished between two critiques of the Enlightenment. The first is a rational critique developed within critical modern thought – most notably by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (*Dialektik der Aufklärung*, 1944) – which treats the Enlightenment as an unfinished project capable of self-critique. The second is a postmodern critique, initiated by Michel Foucault before his thought acquired the “postmodern” label, specifically during the period in which he embraced structuralism, before moving beyond it to poststructuralism. In their critique, Adorno and Horkheimer focused on the dialectic generated by viewing knowledge as an instrument of control, and hence on the instrumentalization of reason, the abandonment of theoretical knowledge in favour of the technical application of science, and the privileging of efficiency and success to the point of subordinating values to these two objectives. According to them, this process begins when science is used for the purposes of control through the mathematic method and the neutralization of qualities and qualitative distinctions in favour of numbers, which became the very hypostasis of the Enlightenment. Calculation, efficiency, and control thus became its new trinity.⁶ I contended that postmodern thought is effectively a critique of the rational critique of the Enlightenment. It is marked by the shift from critiquing the instrumentalization of science to questioning its objectivity, and from criticizing the prioritization of efficiency and success over values to questioning that universal values are possible at all.⁷

The works that Michel Foucault began publishing in the 1960s attracted considerable attention in American universities, especially his studies on the history of madness, the prison, and sexuality, which introduced questions concerning the relationship between truth and power in postmodern thought. Unlike Horkheimer and Adorno, who were concerned with the instrumental rationalization of the Enlightenment tradition as applied to society or the world, Foucault devoted himself to fields regarded as marginal within the discipline of history, such as madness, illness, sexuality, crime, and death. His studies contribute to tracing the emergence of the modern subject by examining institutions of control, such as surveillance and punishment (prisons) and medical treatment (hospitals), and to exposing the political dynamics of power behind what appear to be objective terms and concepts. Foucault's efforts in these fields, including his analysis of power and knowledge, adhered to the so-called scientific standards.

⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Geoff Bennington & Brian Massumi (trans.), Fredric Jameson (foreword) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984 [1979]), p. xxiv.

⁵ Ibid., p. xix.

⁶ Azmi Bishara, *al-Dīn wa-l-'Almāniyya fī Siyāq Tārīkhī*, part II, vol. 1: *wa-l-'Almāniyya wa-l-'Almana* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2015), pp. 712-725.

⁷ Ibid., p. 749.

In the 1980s and 1990s, postmodernism became deeply embedded in social thought and engaged with major social issues such as feminism, gender, postcoloniality, and identity politics. During the same period, the idea of “postmodernity” gained currency as an artistic and literary sensibility blending elitism and decadence (as in the work of Andy Warhol), and as a form of relativism, or a relativist philosophical approach.

In *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (*Der Philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*, 1985), Jürgen Habermas describes postmodern philosophers as neoconservatives, arguing that their intellectual efforts undermine the discourse of the Enlightenment and rationality, which, he regards as synonymous with the discourse of modernity. He also critiques their tendency toward relativism and the aestheticization of knowledge. However, from the perspective of this study, modernity is not a single project that can be dogmatically defended against so-called “postmodernity”, thereby facilitating the task of criticism. Modernity is simultaneously rational and irrational, progressive and reactionary, the nation-state and colonialism; democracy and tyranny, individualism and the masses, liberal democracy as well as populism and fascism, tolerance and xenophobia, socio-economic welfare and class disparities, consumer culture, and the multiplication and diversification of human needs and means of satisfying them. It encompasses both the Enlightenment and its critique. Nevertheless, we cannot fail to see a qualitative distinction between modernity and what preceded it in terms of the rise of science and technology; the scientific approach to nature, human body, and society; the rationalization of administration, the emergence of the modern state, and the rise of institutional structures in general; the recognition of the human subject and its dignity; and the rise of the concept of human rights.

Critiquing the Enlightenment has not brought about the dominance of postmodern thought; instead, it has strengthened forces critical of the Enlightenment within modernity itself. Likewise, critiques of liberal democracy in modernity can serve anti-democratic forces within modernity, or, dialectically, they may serve democracy if they develop in ways that overcome its shortcomings, or if the critique itself proceeds from democratic premises. In any event, these critiques have not produced a postmodern political system – nor has anyone yet explained what the defining characteristics of such a political system would be. Postmodernism consists of radical trends that are apolitical, detached from politics, or concerned with post-state politics – yet another expression of depoliticization.

Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont wrote that “what is new and curious about postmodernism is that it is an anti-rationalist form of thought that has seduced part of the left”.⁸ The irony is that, historically, the left has historically been characterized by rationality and sought to ground its methodology in science. One factor behind this influence is that certain Marxist predictions – which claimed to employ a scientific method – have proved mistaken, especially those regarding the end of capitalism, class conflict, and the transformation of the revolutionary proletariat into a majority. With the rise of new social movements – such as the Black liberation movement and the feminist and gay rights movements – which emphasized issues of identity and recognition, some leftist circles abandoned orientations that had been regarded as expressions of universal rationality in favour of cultural relativism or other approaches that ascribe greater importance to representations of reality than to reality itself.⁹

Generalizations have also emerged that conflate the critique of theories of the linear progress of history, which is a valid critique, with critiques of progress itself, whose definition is not clear. The latter often go so far as to deny the value of actual advances – such as increased life expectancy, higher standards of living, the diversification of individual needs, greater awareness of personal dignity, and the radical

⁸ Sokal & Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense*, p. 198.

⁹ Ibid., p. 202.

transformation in the status of women – on the grounds of the negative aspects of progress. Politics of identity and authenticity contributed to the spread, in societies where many of these achievements remain far beyond reach, of Western critiques directed at certain forms of progress in Europe and the West.

Science appeared to be an “easy target” compared with the institutions and systems within which it develops and which utilize its results. These are also the institutions in which the majority of postmodern theorists themselves work. Indeed, the vast majority of postmodern theorists are professors at Western universities who have spent their entire lives in academia, first as students and then as faculty members, unlike leftist theorists of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

This current found particular encouragement within academic institutions, especially in the United States, and is no longer a marginal phenomenon in the social sciences and humanities. It has little impact on knowledge production in the natural sciences, and its impact within the social sciences is containable. It might be a radical movement, but it is apolitical or politically ineffective. Its influence is greatest among a segment of the student body and among frustrated circles on the left seeking a theoretical justification for political inaction. Some researchers regard postmodern political thought – or, more accurately, postmodern apolitical thought – as essentially, or at least consequentially, libertarian:

Rejecting the state and conceiving of a post-state politics is now a central dogma of the new “radical” theorists. Since the state is seen to be inherently despotic, only the spontaneous, autonomous collection of groups who act against the state and outside of it are viewed as vehicles for political change. The absence of domination is now cast as the freedom to explore narcissistic lifestyles as well as expand an already exaggerated subjectivity where participatory and direct democracy become the political ideal. In the end, they valorize the individual’s resistance to the state and the power of localism. It is precisely a libertarian ethos of freedom that dominates their vision.¹⁰

The prevailing ethos thus appears radical, but is in fact libertarian, ultimately reducing itself to a critique of liberalism from the political right. Particularly striking is postmodernism’s negative stance on the state and identity in general. Yet this stance is only activated against national identity and nationalism, while communal identities are viewed positively. This might be comprehensible (though not necessarily acceptable) in developed liberal democracies, but it is neither comprehensible nor acceptable in countries gripped by state fragility and the unchecked prevalence of communal identities and every possible form of sectarian and local identity politics.¹¹

At times, postmodern philosophy appears to emphasize difference and distinction over identity, understood as sameness. In postmodernist writings, sameness connotes negative implications while difference connotes positive ones – as though these abstract and supposedly neutral distinctions were normative judgements. Yet this strand of philosophy implicates itself in sameness by failing to recognize the fundamental difference between science and other forms of discourse and narrative, and by insisting on the resemblance between all forms of authority – understood as the exercise of material or symbolic power for the purposes of control – while overlooking the distinctive character of state authority and of state violence.

Postmodernism owes its “phenomenal success in the [Western] academy in part to its lack of fixed form or formation”, according to John Sanbonmatsu. Under the conditions of Western academia in late industrial society, ambivalence, ambiguity, and the absence of a defined method have become useful

¹⁰ Gregory Smulewicz-Zucker & Michael J. Thompson, “Introduction,” in: Gregory Smulewicz-Zucker & Michael J. Thompson (eds.), *Radical Intellectuals and the Subversion of Progressive Politics: The Betrayal of Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 6.

¹¹ I have addressed this issue in depth in two monographs, namely: Azmi Bishara, *Mas’alat al-Dawla: Uṣṣūl fī al-Falsafa wa-l-Naẓariyya wa-l-Siyāqāt* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2023); Azmi Bishara, *al-Dawla al-‘Arabiyya: Baḥṭh fī al-Manṣha’ wa l-Masār* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2024). This issue should constitute a third avenue for critiquing postmodernism from “our” perspective, one that perhaps deserves another study.

tools for professional advancement and publication. In such a form, postmodernism poses no threat to the established order; it offers a flexible alternative that can easily be contained in research centres, specialized journals, and conferences. Moreover, the cultural relativism resulting from this philosophy contributes to its spread within conservative and radical circles in the Third World, albeit for contradictory reasons. Scholars within this current adapt quickly, cultivating relationships with periodicals, universities, institutes, and even with the large corporations that fund research centres and projects.¹² In such contexts, there is a postmodern justification for everything.

A salient symptom of postmodern thought is the tendency to avoid criticizing negative phenomena – including oppressive practices in other societies – under the pretext of respecting difference. The futility of this abstract and incomprehensible bias – toward diversity and difference over similarity and unity – becomes apparent in the conversion of these analytical terms into normative categories. The absurdity of this lies in the fact that pure difference itself ultimately equates all phenomena simply for being different. They are all the same in this respect. Criticizing the different other is then construed as bias or as an attempt to impose a single culture or discourse, such as that of the Enlightenment, science, or democracy.

Another common symptom is the illusion that criticizing science and rationality in general is a substitute for criticizing reality – and, more significantly, a substitute for criticizing the forces that use them as instruments of control. One thus gains the impression that not only is postmodernism reluctant to take decisive stances against oppression, but it also leads some students and academics to believe that, by racing to expose the authoritarianism of science or to deconstruct the illusion of universal moral principles, they are actually engaging in critical practice, thus absolving themselves of the responsibility to exercise criticism in public life. As a result, they abandon two fields of critique: moral critique of exercises of power by the state or government – on the grounds that authority/power is diffuse and universal moral values are illusory – and objective, analytical critique engaging the scientific method. They thus refrain from making any useful contribution in either domain.

At another level, many social movements influenced by the mood of the new academic left – including women’s and minority rights movements as well as advocacy groups pressing for social welfare policies or the recognition of a sexual orientation or a gender identity – have found a place in the liberal-democratic state. Within this framework, they protect the interests of various groups (minorities, LGBTQ, etc.) by representing them within the established system. But the emphasis on representing these groups – and on representations of reality rather than on reality itself – has diverted attention from the concerns of the majority of the population, particularly the working and middle classes, who have fallen prey to populism,¹³ which is hostile to liberalism, foreigners, minority rights, and political correctness.

Ideas that deny the existence of foundations of knowledge and that espouse an antifoundational epistemological approach have interacted with this intellectual climate. According to this perspective, the social world – and even the natural world – is constructed through subjects that are themselves products of existing power relations. Power is therefore not only a negative concept but also a productive one. These discursive subjects – that is, subjects produced by power relations and the discourse that generates them – are constituted through various social conflicts and are therefore partial and biased.¹⁴ Under these conditions, politics becomes more concerned with critiquing and deconstructing language and expressions (i.e., with representation) than with criticizing reality itself, and more concerned with cultural politics than with politics itself.

¹² John Sanbonmatsu, “Postmodernism and the corruption of the critical intelligentsia,” in: Smulewicz-Zucker & Thompson (eds.), p. 34; Alan D. Schrift, *Poststructuralism and Critical Theory’s Second Generation* (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 38.

¹³ Smulewicz-Zucker & Thompson, pp. 1-4.

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Alan Sheridan (trans.), 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), pp. 194, 202-203; Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *The Will to Knowledge*, Robert Hurley (trans.) (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), pp. 100-101.

Cultural relativism is postmodernism's main weapon in its critique of universalism. Yet in this context, it does not defend the victims of this cultural relativism within each culture. Perhaps the most prominent example is Richard Rorty (1931-2007), known for advocating conformity to liberal-democratic norms in societies where they have become established, because they have become the prevailing way of life that has proved itself in the West. He offers no rational or moral grounds for defending them against their detractors, sparing him the need for a profound critique of ideas. After all, every social discourse is simply the product of its context, power relations, cultural determinants, and so on. Rorty's only genuine argument against fascism is that it is not how things are done in the United States.¹⁵ By this logic, he probably would simply argue, in response to the populist and authoritarian practices of US President Donald Trump, particularly in his second term, that what Trump is doing is “un-American”.

A subtle collusion thus unfolds between the American postmodernist and the Third-Worldist. The former claims that liberal democracy is a Western way of life and should not be imposed on other countries, while the latter asserts that the other face of this way of life is colonialism, which imposed the Western way of life on Third World countries. Both insist that the purported universality of concepts such as human rights is illusory, since they are Western rather than universal.¹⁶

This cultural relativism has also permeated postcolonial studies, with the result that what counts as science in one culture is considered a colonial ideology in another. The colonizer shares this perspective, but in reverse. Decolonial scholarship has gone so far as to hold colonialism responsible for almost everything that occurs in former colonized states, to the extent of denying the agency of the colonized and their sociopolitical forces. It even rejects the scientific elements of research conducted by scholars from the metropole, including orientalist, emphasizing only discourse and power relations, while avoiding the effort to expose ideological dimensions by distinguishing them from scientific ones. Why should postmodernist researchers take the trouble to reveal the ideological dimension if science itself is merely another form of domination, no different from any other power relationship between a subject and its object, simply because the latter has become the former's object of inquiry?

When everything is viewed from the perspective of power relations, interests, and a particular culture, every idea becomes a form of ideology. If this is the case, then even the critique of ideology is an ideology, which only derives meaning through a preferential relationship with other ideologies. This deprives us of the ability to criticize the ideological elements in the colonizer's study of the colonized, while taking the opportunity to understand, appreciate, and benefit from the scientific aspects in such studies. This also undermines the confidence of formerly colonized people in their own ability to produce scientific knowledge about themselves and others as fellow members of humanity, thereby transforming formal political independence into genuine independence, rather than confining themselves to contesting the legacy of colonialism.

Decolonial studies have adopted elements of postmodern thought such as the deconstruction of narratives and discourse analysis as an expression of power relations. While this approach may be useful at a particular stage of the research process and for a specific purpose, it offers little beyond that. Within this framework, narratives are multiple, power relations are fragmented and diffuse, no discourse takes precedence over another, and liberation narratives take no priority over colonial ones. In the case of Palestine, for example, the postmodern thinkers emphasize the need to recognize the Palestinian narrative

¹⁵ Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1996), p. 27.

¹⁶ The Egyptian-Canadian scholar Shadia Drury demonstrates the futility of such a dialogue by dramatizing an imaginary debate between Rorty and Edward Said. In it, Rorty treats liberal democracy as an American lifestyle, whereas Said views it as something the white man has prescribed for the rest of the world rather than holding Western policy to account for its liberal-democratic claims. See: Shadia Drury, “The Postmodern Face of American Exceptionalism,” in: Smulewicz-Zucker & Thompson (eds.), p. 29.

while insisting that there are two narratives of the conflict. They likewise foreground the role of Palestinian cultural production and even exaggerate its significance and role so that it stands on par with its Israeli counterpart. Yet the conflict is between colonizer and colonized, and the struggle is for liberation, not a competition between two narratives nor a competition in cultural productivity. Palestinians are under no obligation to outperform Israelis culturally in order for their rights to be recognized.

On the Postmodern Approach to Science

The rejection of grand narratives, which are assumed to have prevailed in modernity, forms part of the very definition of postmodernism. In doing so, however, postmodernism oversimplifies the very phenomenon it rejects. It presumes the dominance of a certain grand narrative (such as that of technological progress or the progress of reason through history), treating it as akin to religious or ideological narratives that shape people's understanding of the world. But even if we concede, for the sake of argument, that all of these are narratives, the available options are not limited to two narrow alternatives: either accepting a dominant narrative or rejecting altogether. There are many other possibilities. We could, for instance, regard a historical narrative as a particular point of view that illuminates one aspect of history, without claiming to possess the password to unlocking the mysteries of history or of the world.

Postmodernists' scepticism toward grand narratives, their critique of claims to universal truths, and their privileging of difference over identity apply to science just as they do to philosophy, religion, and ethics. All of these fields, in their view, are bounded by language, culture, history, and existing power relations – and are all, therefore, discursive. Postmodernists' attitudes to science and their relativism in this regard have been criticized on several grounds, starting with their failure to understand the scientific method and the meaning of truth it seeks, which they conflate it with religious and metaphysical truth, even though the word “truth” is used in entirely different senses across these fields; continuing with their lack of consistency and frequent contradiction of their own views in both their intellectual production and their blanket generalizations; and ending with the fact that they, like everyone else, conduct their everyday lives without recourse to relativism, relying instead on their own perceptions – or those of others – of the realities of nature and society.

The same is true of their position on ethics, although attributing discursivity, pluralism, and difference to ethics is more rational and more open to discussion than the claim that science is just one dominant discourse among others.

In his 1873 essay “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense” (*Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne*), Nietzsche argues that scientific concepts are a series of metaphors that have solidified into accepted facts. To begin with, a nerve stimulus is transferred into an image: first metaphor. The image, in turn, is imitated in a sound: second metaphor. With repetition, a word then emerges, which becomes a concept insofar as it simultaneously has to fit countless more or less similar cases ... cases which are never equal and thus altogether unequal. Every concept arises from the equation of unequal things”.¹⁷

This contention, which postmodernists praise as one of Nietzsche's landmarks that shaped their thought, is in fact simply one of several explanations of the origin of words and terms. Yet, in any given society and at any given moment, words do not “emerge”; they are inherited. The transformation of words into terms and concepts is a conscious effort, and those who engage in it are aware that it is artificial. They do so not to deceive themselves, but because language is the only tool available to articulate relations between

¹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,” reprinted in: Daniel Breazeale (ed. & trans.), *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870s* (New Jersey/London: Humanities Press, 1979), pp. 82-83.

things or recurrent patterns in the relations among phenomena. This indeed requires borrowing words from language and using them in a particular context in a way that gives them new meaning. But terms and concepts are clearly defined by assigning them meanings distinct from those of the words in which they have come to reside. This does not obliterate the difference between poetic metaphor and scientific concept. For a philosopher to remind us that these are metaphors and, hence, lies, is, at the very least, a pointless exercise in philology (Nietzsche's original discipline). The Nietzschean metaphor might enthrall non-experts, but any specialist would regard it as redundant, verbal padding, or at best, a rhetorical flourish. Reading Nietzsche might come in handy as an enjoyable way to pass time (depending on the reader's taste), like reading a literary text peppered with clever and thought-provoking wit. It highlights and amplifies one aspect and obscures others, then generalizes the claims that emerge from this literary exercise as though they were explanations. Such are the characteristics – or flaws – of the Nietzschean texts that influenced postmodernist currents.

Liotard argues that with the advancement of science, the proliferation of specializations, and the consequent mushrooming of relativism, legitimacy has been parcelled out to each individual subfield. The profusion of scientific discourses is now sorted into inputs and outputs – that is, costs and benefits. Hence, science must be pragmatically quantifiable. The validity of the sciences is no longer absolute, but limited, and the dominant theories in each discipline are determined by scholarly consensus.¹⁸ There is no longer a meta-language serving as a basis on which scientific proof can be validated. No longer is there a single, self-evident method underpinning all sciences, but rather multiple methods. This means that science has lost its narrative foundation.¹⁹ Lyotard contends that the link between scientific and ethical evaluation has been overshadowed by the link between science and technology, that is, by the dichotomy of efficient versus inefficient. The connection between science and technology and between research tools and funding has reduced science to the service of power, leading students to dedicate their studies to what is effective, not to what is true.²⁰ In postmodernity, according to Lyotard, philosophy and old epistemological traditions act alone like a self-contained field of reflection – one that neither legitimizes other knowledge systems nor dictates to them epistemic or moral prescriptions.

But did not early critical modern thought already embrace this position, for instance in the work of Immanuel Kant, who completely separated science from ethical prescriptions? This was also largely true of any science that developed its principles and laws outside philosophy. Similarly, David Hume held that science has no answers to existential questions, unlike philosophy or religion. In modernity, science is not legitimated through grand philosophical narratives (of the Enlightenment or otherwise), but through the demonstration of the scientific method employed, the rigour with which it is applied, and empirical practice, including the successful application of its findings in industry, agriculture, medicine, and practical life. They also entail formulating laws governing fixed relations between variables, thereby enabling scientific prediction and the development of technologies that harness this predictivity. Science derives its legitimacy – or more precisely, its validity – from these practices, not from grand narratives, as Lyotard contends. Although philosophical and ideological narratives may inspire scientific discovery – or, conversely, impede its development – they are not a source of its validity.

To insist, in Kantian terms, that scientific judgements are separate from moral judgements and argue that science cannot answer existential questions about the meaning of life in this infinite universe (in contrast

¹⁸ Apparently, the most significant postmodern idea Nietzsche put forth is that what we call truths are human conventions: “Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions; they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins”. See: Ibid., p. 84.

¹⁹ Sherif Younis, *Su'āl al-Huwiyya: al-Huwiyya wa-Sulṭat al-Muthaqqaf fī 'Aṣr mā ba'd al-Ḥadātha* (Cairo: Merit Publishing House, 1999), pp. 113-114.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 114.

to religious devotion for believers and regardless of how scientific research might offer its practitioners self-fulfilment or satiate their curiosity and passion for discovery) is not to extol science at the expense of other types of human activity. In fact, these positions could betray dangerous tendencies, such as the subordination of science for unethical ends external to it.

Ethical decisions concerning how science should be used, and the responsibility for decisions, rest with those who use it, especially the owners and executives of major corporations, government decision-makers, and, finally, scientists themselves. No matter how much we reconsider the matter, we will never reach a different conclusion so long as the debate remains rational. Still, a heated debate has persisted since before the advent of nuclear energy on the responsibility of scientists (rather than of science itself), as they have the ability to foresee both the beneficial and harmful uses of their discoveries and, therefore, to sound the alarm about abuses and their potential catastrophic consequences.

Science does not offer answers to existential questions, nor does it distinguish between good and evil; instead, it explains phenomena through the laws it derives, identifies the relationships among variables, and distinguishes the true from the false, and the possible from the certain. It imposes itself through proof, not by imposing a point of view. Science is not itself an opinion; its claims are either demonstrable or not. Scientific thinking might be imposed by force when human authorities adopt scientism as an ideology – i.e., treating science not only as a way to explain natural and social phenomena but as a solution to all human dilemmas and a way to explain all phenomena. Those who espouse such an outlook mistakenly presume the existence of a universal science or they attempt to transfer the laws of a given science (such as biology, physics, or more recently psychology) to all social and political phenomena. Such a politico-ideological practice has nothing to do with science and scientific methods. If an authority adopts such an approach, it is imposing not science, but the ideology of scientism upon society.

Foucault's claim that the 18th century was characterized by the decline of philosophy and the advancement of mathematics, the emergence of the institutional organization of the sciences across institutions such as the university, their homogenization within the encyclopaedia, and the replacement of the coercive authority of dogmatic religious truth by the coercive authority of science rests on the omission of this crucial distinction.²¹ The claim regarding the decline of philosophy requires closer scrutiny. The scope of philosophy (up until, let us say, the 18th century) was once very broad, encompassing fields that have become the province of various scientific disciplines. At the same time, however, philosophy remained the concern of a very small intellectual elite. After the 18th century, its scope narrowed with the emergence of specialized sciences, yet it also became the focus of wider public interest owing to the expansion of education, the increasing tendency of philosophers to write in the vernacular, and the translation of classical philosophical works into those languages. All of this occurred during a period in which people increasingly became able to engage with public affairs, at a time when philosophy was addressing many of the questions that the social sciences would take up from the second half of the 19th century onward.

Postmodernists believe that the loss of the grand rational-philosophical narrative, the “compartmentalization of knowledge” into disciplines, and “the dissolution of epistemic coherence” have resulted in the loss of meaning and the fragmentation of narrative elements into what Lyotard calls “linguistic clouds” and “collisions among multiple language games”. Within each game the subject moves from one position to another, – as sender or receiver – in heterogeneous moments of subjectivity that do not cohere into the identity of the single self. Even if we grant Lyotard's premises, they do not entail such a conclusion. One might just as plausibly conclude that the fragmentation of narrative elements compels the subject

²¹ Zouaoui Beghoura, *Mā Ba'd al-Ḥadātha wa-l-Tanwīr: Mawqif al-Anṭūlūjīyā al-Tārīkhiyya: Dirāsa Naqdiyya* (Beirut: Dar Al Taliaa, 2020), pp. 246-247.

to compensate through a form of self-coherence, making it intellectually possible to project unity onto a fragmented reality. But postmodernists insist that performativity is what bestows legitimacy – specifically in the form of maximizing information flow and minimizing non-functional, reflective movements in the system, such as philosophical approaches. All that cannot be identified as a piece of information or an instrument is redundant. Hence, “the performativity criterion threatens anything not meeting its requirements ... with de-legitimation and exclusion”.²² These narratives have not, in fact, been excluded from human life; they have been superseded by the scientific approach to how societies interact with the human body through medicine and with nature through the sciences. Science has even penetrated the domains of society and state, where its struggle with ideological narratives continues through scientists’ continual refinement of scientific methods and philosophical critique.

Foucault applied genealogy to formative moments in the history of modernity. In his 1971 essay “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”, he wrote that genealogy “opposes itself to the search for ‘origins’” within an identical subject and instead “studies the accidents and contingencies that converge at crucial moments, giving rise to new epochs, concepts, and institutions”.²³ This process does not take place according to laws, as it is not an inevitability. As Gary Aylesworth observes,

In Nietzschean fashion, Foucault exposes history conceived as the origin and development of an identical subject, e.g., “modernity”, as a fiction modern discourses invent after the fact. Underlying the fiction of modernity is a sense of temporality that excludes the elements of chance and contingency in play at every moment. In short, linear, progressive history covers up the discontinuities and interruptions that mark points of succession in historical time.²⁴

Like Lyotard, Foucault postulates that genealogical research will result in the disintegration of the epistemic subject, as the continuity of the self is broken up by the gaps and accidents that historical research uncovers. Foucault’s first foray into historical research was *History of Madness (Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique, 1961)*, written during his engagement with structuralism. In this book, he “gives an account of the historical beginnings of modern reason as it comes to define itself against madness in the seventeenth century. His thesis is that the practice of confining the mad is a transformation of the medieval practice of confining lepers in lazar houses”.²⁵

Reason, according to Foucault, defines itself in its earliest infancy in contrast to an Other, while simultaneously determining that Other’s truth and identity. Madness does not speak for itself. Reason “subjugat[es] non-reason, wresting from it its truth as madness, crime, or disease”.²⁶ But isn’t everything defined according to what it is not? What, then, is new about this? In any case, the definition of madness as the absence or opposite of reason is not the only way to define reason. Reason has never been defined solely through negation – not in modernity nor before it. The problem is not that reason defines itself by isolating madness, but that madness is defined as the loss of reason, superseding its earlier definitions as possession of the human body or soul by evil spirits or demons inhabiting the human body and soul. Instead of exorcizing those demons, the solution now is to confine the mad and subjugate madness to reason. What is new here is not definition by negation, which is an old technique, as Spinoza once wrote: *omnis determinatio est negatio*.

²² Gary Aylesworth, “Postmodernism,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Archive* (Spring 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), accessed on 21/12/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BPdZ>

²³ Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, Donald F. Bouchard (ed.), Donald F. Bouchard & Sherry Simon (trans.) (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 140-142.

²⁴ Aylesworth.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, Richard Howard (trans.), David Cooper (into.) (London/New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. ix-x.

However, as knowledge advanced, so too did psychology and psychiatry, which have identified, analysed, and classified various kinds of mental disorders, and attributing them to cerebral or other causes. It is therefore useful to trace the development of knowledge and the sciences – a phrase I prefer to “the development of reason”²⁷ – in tandem with evolving definitions of madness. Today, human reason is no longer defined by confining the mentally ill to asylums. Nor was this central to the point Foucault sought to demonstrate in the *History of Madness*; rather, his thesis was that reason defines itself through the repressive authoritarianism inherent in forcible isolation. Yet this conflation of reason with authority obscures the distinction between their respective meanings and the fact that they are as likely to clash as to cooperate. The two trajectories have always existed. To equate reason and science with power and oppression is unfounded. There may be a historical, socio-political relationship, but it is not rooted in the essence or definition of reason or science. Any attempt to equate science’s understanding of its object of inquiry – whether natural or social – with its “control” over that object, as though it exercised authority over it, is purely metaphorical. Power, in the sense of domination, is exercised by human beings, not by science or knowledge, for there can be no will without human agency and equating the scientists control of his subject to political power mean overinterpreting control and underestimating political power by very unpolitical academics.

On the subject of the relativity of science, Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), which discusses the emergence and transformation of paradigms based on consensus of scientists, came to be regarded as the epistemological foundation for postmodernism in the philosophy of science, thereby shaping the postmodernist agenda. Another widely cited work in postmodernist scholarship is Paul Feyerabend’s *Science in a Free Society* (1978), which contends that science is an anarchic institution and thus not very different from myth. It calls for a separation of science and state – along the lines of the separation of church and state – because the scientistic mentality is an ideology that takes what suits it or what it considers legitimate and rejects everything else.²⁸

The important point is that relativists, in drawing their conclusions about scientists’ activities and the nature of science, observed scientists at work and arrived at generalizations in much the same way as the rationalists they criticize.

The difference is that their own generalizations can neither be proved nor disproved because they are not scientifically grounded. Moreover, science never claimed to offer certainty, only high probability. Its theories may be proven or disproven, not through differences of opinion or interpretation, but through the scientific method. They are valid insofar as they can still be substantiated, but this does not make them relative. Relativism, in contrast, means that something can be true and false at once. It depends on perspectives of the observers and the power relations governing the discourse and, therefore, relativist claims cannot be verified or falsified.

When relativists present their ideas, they frame them in a rational, logical language designed to persuade. They know that – at least within the scientific community – persuasion entails more than dazzling audiences with rhetorical eloquence, appeals to sympathy, or catchy soundbites. Before proposing his theory of scientific revolution and paradigms, Thomas Kuhn studied data and other sources from which he drew observations about the transformation of scientific paradigms – observations he then presented as coherent findings grounded in solid evidence and, hence, as objective and scientific. It is also important to bear in mind that scientific revolutions do not mean that a new science invalidates what came before. Rather, it redefines the boundaries of validity, turning a general paradigm into a theory that is only valid within its field. The theory of relativity and quantum mechanics did not invalidate Newtonian mechanics; they specified the limits of its validity. Science is not relative with respect to truth but to the applicability of its laws. This point escapes those who invoke the ideas of scientific revolutions and paradigm shifts to justify relativism.

²⁷ One of postmodernism’s most significant contradictions is its critique of narratives and the trans-historical subject, and its insistence on using the term “reason” as if in reference to a trans-historical subjectivity.

²⁸ Beghoua, p. 19; Paul Feyerabend, *Science in a Free Society* (London: NLB, 1978), p. 13.

The transition from one paradigm to another takes place according to the same scientific logic, or even the same methodology, driven by a need to understand phenomena scientifically. The process involves formulating a hypothesis based on a form of intuition that is far from a stab in the dark, as it is informed by a background of cumulative knowledge. This is followed by collecting and analysing data, identifying patterns, and formulating generalizations in accordance with established rules, then building on these generalizations to generate others through rigorous deductive processes. This logic continues to be applied in scientific research despite changing paradigms, just as mathematical reasoning continues to underpin scientific inferences.

If relativism were true only for those who subscribe to it – i.e., relativists – no one would care about it. But relativists present their ideas to everyone, claiming that their conclusions are valid for all people, not just for their own societies.²⁹ In general, a statement’s truthfulness in science is similar to its truthfulness in daily life. When an ordinary person says they returned home from their job at a particular factory, they do not mean to say they *believe* they work at that factory, but that they do work there. The statement is true, devoid of any relativity, and the listener assumes it corresponds to reality. The sciences use the very same criterion of truth. But relativism will not declare a statement true or false without the caveat that truth depends on a particular perspective shaped by interests, desires, and relations of power within a given cultural context.

We are not sceptical about our everyday perceptions. We assume that “our perceptions do not *systematically* mislead us and that they are indeed produced by external objects that, in some way, resemble those perceptions”.³⁰ We live with a near-certain conviction that there is an external world that affects our perceptions and sensations, and we act accordingly. Why, then, is relativist scepticism directed primarily at science, which, if it differs from daily consciousness, does so only by being more precise in diagnosing external influences and more careful in distinguishing perception from imagination and illusion? I do not claim that science mirrors reality, nor does science make such a claim. Trying to disprove that science reflects reality and celebrating those scholars who have succeeded in this is like bragging about having broken through a door that was already open.

Scientific theory is the best tool for understanding and interpreting phenomena and for making predictions accordingly. At times, science is content to conduct experiments and extrapolate from the results without developing and proving fully fledged theories to explain the causal relations. It might take years for theories to develop and contribute to explaining or validating how variables interrelate. Experiments might later expose the flaws in the theories. Conversely, a medicine may be used to treat patients once its efficacy has been established through controlled experiments, even before a theory has been developed to explain why it is so. Attempts at explanation may remain mere hypotheses long afterward.

Modern physics deals with theoretical entities imperceptible to the naked eye, such as atoms, electrons, and neutrons. These entities may not take the forms that theory attributes to them. Yet all science can do is hypothesize their qualitative and quantitative properties and design experiments on the basis of these carefully formulated hypotheses. If the results match expectations, they will validate the hypotheses until proven otherwise. Scientific theory is a tool for understanding phenomena – it is not necessarily a reflection of reality.³¹ Rather, reality is established through theory and through the scientific experiments conducted on its basis. In the same way, scientific reality is not a tool for understanding the world as a whole. It is neither a narrative nor an overarching philosophical principle, as every scientific theory is concerned with

²⁹ Raja Bahlul, “Muqaddimat al-Tarjama al-‘Arabiyya fī Mā Lā Yufham wa-Mā Huwa Ghayr Qābil li-l-Fahm,” in: Alan Sokal & Jean Bricmont, *Hurā’ ‘Aṣrī: Sū’ Istikhdam Mufakkir Mā Ba’d al-Ḥadātha li-l-‘Ilm*, Nagib El-Hassadi (trans.) (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2025), p. 47.

³⁰ Sokal & Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense*, pp. 54-55.

³¹ Ibid.

explaining a specific phenomenon or a set of phenomena and deriving laws that predict their behaviour. There is no such thing as “theory of everything”. Theory cannot replace religion or ideology as a way of explaining the “truth” of the whole world or “the truth” from a given point of view. Here the descriptor “relative” may be applied without hesitation to such comprehensive (and absolute, in the case of religious faith) perspectives that are external to it, be they philosophical, religious, ideological, or otherwise (bearing in mind the overlap between ideology, philosophy, and religion and the need to distinguish among them). One may adopt a relativist position toward such “truths”, but this is not an innovation of postmodern philosophy. In this sense, scepticism is as old as philosophy and religion themselves.

Metaphysical truth and religious truth, though distinct, are both forms of contemplative, belief-based truth. Scientific truth, by contrast, comes in two forms. The first consists of mathematical and logical truths, which are axiomatic or deductive. It would be incorrect to describe them as relative. The second consists of inductively established truths, that are characterized by a high degree of probability, which better captures the relationship between facts. It would not be incorrect to label them as truths, but it risks conflating them with philosophical and religious truths. Scientific truths are as close as can be to the facts of daily life, which shape how people manage their affairs from the moment they wake until they go to bed.

A person may truthfully recount what they did during the course of a day. If that account is shown to be false, this simply means that the events described did not occur; it does not mean that truth is relative. The same applies to the sciences. The earth did not begin rotating around its axis and revolving around the sun only after the discoveries of Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543). Rather, Copernicus used observation and contemplation to formulate a scientific explanation of phenomena that only this hypothesis could account for, as later science would confirm. The earlier belief that the earth is stationary, and the sun revolves around it, was not a relative truth; it was false because the available cognitive and observational tools were not yet sufficiently developed.

Scientists strive toward an objective understanding (in keeping with the principles of the scientific method) of the phenomena they study – that is, one consistent with the principles of the scientific method. In the process, they bear in mind the interests of the institution in which they work, their own interests, and other external factors. They, along with their critics, readers, and those who test their conclusions, are aware that any influence of such factors on scientific judgements – whether in selection of data, interpretation of results, or induction of conclusions and inferences from their experiments – would constitute a deviation from scientific objectivity and undermine the credibility of the research. The critical review of deviations, bias, selectivity in data, and faulty deductions is not contingent on philosophical critiques of science. Rather, it is expected an integral part of the scientific inquiry itself, continuously accompanying the conduct of scientific work, the review, and validation processes. Otherwise, it would not deserve to be called science, and it would not be distinguishable from beliefs, literary taste, artistic sensibility, and rumours spread on social media.

The Moral Dimension

1. What Does Moral Relativism Mean?

In the field of ethics, Nietzsche is the most important precursor of postmodernism. In his aristocratic critique of what he called the morality of weakness, which transforms the resentment of weak slaves toward their masters – or toward the strong – into a morality of tolerance, equality, and the like, because the weak are incapable of confronting the strong with their own weapons³² – he concluded that moral truths are not absolute, but rather interpretations and “points of view”. In short, there are no moral phenomena at all, only

³² Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (New York: Vintage Edition, 1967), § 10, pp. 36-39.

a moral interpretation of phenomena.³³ The postmodern turn amplified this view by claiming that human beings exist in a state of irreducible plurality in terms of values and perspectives. For postmodernists, the modernist assumption that universal values exist is a violation of difference.

In *Just Gaming*, Lyotard argues that we must learn to make judgements in the absence of universal criteria. In moral and political matters, he says, judgement is made “case by case”. Even when we formulate general rules, they derive their meaning from their application in specific contexts. Lyotard draws on the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis* (practical wisdom)³⁴ to suggest that every moral situation is singular, requiring a precise identification of its particular circumstances; it cannot merely be subsumed under a general rule or universal prescriptive law.³⁵ I believe this to be true. However, “particular circumstances” are considered particular precisely because of the assumption that a rule exists and is applied by institutions and states that take such circumstances into account. Individuals, for their part, make judgements based on numerous factors, such as, emotions, cherished values, gut reactions, internalized moral principles, and varying degrees of compliance with norms. Yet the “general rule” is not confined to moral customs in society, nor to principles internalized by individuals through upbringing, social pressure, or indoctrination. It is also informed by a shared human faculty: the capacity for moral reasoning grounded in moral dispositions, such as the ability to distinguish between good and evil or right and wrong; an aversion to violence and physical pain; empathy; the desire to belong to a group; and the need for recognition. These dispositions generate values through the interaction between the individual and society, the necessities of life, and historical experiences that become embedded into mainstream culture.

However, postmodern theorists generally focus almost exclusively on one factor: the individual left alone to face a moral dilemma in the absence of rules to guide his judgement. They tend to regard moral values as social constructs. Moral values as such – i.e., as products of a process of social construction rooted in certain historical social contexts – are historically variable and even contingent; no necessity governs their emergence or disappearance. This is a recurring theme among postmodernist thinkers – though it is not unique to them – and it has led them to conclude that all moral reference or anchor has been lost. However, this should not be read as moral nihilism. Rather it implies that the individual bears a greater moral responsibility – a topic to which we shall return in greater detail.

Postmodernists hold that we should embrace difference and pluralism politically. The ontological basis of this is that the world, in their view, has become devoid of a centre and of any stable foundation – as though it had once possessed one. But if the world has never had a centre, then we are left with a mere assumption and, in broad contexts (such as the world, science, morality), the very notion of decentring loses all meaning. The problem lies not only in the postmodernists’ insistence on this view, but also in their tendency to conflate the moral with the factual and what is with what ought to be. In other words, we should live according to the pluralist, uncentered world where difference is fundamental. Yet in reality there is no necessary connection between the supposed absence of sameness in life and how we ought to behave. Also, the claim that there are no indisputable facts is not a moral value; it is at best a description of reality. It does not follow that we must live without a centre or identity. Indeed, why not draw the opposite moral conclusion, which is to behave contrary to this presumed state of the world?

There are other cases in which postmodernists conflate analysis of what exists (from their perspective) with prescriptive discourse by embedding normative values in their analytical process. For example, if deconstruction leads to the conclusion that collective identity is a construct – built around interests, power

³³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Marion Faber (ed. & trans.), Robert C. Holub (intro.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), §108, p. 64.

³⁴ Jean-Francois Lyotard & Jean-Loup Thebaud, *Just Gaming*, Wlad Godzich (trans.) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), p. 26.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

relations, authority, and dominant culture (and attitudes for or against it) – then postmodernists see identity as artificial. This, in turn, is interpreted by some as suggesting that this collective identity should not exist or should be dismissed – particularly when it is a national identity rather than a homosexual or gender identity. The latter, in their view, is “emancipatory”, whereas national identity is “repressive”.

The concept of morality is said to have undergone a radical reconfiguration in postmodern thought, which subjects it to the same scepticism directed at grand narratives. However, the issue here is not morality per se, but ethical concepts and theories. Postmodern thinkers have in fact dealt – without explicitly stating so – with meta-ethics, particularly with the relationship between the formation of moral concepts and to language, culture, and existing power structures. But they have not engaged with morality itself.

Just as postmodernism critiques science on the premise that it is a grand narrative, it critiques modern ethics as a set of fixed rules or objective commands grounded in reason or nature. Yet if this critique of modern ethics reflects a new reality in which grand narratives have disintegrated, and if, as postmodernists believe, morality has thereby become a purely individual concern and endeavour, then precisely which ethical theories treat morality as universal rules and objective commands independent of human will?

Modern ethical theories generally proceed from the assumption that human beings possess a moral sense grounded in empathy, together with moral rules that combine moral sentiment with practical reason. They are generally formulated on the basis of a particular conception of human nature, or on the principle of promoting the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people, or from a consequentialist standpoint, whereby action seeks to promote the values espoused by the moral agent. Others take natural dispositions expressed through empathy and aversion, building moral values upon them, and deriving further values through accumulated human experience and social interaction, beginning with the family and extending to society as a whole. All of these are philosophical accounts of morality; none claims to be a scientific theory. Moreover, they are inherently relative in that they hinge on the different premises on which they rest, such as the human pursuit of happiness as the highest good; the existence of an innate moral disposition such as empathy; the desire for recognition; an aversion to physical harm; the view that moral judgement is a free act requiring the ability to distinguish between good and evil; and the distinction between moral judgement and other forms of judgement by virtue of its universality – which, in turn, signifies the human willingness to act according to what could serve as a law for all humanity (Kant’s categorical imperative).

A philosophy preoccupied with defending difference or cultural specificity, while neglecting equality and even respect for the humanity of human beings, in fact contains premodern elements, despite being labelled postmodern.³⁶ Indeed, some tenured professors at American universities – who publish their works in their institutions’ journals and presses, enjoy the freedoms of Western liberal democracy, and fear the threat posed by figures such as Trump on these freedoms, yet would never choose to live in a contemporary country of the Global South – have attempted to advise Arabs that the most suitable political system for them is that of the early centuries of Islamic rule, before the third Hijri century (c. 815-911 CE).

The same argument applies to the postmodern position on universal values, such as the claim that every human being deserves respect simply by virtue of being human, regardless of their particular culture, place of birth, social role, or other attributes. Postmodernists regard this as a false universal value that masks Western aspirations of domination, arguing that the hypocrisy of its proponents is easily exposed. Nevertheless, those who celebrate exposing such hypocrisy fail to see that the tension between values and praxis is a crucial impetus for criticism and change within liberal democratic societies and in these societies’ relations with others. There is a fundamental difference between formal affirmations, embodied in charters

³⁶ Eagleton, p. 89.

and official discourse that all human beings are equal and possess what are called human rights and, for instance, racist discourses that openly categorize people into classes and races and accord some people rights while denying them to others. This difference is not merely verbal. It reflects different balances of power and different cultures, as well as new opportunities, possibilities, and horizons for influence and practice.

In Foucault’s genealogical studies of the origins of morality – especially in his analyses of the evolution of punishment and of what is permissible and possible in sexuality – he showed that what he counts as “moral” in a given historical context is inseparable from discursive formations and power relations. This led later postmodern thinkers to assume that he had debunked the Enlightenment conception of a “permanent moral reason”,³⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau stood out among the thinkers of the 18th century enlightenment for denouncing the falsity of morality of civilization and calling instead for the return to the natural morality inherent in human beings prior to the emergence of property relations. Moreover, few can rival Karl Marx in the harshness of his critique of the presentation of bourgeois interests, such as private property, as universal values and in tracing the origin and formation (or “genealogy”, in postmodern terminology) of individual freedom to the conditions of free trade and the emancipation of the peasant from bondage to the land and its owner, rendering him free to sell his labour power. Marx would rank among the modernists if the criteria are his adoption of a grand historical narrative and his attempt to cast his social theories as science. While his shortcomings in moral philosophy may be among his weaknesses, this does not mean that he failed to distinguish between good and evil. Indeed, his entire project can be summarized as the pursuit of human emancipation and happiness in a society free from class exploitation and private property.

The question of how morality can remain possible after the “death of God” and the collapse of universal certainties has been instrumental in motivating most ethical theorization in postmodern thought. Thinkers such as Foucault, Derrida, and Lyotard have argued that morality should not be understood as fixed universal prescriptions, but as a creative, context-sensitive practice. The argument up to this point remains intelligible and open to rational debate. For instance, one might claim that individual responsibility and sensitivity to context do not contradict the existence of moral rules, whether those rules are followed or challenged on contextual grounds.

The problem – indeed, the dilemma – arises when we ask how this can be reconciled with the notion of the “death of man” and the disappearance of the subject, which postmodernists have presented as a philosophical metaphor. They are alluding to Nietzsche’s declaration of the “death of God” – a catchy sound bite that adds nothing fundamentally new to philosophy. Zouaoui Beghoura, citing Foucault’s *The Order of Things* (*Les mots et les choses*, 1966), observes that structural anthropology, through its contrast between culture and nature, studies factors external to humans, thereby converging with psychoanalysis, which studies what lies outside human consciousness in order to understand it. Thus, both disciplines “dissolve the human”, to use Foucault’s term.³⁸ Foucault adds that

man is neither the oldest nor the most constant problem that has been posed for human knowledge. Taking a relatively short chronological sample within a restricted geographical area – European culture since the sixteenth century – one can be certain that man is a recent invention within it ... As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end.³⁹

There can be no morality that is subjective or intersubjective, relative or absolute, local or universal without the human subject – unless the “death of man” is simply a Nietzschean play on linguistic metaphors,

³⁷ Michel Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress,” in: Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 352.

³⁸ Beghoura, pp. 185-186; Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon, 1970), p. 279.

³⁹ Beghoura, p. 186; Foucault, *The Order of Things*, pp. 386-387.

a style more suited to literature than to philosophical thought. This metaphor is followed by another: the revolt of the individual and the advent of an age of individuality committed solely to itself, and to absolute individual responsibility.

Moral theories ought to be approached as relative; they are not scientific theories but philosophical attempts. This does not mean, however, that morality itself is relative. Human beings act on the basis of different motivations depending on the context. In some instances, they might be guided by deontological values that keep them from committing certain acts; in others, utilitarian considerations may lead them to act in ways they believe advance a particular value. Or they may act in accordance with the categorical imperative. But this does not mean that truthfulness can be considered immoral or that lying can be a moral value. People generally regard lying as bad – as they do theft, violations of human dignity, torture, and killing. All of these are seen as wrong and evil: there is no relativism here. This is why any justification for committing one of these wrongs requires subordinating it to another value or claiming that it serves a higher moral end, such as saving a human life, or invoking necessity, which permits what would otherwise be prohibited. But the prohibitions remain prohibitions. Morality is not relative!

In his later works, Foucault distinguished between the “moral code” and “morality”, which was his way of differentiating between morality and ethics.⁴⁰ He explains: “By ‘morality’, one means a set of values and rules of action that are recommended to individuals by various prescriptive agencies such as the family (in one of its roles), educational institutions, churches, and so forth ... we can call this prescriptive ensemble a ‘moral code’”.⁴¹

Scholars generally agree that moral rules – or what Foucault calls “moral codes” – change over time. Some Marxist claims go even further than postmodernist ones, linking moral rules and norms not only to interests and power but specifically to the interests of ruling classes. All such explanations, however, are one-dimensional. They fail to capture the richness of the relationship between human dispositions and their makeup, social structures, cultural hegemony, prevailing norms (whether codified or not), and human agency.

Moral philosophy, in general, investigates the rules governing human conduct toward others – the question “what should I do?” – and the human aspiration to live a good life. Kant, whom postmodernists regard as the one who systematized Enlightenment philosophy, approached the question by positing the existence of an autonomous individual who determines how to formulate a personal moral law that applies to all humanity. This law is to accept for others what one accepts for oneself, i.e., a philosophical formulation of the “Golden Rule”. Philosophy did not invent it; this has long predated philosophy and has existed in human conduct, including in the Christian tradition, for example, since the Sermon on the Mount. There is, therefore, no uniquely Kantian achievement here, especially once one probes his conception of humanity, which excluded non-Europeans. If there is a Kantian achievement in this realm, it lies in prioritizing moral duty over utility and even over happiness – even if the Stoics regarded virtue as the highest form of happiness. In addition, there are the sharp distinctions Kant drew between the judgements of pure reason (including the limits he established for scientific knowledge expressed in the question “what can I know?”), the judgements of practical reason (ethics as epitomized by the question “what ought I to do?”), and the judgements of religious faith.

In general, moral rules are not created by thinkers or philosophers, modern or otherwise, but by the interplay between human dispositions, social structures, and social development. When these rules change

⁴⁰ In principle, there is no difference between the two terms, except that the first derives from Latin and the second from Greek. They have been used to mean the same thing. However, many philosophers use morality to refer to the rules governing interaction between individuals, and ethics to denote a broader domain, which includes the inquiry into the virtuous life, how a person ought to live a good life, or how one can become a better human being, and other related questions. See: James Griffin, *What Can Philosophy Contribute to Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 93.

⁴¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 2: *The Use of Pleasure*, Robert Hurley (trans.) (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 25.

– as in changing conceptions of shame, taboo, chastity, sexuality, and the like – it is not moral philosophers who lead the process, and they rarely participate in the cumulative struggles that bring such changes about. When advocates demand full equality of women or protest against the treatment of women as mere bodies or objects of sexual desire, activists gain nothing from postmodernists’ assertion that grounding such demands in a universal moral principle merely expresses a will to domination, or that those advancing such claims should recognize that they are appealing only to a norm relative to a particular culture.

I doubt that any postmodernist has managed to produce an example of an Enlightenment thinker who formulated moral values as eternal, universal moral rules in the way the Stoics did, or as religions do in their commandments to the faithful. Attempts to formulate a universal morality are by no means unique to modernity. Indeed, from this perspective, a more accurate label for postmodernism in this realm might be “post-Stoic” or “post-Christian”. Nor is the formulation of universal moral rules, strictly speaking, the task of moral theory. Instead, theorists should ask the following types of questions: why is the prohibition of killing a principle accepted across societies and cultures, differing only over the exceptions that may justify violating it? Why do human beings universally recoil from the torture of the human body? Why is lying regarded as unfit to serve as a basis for communication among people? Clearly, not all moral values are relative and mutable. Some fundamental values are shared among human beings, yet insufficient emphasis is placed on their validity beyond the identity groups within which certain sets of moral rules operate.

In my view, the great challenge of modernity, one overlooked by postmodern thinkers who were preoccupied with its opposite (i.e., the localization of values), has outlived them. That challenge is this: how can these values extend across cultural, national, sectarian, or political communities of identity? This is the inverse of the preoccupation with cultural relativism. Modernist moral thought was a form of inverted cultural relativism: it acknowledged the existence of different cultures with different moral standards, while maintaining that the morality of modern societies was the correct one and ought to prevail. Postmodern relativism, by contrast, offers no pathway toward a shared human morality that would enable dialogue amid diversity. For what meaningful dialogue can exist between particularist cultures with nothing in common?

Foucault shifted his focus from normative moral systems to ethics as a practice of self-care and the creative formation of the self. In the Nietzschean vein, his approach viewed morality as an aesthetic and personal practice rather than a universal law.⁴² This perspective can be seen as a continuation of the Socratic tradition of grounding morality in the question “How should I live a virtuous life?” or “How can I become a better person?”. Yet it can also be interpreted as orienting the individual toward self-centredness and a kind of narcissism of the strong, primarily concerned with the refinement of one’s conduct, style, and aesthetic appearance – as in Nietzsche’s idealization of imagined Hellenic and Roman cultures as embodied in heroic statesmen and leaders.

In addition, it is not clear whether Foucault is describing morality as it actually exists, or as it ought to be. If his intent is descriptive, his claim can be refuted by showing that morality functions differently in practice. Human beings possess innate moral intuitions, act from diverse moral motivations, and differ in their understanding of moral duty and in their ethical practices. If, however, the intent is prescriptive, then we are dealing with a moral stance and conviction that Foucault aims to generalize and that can be interpreted and analysed. A critique of such a stance may be prompted by a moral conviction regarding the danger of conflating aesthetic with moral judgement. Alternatively, it may stem from the view that formulating moral values ought, at the very least, to aspire to universality, not through the imposition of universal rules, but through universalizing one’s own humanity and, accordingly, recognizing the dignity of every human being.

⁴² Ibid., p. 26.

To this, I will add a consequentialist observation: amid the struggles for justice and liberation, denying the existence of the humanity that binds all human beings can only produce harmful consequences.

2. The Question of Moral Rules and Individual Responsibility

As discussed earlier, postmodern thinkers are preoccupied with the shattering of grand narratives. In the moral realm, this translates into the insistence on confining morality to individual moral choice, a position that is coupled with the assertion that mere adherence to moral rules does not make an action moral. In *Postmodern Ethics* (1993), Zygmunt Bauman offers a conception of morality in a postmodern context. It emphasizes moral uncertainty in a world shaped by the decline of the authority of universal reason, as formulated by modernity. To my mind, this is one of those sweeping generalizations that are widely repeated yet rarely examined. Still, Bauman – whom I regard as a rational, critical thinker, although some associate with postmodernism – asserts that this decline in what he calls the “authority of universal reason” does not leave behind a nihilistic void. Rather, it opens the way for a new kind of moral responsibility rooted in the individual’s relationship with the Other.

Moreover, responding to the criticism that postmodernism leads to a relativism that allows everything, he takes issue with certain postmodern theorists who create this impression. He also censures the hypocrisy of developed Western societies that claim to subscribe to universal values but practise them as narrow, localized ones – a valid critique, indeed.

Bauman defines postmodern ethics as “morality without an ethical code”. Morality rests on the self’s responsibility toward the Other. Specifically, it is rooted in the face-to-face encounter between the self and the Other, an encounter that calls forth a responsibility exceeding the dictates of rules. Imposed duties are not the same as moral responsibility. Individuals distinguish themselves from others through the assumption of moral responsibility (“The Moral” in Bauman’s terms); they resemble others in the performance of duties (“Ethics”).⁴³ This distinction resembles the one drawn by Foucault discussed above.

Some “wordplay” is involved in Bauman’s densely written account. No society can function unless a majority understands morality in terms of duties – or more precisely, prohibitions. This is particularly true in societies marked by fragmentation of the public sphere and the decline of public morals and the weakening of individuals’ sense of responsibility toward the common good. Yet compliance with prohibitions is not sufficient to distinguish individuals from each other in terms of their understanding of what it means to do good, or of what they do to cultivate their characters and find meaning in their lives. The debate over the nature of ethics of responsibility has long existed among modern moral philosophers under headings such as consequentialism and virtue ethics.

Bauman’s argument resembles Charles Taylor’s discussion of finding meaning and individual identity in values that define the self, or what Bauman calls “moral self”. In my view, this stands in stark contradiction to the postmodern discourse on the end of the subject or the “death of man” – unless what is meant is the death of man in modernity and his resurrection in postmodernity.

Bauman maintains that the absence of a unified moral code does not weaken the sense of responsibility but intensifies it. In the absence of the reassurance of external certainty, moral decision-making reverts to the conscience of the individual, who must assume full responsibility. But when did modernity ever combine the reassurance of an external certainty with the autonomy of the individual?

Can any society – whether we call it modern or postmodern – exist without moral rules? Individuals face moral responsibility in their relationship to the Other, whether or not moral rules exist. Moral rules

⁴³ Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), pp. 5, 11, 14, 48.

and deontological values – especially universal prohibitions such as “Do not kill”, “Do not steal”, “Do not lie”, “Do not violate the dignity of others” – do not diminish the challenge of taking responsibility toward the Other. Moreover, this responsibility has never been either fully realized or entirely absent at any known stage of human history.

Postmodernists’ quick and sweeping generalizations bring to mind similar claims made by many modern philosophers and literary figures regarding the decline of premodern religious certainty, the disintegration of intimate social bonds in rural communities and other traditional forms of social life, and the rise of individual responsibility in the modern age. They also echo some generalizations associated with the rise of Romantic philosophy in reaction to Enlightenment thought, as well as the Frankfurt School’s critique of instrumental reason under advanced capitalism and mass society. It seems that such patterns of thought recur during periods of major transformation and crisis.

Bauman observes that under the bureaucratic ethics of modernity, one could say: “I am only obeying the rules” or “I am following the law”, thereby evading responsibility and transferring it to the system. In postmodern ethics, by contrast, these external assurances collapse, and responsibility reverts to the individual. It is a condition in which “morality has no excuse”, as he puts it. Each individual, alone, encounters an open-ended moral dilemma: having to choose between good and evil without absolute assurance – it is “a cruel predicament ... a drama of choice”.⁴⁴

A warning against blind obedience to laws, regulations, and orders in the name of one’s official duties is present in every line of Bauman’s argument. This was precisely how some Nazi officials justified their conduct during the Holocaust – a justification that avoids facing the choice between good and evil and thus shirks responsibility. Here the motivation behind Bauman’s argument becomes clear: he is the author of *Modernity and the Holocaust*.

It is also worth stressing here that there is no connection between committing a crime out of obedience to laws or orders and the existence of general moral rules. In both cases, obedience or disobedience constitutes a moral stance and does not absolve one of moral responsibility. Nor is there any guarantee that individuals will refrain from obeying orders in the future because of some hidden feature distinguishing postmodernity that supposedly endows individuals with moral responsibility. Unless, of course, Bauman’s argument is not an analysis of a historical condition distinct from modernity but rather a call for such moral responsibility.

I disagree with Bauman’s assertion that moral action is not amenable to codification. Without some degree of codification, no society can function. Yet he correctly observes that genuinely moral acts often arise in response to the unique needs of a particular individual, which no general law can determine. Showing empathy may require breaking a rule or going beyond the bounds of duty. Like Derrida, Bauman underscores the elements of singularity and spontaneity in moral action: “Before society, its law-makers and its philosophers come down to spelling out its ethical principles, there are beings who have been moral without the constraint (or is it luxury?) of codified goodness”.⁴⁵

Although I am inclined to accept Bauman’s insistence that moral reasoning is not purely rational, that it is rooted in human nature, and that individuals’ moral nature leads to social life rather than the reverse, it is still important to stress that individuals have never existed in isolation – whether in human history or in their personal histories. They have always lived within groups or societies, which entails norms, prohibitions, and duties. It is true that these do not exhaust the domain of morality. Individual morality begins with their conscious practice, that is, with a conscious and often tense relationship to those norms,

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 13; Zygmunt Bauman, “What Prospects of Morality in Times of Uncertainty?,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 15, no. 1 (1998), p. 13.

⁴⁵ Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, p. 61.

and does not end with individual moral choices, even in the most traditional societies. The importance of such choices, however, increases with the growing autonomy of the individual and the expansion of freedoms in modern society.

Bauman emphasizes the absence of what he calls “universal certainties”, yet without relinquishing the call for moral commitment. He holds that postmodernity restores ethics to the human level. Rather than erasing the distinction between good and evil, the postmodern condition compels us to confront that distinction in the course of our own moral decisions. Bauman’s work constitutes a philosophical response to the equation of postmodernism with moral decay. He paints a picture of moral actors without universal assurances, each a moral subject bearing individual responsibility. It is a morality grounded not in rules but in dialogical relationships with others, consistent with the postmodern emphases on alterity, locality, and difference.

The problem emerges when one agrees with postmodern thought in its most important texts on ethics. The adamant rejection of universal rules leads to an exaggerated account of the burden of individual moral responsibility, which reaches an even greater extreme Derrida’s *The Gift of Death* (1992). Derrida approaches morality through the concept of responsibility and questions the assumption that moral decisions can be made on the basis of clear universal rules.

In that book, Derrida treats the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac as an example of an aporia – that is, an irresolvable dilemma given the available premises, in this case moral premises. He argues that any decision worthy of being called moral involves such an aporia, as no general rule can dictate – or even justify – the decision. Yet the individual must still make a choice and bear responsibility for it. If a decision could be determined in advance by a rule or formulaic calculation, then, according to Derrida, the consequent act would not be an authentically moral act; it would be merely an act of obedience and execution. This is mistaken. Choosing to adhere to a moral rule – provided that adherence is itself voluntary – is already a moral decision.

For Derrida, however, true responsibility lies in the state of anxiety and uncertainty about what is right under any given rule, where every decision has a cost, since responding in solidarity to the call of one obligation entails sacrificing another. In *The Gift of Death*, he formulates this point forcefully: “I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another without sacrificing the other other, the other others”.⁴⁶ The problem is that, for Derrida, this dilemma is not confined to extreme cases such as God’s command to Abraham to sacrifice his son; rather, it lies at the very heart of morality. Responsibility toward one person implies irresponsibility toward others, since human attention and resources, at any given moment, are limited.

Is it true that deciding to help a needy or oppressed person at any given moment means neglecting others? Is there, indeed, a moral duty to help all human beings? In my view, the answer is no. Responsibility is, by definition, the antithesis of irresponsibility. But it does not follow that exercising responsibility toward one person simultaneously entails irresponsibility toward everyone else. Nor does failing to help someone amount to helping all others. Failure to assist is not an act that occurs when one is helping someone else. On the contrary, acting in solidarity with the oppressed in one area may contribute to helping others, by setting an example, for instance. Certainly, people face dilemmas when having to choose how to allocate limited resources, but such dilemmas are not peculiar to morality alone.

Although Derrida’s conception of moral responsibility is open to discussion, I do not believe he identifies a genuine problem. Moral action is rarely motivated by general rules but instead is usually a

⁴⁶ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, David Wills (trans.) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 68.

response to particular cases. Individuals may internalize certain general rules, thereby making them part of their motivations. They may also act out of their moral sense or a desire to be a good or noble person. Indeed, they may simply conform to a social norm in their conduct or in their stance toward a particular issue, believing this to be the moral course of action expected of them.

One may face situations in which assuming one responsibility entails neglecting another, or where helping one person – rescuing them from the atrocities in Gaza, for example – means abandoning others, given the limits of one's available resources for acts of solidarity. But does helping a single person really create such a dilemma? Or is Derrida overcomplicating the matter? The ordinary moral person (as distinct from the philosopher) – someone who is genuinely noble or altruistic – helps those they can recognizing that they cannot help everyone. Nor does this mean that such help comes at the expense of others. That conclusion rests on a fallacy based on pairing a word with its opposite, unless the philosopher simply means that any act of assistance comes at the cost of one's time or comfort. However, the moral person does not think in this way. They understand that benevolent deeds require a sacrifice of time, and perhaps money, and they weigh their abilities and resources accordingly. This is not an ethical dilemma. The real problem arises in cases of conflicting commitments, where meeting one comes at the expense of another. For example, one hesitates between helping victims of injustice and fulfilling one's obligations toward one's family. This issue has been extensively discussed in moral philosophy, and Derrida contributes little that is genuinely new.

Nor should we forget that many people believe that the most effective moral act, instead of rescuing a person or two from poverty or war, is political struggle against such conditions. They might then combine, if possible, individual acts of compassion with political action. There are many ways to avoid confronting Derrida's dilemma.

Moral philosophy has long grappled with dilemmas arising in extreme situations, such as whether to sacrifice one person to save many others, or whether to torture a prisoner to extract a confession that could save lives. These, too, involve conflicts between values, as well as between moral theories – for instance, between consequentialist reasoning, which may permit such actions in certain cases, and deontological approaches, which prohibit torture absolutely. But this is not Derrida's intent; his claim is far too general, reducing every moral responsibility to one responsibility undertaken at the expense of another. It thereby transforms moral action into a source of suffering rather than of fulfilment.

What is particularly striking in this context is Derrida's invocation of the story of Abraham, which does not belong in this discussion. It is wholly unsuited to illustrating the kind of moral dilemma he seeks to explain. The entire biblical episode is about a test of faith, not a test of morality. From a moral standpoint, there should be no dilemma. Sacrificing one's son is an immoral act, and the moral question it raises is easily resolved by any human being. There is no moral dilemma here. This is not a case of upholding one moral value at the expense of another. Agreeing to sacrifice one's son is to prefer obedience to God over both morality and one's love for one's child. But this situation does raise an important question, namely, the potential conflict between religious faith and morality. Certain forms of religiosity – especially the more dogmatic ones – prioritize faith, as they understand it, over morality. They behave as though faith were a substitute for morality. Many societies have suffered the consequences of religious dogma that replaces morality with absolute faith and blind obedience. Some continue to suffer those consequences today, including parts of Iraq and Syria formerly controlled by the Islamic State (ISIS).

The moral person, by contrast, gives priority to moral values over religious faith, or interprets their faith in moral terms, thereby enabling them to preserve that faith while rejecting any immoral practice carried out in its name. The model presented by Abraham is one of combining absolute faith with absolute

obedience, without questioning the reason or the purpose. God tested him, and he passed the test by preferring obedience over parental love (having suspended morality altogether). Only then did God provide a ram to sacrifice instead of his son. But whenever religious extremists prefer their literal understanding of the texts they believe in over moral values (whose existence they themselves recognize), God neither speaks to them directly nor sends a ram at the end of the test. Yet they continue to prefer what they regard as a higher purpose, accessible only to an elite among the faithful, over the values that bind ordinary people. They thereby “rise” above those values when, in reality, they sink below them.

Does this not recall Nietzsche’s revaluation of values – despite the fact that he believed in no religion and despised what he called “slave morality”?

Conclusion: On the Nature of Morality

Doubt about grand narratives and refusing to confine explanations of the world, or “truth”, to science gave rise to scepticism not only toward theories of ethics but also toward universal morality. These have come to be viewed as a form of Western discourse invested in relations of power and domination over the rest of the world. This outlook ignores the fact that certain currents within Islam and Christianity advanced universal moral values for all humanity long before modernity. These values were grounded in the oneness of God, His creation of the universe and humankind, and His appointment of humans as His representatives on earth – in contrast to modernity’s emphasis on human centrality.

In this respect, postmodern thought begins by questioning the very foundations upon which moral theory has been built. Its scepticism encompasses every comprehensive moral theory, whether grounded in divine law, universal rationality, an assumed human essence, or aspects of human nature. Instead, morality is understood as a collection of local narratives, each legitimate only within its own historical and geographical boundaries, without any claim to an absolute, all-embracing moral truth. We should take note of an underlying assumption in the postmodern approach: it treats moral theories in the same way it treats scientific ones, despite the fundamental difference between the two. The former are not scientific theories; they are philosophical propositions. On the one hand, they offer explanatory models; on the other, they articulate moral values to which people ought to aspire. In other words, they are normative theories.

In general, modern moral philosophies assume the existence of a human moral sense that can serve as the foundation for moral rules. There is an important distinction between criticizing moral theories that derive moral rules from a particular principle and criticizing universal morality. The latter does not depend on the existence of universal moral theories. Moral conduct grounded in the belief that humanity is a shared attribute of all human beings does not necessarily proceed from acquaintance with any particular theory of moral philosophy.

There is also a distinction between people’s attitudes and conduct in everyday life and the attempt to formulate them as general rules, as moral philosophical schools, such as consequentialism, utilitarianism, realism, and deontology, is another. Such efforts are philosophical enterprises, not unlike those of postmodern thinkers themselves. They do not legislate moral laws; rather, they classify and systematize patterns of conduct, attitudes, and forms of moral hesitation already present in human life.

Moral theories are rarely mentioned in everyday contexts or referenced in newspapers – let alone on social media. Rather, they are discussed in academic conferences and journals or perhaps cited in commentaries on government policies or parliamentary legislation from the perspective of one moral philosophical school or another. If we regard morality as applying to a community of persons that encompasses humanity as a whole, then it addresses such values as

the respect for the life, integrity, and well-being, even flourishing, of others. These are the ones we infringe when we kill or maim others, steal their property, strike fear into them and rob them of peace ... We are dealing here with moral intuitions which are uncommonly deep, powerful, and universal. They are so deep that we are tempted to think of them as rooted in instinct ... There seems to be a natural, inborn compunction to inflict death or injury on another.⁴⁷

While it seems natural, in my view, that deontological morality should apply to human beings as such – i.e., universally – the problem lies in the fact that belonging to a group tends to activate moral values primarily within the group, and only conditionally outside it, subject to a variety of conditions and circumstances. At the same time, individuals differ in how they define the boundaries of the group. One person’s horizon may encompass all of humanity, as in the Stoic concept of the cosmopolis and its motto: “all human beings are brothers”.

Scientific practice is difficult to imagine without laws and theories, but moral practice is woven into the fabric of life itself, both in modernity and beyond. Humans adopt moral positions in their daily interactions with others, from family members to strangers they encounter, without consulting moral theories. They do so because they possess certain values, as well as both moral and non-moral motives. If a society lacks shared public values – let alone laws – it cannot rely solely on its members’ individual sense of moral responsibility and personal calculations. Such a situation gives rise not to a postmodern society but to a condition of disorder. Yet norms, laws, and prevailing values alone do not create a moral society. For that reason, there must also be moral individuals capable of critically questioning these norms, laws, and values.

Values are not called “universal” simply because all people adopt them. Not all people act in accordance with universal values, nor do governments base their policies on them. Universal values are those formulated to apply to all human beings. They may sometimes be expressed as natural rights inherent in all humanity. They have achieved widespread recognition and legitimacy and remain capable of being defended. Today, it has become difficult to make moral judgements about individuals’ behaviour, institutional policies, or state actions beyond the sphere of personal relations, in a manner that is intelligible to others without invoking universal values.

One might assume that the source of postmodernists’ scepticism was not the collapse of scientific theories before the eyes of these late 20th-century thinkers – even though they later invoked such Thomas Kuhn, Paul Feyerabend, and others to support their scientific relativism. Rather, its origins were moral, arising from great disillusionment within Western civilization, such as the horrors of World War II and the Holocaust; the alienation of the individual in mass consumer societies awash with media spectacle;⁴⁸ dismay at the dictatorships and other outcomes of socialism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe; and the commodification of everything, including culture, in advanced capitalist societies.

Postmodern thinkers were no more sensitive than others to these shocks. Many Marxists abandoned Marxism following the Soviet intervention in Hungary (1956) and the exposure of Stalinist crimes at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Some turned to Kant in an attempt to correct the conflation of theory and moral values in historical materialism. Meanwhile, the Frankfurt School – from Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to Herbert Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man and Reason and Revolution* – subjected mass culture and its commodification to sustained criticism, offering profound, emancipatory critiques of Western modernity, while opposing both capitalist exploitation and the authoritarianism of bureaucratic socialist regimes.

⁴⁷ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 4-5.

⁴⁸ Some postmodern thinkers have recast these societies as domains of freedom and individuality, viewing “trends” as a mode of rebellion and individual personality formation, unconstrained by rules of appearance or “style”. The generation represented by Gilles Lipovetsky presents the most forceful expression of this view. They see themselves as moving beyond postmodernity into hypermodernity. See: Gilles Lipovetsky & Sébastien Charles, *Hypermodern Times* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005). This book epitomizes the view that postmodern thought is a phenomenon linked to late capitalism.

Therefore, in my view, these shocks are not sufficient to explain the postmodernists’ moral scepticism and relativism. Rather, what led to what Lyotard calls the “loss of authority” enjoyed by traditional value systems was the fragility of the French philosophical milieu under a French regime that collaborated with Nazism. This milieu proved incapable of criticizing that regime directly or of holding itself accountable for its failure to do so, while French and German philosophers continued to produce their work under it.

This angst-ridden current in French philosophy discovered revolutionary critical elements in the thought of Nietzsche and Heidegger – the two thinkers least qualified to provide points of departure for a critique of Nazism and fascism. Indeed, the Nazis themselves were more influenced by them than by any other modern thinkers (albeit – as others argue – through misinterpretation).

After World War II, postmodernists extended the scope of their critique to Western culture as a whole. Once this process began with Nietzsche’s elitist critique of the prevailing value system (a premodern critique because of its aristocratic character), it developed its own internal dynamic, and Nietzsche’s premodern critique was transformed into a postmodern one. One of the ironies in the history of ideas is that, when Nietzsche’s critique of values is exported to “us” in postmodern guise, it reverted to its original premodern form. In this context, it becomes necessary to rethink the origins of morality. If belief in the existence of moral foundations or dispositions in human nature is abandoned, or if the possibility of universal values is denied, then the origin of morality becomes contingent upon and dependent on historical and cultural contexts. Such a claim explains everything and, hence, explains the specificity of nothing. Failure to grasp what distinguishes a phenomenon from another is a failure to understand it at all.

It should also be added that postmodern philosophy emerged after the failure of the student movement, or cultural revolution, of the 1960s to achieve a political revolution, although it contributed to transforming Western societies by strengthening the link between democracy and liberalism and expanding the scope of individual freedom. It preserved radicalism largely at the level of discourse, expressed in its emphasis on difference and plurality as though they were forces of good, in contrast to unity, identity, universality, totality, and order, which were cast as forces of evil. The leading figures of this current recognize the existence of these tensions and acknowledge them. However, they are unwilling to view them in their totality and, instead, align themselves with one side of the opposition – for example. Because of this prior commitment to one pole against another, postmodernism itself can become exclusionary, censorious, and orthodox: it welcomes the language of gender while dismissing class; it embraces cultural particularity while excluding human nature; it speaks extensively of the body, pleasure, and power while avoiding questions of justice and equality; and it overuses postcolonial discourse while avoiding questions of liberation movements and state-building.⁴⁹ In their critique of liberalism, postmodernists ignore the fact that life under it is preferable to life under tyranny, because they refuse to view phenomena in their totality, including liberal democracy in all its contradictions and historical development.

Postmodern thought is neither nihilistic nor devoid of morality. Rather, it reimagines morality as contextual, pluralistic ethics centred on alterity and on the formation of the self without foundational grounds. But does this justify accusing it of moral relativism? Is it possible to construct a coherent moral outlook in the absence of foundations?

Postmodern ethics is concerned with the “other” (whether a concrete individual or someone identified as belonging to a different culture) and with the relationship of the subject to itself, rather than with obligations or abstract principles. Whereas a modern ethical person might ask, “What is the universally correct action in this situation?”, “How would a moral person behave here?”, or “How do I realize my self-conception through moral action?”, a postmodern moral person is more likely to ask: “What is the

⁴⁹ Taylor, pp. 7-9.

nature of my relationship to this particular other in this spatio-temporal context, and what moral obligations arise from that relationship?”. Nevertheless, it quickly becomes clear that answering this question requires presupposing either moral dispositions inherent in human beings as such or moral rules that may be followed or transgressed. This, in turn, takes us back to questions associated (perhaps imprecisely and arbitrarily) with what might be called the “modern moral subject”.

Postmodern thinkers do not concern themselves with the distinctions that could genuinely make a difference in moral behaviour. These include: first, the distinction between a person whose actions and behaviours are guided by value-based considerations and another who readily sidelines morality in favour of other considerations at the first real test; second, the distinction between two individuals in terms of the nature and weight of moral considerations in their conduct and lives generally, relative to interests, fears, and other calculations; third, the distinction between an autonomous individual – whether called modern or not – and an individual constrained by the norms of the group to which they belongs, acting according to its conventions and its definitions of what is good and bad in every circumstance; and fourth, the distinction between an autonomous individual with strong moral commitments and another for whom morality consists merely in obeying the law and refraining from prohibited acts, while remaining indifferent to doing good for those outside the narrow circle of family or the identity group to which they are attached.

In my view, these are important questions. Most of them receive little attention in modern moral philosophy, and they are equally absent from postmodern critiques directed against it.

Many other distinctions between what is moral and what is immoral readily come to mind. All of them have been, and remain, far more meaningful than the distinction between a modern and a postmodern moral subject. If an ordinary person were to assess the conduct of authors of difficult postmodern texts by looking at their lives beyond their books and philosophical debates – even in the corridors of the university – the distinctions outlined above would prove far more illuminating than the distinction between a modern and a postmodern person.

It thus becomes clear that the critique of universality, the glorification of alterity and difference, and the departure from normative models in favour of a Nietzschean aesthetic project of self-formation do little to determine whether a person treats others with respect; refrains from harming or degrading them; is sincere in the expression of emotions; helps those in need; refrains from ranking human beings by worth; is racist or not; or remains a passive observer in the face of the annihilation of another people.

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