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مدخلان لمناقشة موضوع: "نحن" والفكر ما بعد الحداثي

Two Perspectives On "US" and Postmodern Thought

ملخص: تقدّم هذه الدراسة قراءة نقدية لأثر استيراد فكر ما بعد الحداثية إلى السياق العربي، وتبيُّن 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 تتسم بضعف المؤسسات العلمية، وتغوّل الهويات ما قبل الحديثة، قد يؤديان إلى إضعاف الموضوعية العلمية، وتبرير النسبوية الأخلاقية، وتثبيت أنماط السلطة التقليدية. وتركّز الدراسة على محورَي 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، الأخلاق الكونية، نقد التنوير.

Abstract: This study offers a critical reading of the consequences of importing postmodern thought into the Arab context. It demonstrates that postmodern commentary on the relativity of Truth, deconstruction of grand narratives, overcoming the authority of the universal intellect, and scepticism toward human agency are based on modern Western criteria which are not met in partially modernized societies. The study shows that the adoption of postmodern critique in an environment of weak scientific institutions where premodern identities prevail can enfeeble scientific objectivity, justify moral relativism, and reify modes of traditional authority. This study concentrates on the subjects of science and ethics by deconstructing postmodernist arguments regarding scientific discourse and ethical standards. In doing so, the study clarifies the difference between scientific truth and philosophical and religious truth; it also explains the distinction between universal moral values and moral rules, and between morality, theories of morality, and scientific theories.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Relativism, Objectivity, Universal Ethics, Critique of Enlightenment.

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Introduction

This study engages with postmodernism from the perspective of a presumed "we", which connects the author with his audience without defining the term explicitly. Readers may determine the extent to which they belong to this "we". The aim is not to affirm a national identity, but to emphasize an affiliation with a society whose cultural, political, and civilizational realities are unlike those that typify the stage of development that Western postmodernist intellectuals call postmodernity. As the prefix "post-" suggests, this 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 prevalence of what they call the Enlightenment narrative and the authority of "universal reason", among other concepts. The presumed "we" has not moved beyond the modernity just described; indeed, its narrative has yet to take hold in "our" 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 disjointed modernity stemming from an asymmetrical relationship with modern, developed countries – a relationship that disrupted the organic modernization processes that had been underway in these societies.

The study discusses the potential impact of postmodernism in science and ethics. I proceed from the conviction that these fields, taken together, constitute the primary intellectual and cultural challenge facing societies that have experienced Western modernity only in a piecemeal form. This manifests itself in the instrumental use of its achievements and in patterns of consumption, conflicts between endogenous and exogenous values, and the production of identity conflicts. Science and ethics here are closely intertwined with questions of human development and social justice; they form, moreover, the basis for overcoming interactions rooted in the dichotomy of dependency versus authenticity and identity. The study is motivated by the concern that certain postmodern ideas, critical of modernity and exported as-is to our countries, do not help the shift from modernity to postmodernity – if we suppose for argument's sake that this negative "post-ness" does exist in its European countries of origin. Instead, they are deployed to justify the perpetuation of premodernity in our societies, much as authoritarian regimes latch onto seemingly radical critiques of liberal democracy and import them into countries that have never experienced democracy.

Defending the objectivity of science and recognizing the moral autonomy of the individual and public ethics acquire great importance in countries where scientific production does not play a meaningful role in the economy, where the state allocates paltry budgets for research, and occultism sits side-by-side with the latest imported technologies, without being influenced by the sciences that produced them. The theoretical sciences are neglected, research is restricted and censored, and a culture prevails in which an analysis is judged to be true or false according to the political orientation of its author, or by answering the question: "Whom does this analysis serve?" Likewise, the justice or moral worth of a political position is evaluated 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 exist many exceptions to this situation, it nevertheless poses immense problems and challenges. Yet these lie beyond the horizon of postmodern theorists in Western academia.

Ideas associated with postmodernism are united by the claim that the world has undergone a fundamental shift to a state beyond modernity, because it can no longer be understood in the same ways as before. Understanding this postmodern condition begins by questioning the so-called grand narratives of progress and universal truths grounded in reason. One must also challenge the existence of a unified, conscious human subject that interacts, in that capacity, with an objective world or other external objects.

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 they represent. This current has thus opened itself to accusations of relativism, as it denies the existence of any fixed anchor 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) homed in on Michel Foucault's contention that "power is not something unitary that exists outside us" but rather something that permeates all social domains. The acceptance of this claim, for Eco, is the measure of postmodern thought. Hutcheon proposes the existence of many "postmodernities", including the notions of textuality, deferral, and the deconstructing impulse associated with Jacques Derrida, the question of "intellectual mastery and its limits" discussed by Jean-François Lyotard (1924–1998), and the concepts of simulation and the replacement of reality by its representation developed by Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007).(2)

The terminology of postmodern thought tends to be vague and slippery, opening it to 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 understandable and contain meaningful ideas – including critiques of Western rationalism – that can be rationally debated. By contrast, some of the second generation's texts appear profound because they are abstruse and

(1) Alan Sokal and 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.

impenetrable – which blurs the difference between the difficulty arising from the complexity of the texts and the incomprehensibility resulting from their vacuousness. This is compounded by their moral and scientific relativism.

Before the label "postmodernism" was applied to intellectual trends in the social sciences, it was used to describe an architectural movement that "subverted" mainstream modernist styles in the 1950s. This movement embraced stylistic pluralism, rejected functional simplicity, and invited 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 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 "strict interlinkage 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 "grand narratives" (les grands récits) – in Lyotard's terms – the scientific narrative lost its legitimizing role. At the same time, the rise of specialized disciplines, each with its own framework of authority, and the increasing dependence of scientific research on funding due to the technologies employed rendered science subject to the institutions and administrations that controlled the budgets. Consequently, the source of scientific legitimacy became the consensus of scientists within each field, and the need to free science from monopolistic control became one of the most important issues of the postmodern period.

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, particularly

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(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.

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

(5) Ibid., xix.

during his structuralist, or pre-poststructuralist, phase. 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 as objectives, even at the expense of values. According to them, this process begins when science is utilized for the purposes of control through mathematization and the neutralization of qualities and modalities 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 the very possibility that universal values can exist.(7)

American universities were attracted to the works that Foucault began to publish in the 1960s, especially his studies of madness, imprisonment, and sexuality, which focused postmodern thought on questions concerning the relationship between truth and power. Unlike Horkheimer and Adorno, who were concerned with rationalizing the Enlightenment tradition as applied to society or the world, Foucault devoted himself to fields regarded as marginal within historical scholarship, such as insanity, illness, sexuality, crime, and death. His studies helped trace the emergence of the modern subject by examining institutionalized forms of control, such as surveillance and punishment (i.e., prisons) and medical treatment (i.e., hospitals). They also contributed to exposing the political power game behind what appear to be objective terms and concepts.

In the 1980s and 1990s, postmodernism penetrated social thought and intertwined with established social issues such as feminism, gender, postcoloniality, and identity politics. At the same juncture, the idea of "postmodernity" gained prominence as an artistic and literary temperament blending elitism and decadence (as in the work of Andy Warhol), and also as a form of relativism.

In The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity (Der Philosophische Diskurs der Moderne, 1985), Jürgen Habermas describes postmodern philosophers as neoconservatives, arguing that their intellectual efforts destabilize the discourse of the Enlightenment and rationality, which, for him, correspond with the discourse of modernity. He also critiques their tendency toward relativism and the aesthetization of knowledge. However, from the perspective of this study, modernity is not a single project that can be zealously defended against so-called "postmodernity", thereby facilitating the task of criticism. Modernity is riddled with internal contradictions: it is at once rational and irrational, progressive and reactionary, a 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

(6) Azmi Bishara, *Religion and Secularism in Historical Context*, part II, vol. 1: "Secularism and Secularization: The Intellectual Process" (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2015), pp. 712–725. *Al-Din wa-l-'Ilmaniyya fi Siyaq Tarikhi*, part II, vol. 1: *Al-'Ilmaniyya wa-l-'Almana*

(7) Ibid., p. 749.

and class disparities. It is consumer culture and the multiplication and diversification of human needs and ways of satisfying them. It encompasses both the Enlightenment and the critique of the Enlightenment. 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, the 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, conversely, they might trigger dialectical responses that serve democracy if they inspire progress toward overcoming the problems or if the critiques are anchored in democratic foundations). In any event, these critiques have not produced a postmodern political system – not that anyone has informed us yet of what such a system might look like. Postmodernism is a collection of radical trends that are apolitical, detached from politics, or concerned with post-state politics – another manifestation 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 tended toward rationality and sought to ground its approach in science. One factor behind this influence is that certain Marxist predictions – which had employed a scientific method – have proven false, 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 associated with 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 valid, with critiques of progress per se. The latter tend to deny the value of actual advancements – such as increased life expectancy, higher standards of living, the diversification of individual needs, the growing awareness of human dignity, and the radical transformation in the status of women – on the grounds of the negative aspects of progress. Before long, Western critiques of progress in the West spread to societies where many elements of that progress, such as adequate healthcare, social welfare, individual liberties, women's rights, and so on, remain out of reach.

Science appeared to be an "easy target" compared with the institutions and systems within which it develops and which utilize its results. These happen to be the institutions in which the majority of postmodern theorists themselves work, mostly as Western

(8) Sokal and Bricmont, p. 198.

(9) Ibid, p. 202.

university professors who have spent their lives in academia, in stark contrast to leftist theorists of the 19th and early 20th centuries. This current found particular encouragement in academic institutions, especially in the United States. Still, while it is no longer a marginal phenomenon in the social sciences and humanities, it does not affect output in the hard 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 some student groups and in frustrated circles on the left seeking a theoretical justification for political inaction. As Gregory Smulewicz-Zucker and Michael J. Thompson observe:

> 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)

Such an ethos ultimately amounts to a critique of liberalism from the right. It is notable in this connection that, while postmodernism takes a negative position on the state and identity in general, this stance is only activated against national identity and nationalism, while communal identities are treated 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. I have previously addressed this issue in depth in two monographs.(11) This dimension could serve as a third entry point for critiquing postmodernism from "our" perspective, and perhaps I will address this theme in a separate study.

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 essential 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 specific character of state authority and the particular nature of state violence.

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(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) Namely, *Masʾalat al-Dawla: Uṭrūḥa fī l-Falsafa wa-l-Naẓariyya wa-l-Siyāqāt* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2023); and *al-Dawla al-ʿArabiyya: Baḥth fī l-Mansha' wa l-Masār* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2024).

Postmodernism owes its "phenomenal success in the [Western] academy" in part to its "formlessness", 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 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 to cultivate 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 sterility of this incomprehensible bias at the level of abstraction – favouring 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 the weight given to pure difference ends up equating all phenomena by virtue of their 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 can serve as a substitute for criticizing reality – and, more significantly, for criticizing the forces that use science and rationality as instruments of control. One thus gains the impression that not only is postmodernism reluctant to take decisive stances against oppression, but it is also bent on leading some students and researchers to believe that, when they race to expose the authoritarianism of science or to deconstruct the illusion of universal ethical principles, they are actually performing critical work, which exempts them from practising criticism in public affairs. As a result, they abandon two fields of critique: ethical critique of exercises of power by the state or government – on the pretext that authority is dispersed everywhere and universal values are false – and objective, analytical critique engaging the scientific method. They thus refrain from doing anything useful in either domain.

At another level, many social movements influenced by the mood of the new academic left – from women's and minority rights movements to advocacy groups pressing for social welfare policies or the recognition of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations – have found a place in the liberal-democratic state. Within this framework, they defend 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

(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.

concerns of the majority of the population, particularly workers and the middle classes, large sectors of which have fallen prey to populism, which is hostile to liberalism, foreigners, and minority rights.(13)

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

Cultural relativism is postmodernists' main instrument in their critique of universalism, but they do not defend the victims of this cultural relativism within each culture. Perhaps the most prominent example of this is Richard Rorty (1931–2007), known for advocating conformity to liberal-democratic norms in the West where they have become the established way of life, because they have been shown to work in Western societies. He offers no logical grounds for defending them against their detractors, which spares him the need for any deep critique of ideas. After all, every social discourse is simply the product of setting, power relations, cultural determinants, and so on. Rorty's only real argument against fascism is that it is not the way things are done in the United States.(15) By this logic, his argument against the populist and authoritarian practices of US President Donald Trump, particularly in his second term, would merely be that they are "un-American".

A subtle collusion thus unfolds between American postmodernists and "Third-Worldists". The former claim that liberal democracy is a Western way of life and should not be imposed on other countries, while the latter assert that the other face of this way of life is colonialism, which imposed it on Third World countries. The two converge in their rejection of the universality of ideas such as human rights, which they agree are Western values, not universal ones.(16)

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(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, Volume 1: The Will to Knowledge*, Robert Hurley (trans.) (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), pp. 100–101.

(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.

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 colonizing side shares this perspective, but in reverse. Postcolonial scholarship tends to attribute responsibility for nearly everything that occurs in former colonized states to colonialism, to the extent of denying the agency of these societies and their sociopolitical forces. It even rejects the scientific component of research conducted by scholars from the metropole, including orientalists. It emphasizes 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 just another form of domination – no different from any other relationship between a subject and its object – merely by virtue of being their 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. We are therefore deprived of the ability to condemn the ideological components in the colonizer's study of the colonized, while taking the opportunity to understand, assess, and benefit from the scientific aspects. This also undermines the confidence of formerly colonized people in their ability to produce scientific knowledge about themselves and others as fellow members of the human race, thereby transforming formal political independence into genuine autonomy and expanding their work beyond contesting the legacy of colonialism.

Postcolonial studies has adopted elements of postmodern thought such as deconstructing narratives and analysing discourse as a representation of power relations. While this approach may be useful at one stage of the research process and for a specific purpose, it offers little beyond that. Within this framework, narratives are numerous, 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, postmodern thinkers will insist that the Palestinian narrative must be recognized, stressing the existence of two narratives in the conflict. They will foreground the role of Palestinian cultural production and even magnify its significance to rival its Israeli counterpart, even though this is a conflict between a colonizer and a colonized people. This is a struggle for liberation, not a competition between two narratives. 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 supposedly prevailed in modernity, is part of the very definition of postmodernism. It presumes the dominance of a certain grand narrative (such as technological progress or the advancement of reason in history), which it treats as fictions not far removed from religious or ideological narratives that shape the way people understand 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 or rejecting a narrative. For instance, we could regard a historical narrative as a specific point of view that illuminates a facet of history, without claiming it is the password to revealing the mysteries of world history as a whole.

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 – they conflate it with religious and metaphysical truth, even though the word "truth" is used in entirely different senses across these fields. Second, they have been faulted for lacking consistency and contradicting their own views in their intellectual production and their blanket generalizations. Third, they do not practise the relativism they preach: ultimately, they live their lives like everyone else, relying on how they or others perceive 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." 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 a Nietzschean landmark that shaped their thought, is in fact simply one of several explanations of the origin of words. Yet words do not "emerge" in any given society and at any given moment; they are handed down. 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 it not to deceive themselves, but because language is the only tool available to articulate relations between things or recurrent patterns in the relations between 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 the fact that they designate meanings distinct from those native to the words in which they have come to dwell. That a scholar should remind us that these are metaphors and, hence, lies, is, at a minimum, a pointless exercise in philology (Nietzsche's original field). The Nietzschean metaphor might enthral non-experts, but any specialist would regard it as redundant, verbal

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

padding, or a rhetorical flourish, at best. 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. But it does not explain phenomena; it highlights and amplifies one aspect and obscures others. The claims that result from this literary exercise are then generalized as if they were explanations. Such are the characteristics – or flaws – of the Nietzschean texts that influenced postmodernist currents.

Lyotard 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 to accept scientific proof. 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 effective versus ineffective. 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 critical modernism already embrace this outlook – 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 legitimated not through grand philosophical narratives (of the Enlightenment or otherwise), but through scientific processes. These involve explaining the scientific methodology used, adhering to it rigorously, experimenting and testing, and applying the successful results in industry, agriculture, medicine, and daily 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 credibility – from these practices, not from grand

(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, *Suʾāl al-Huwiyya: al-Huwiyya wa-Sulṭat al-Muthaqqaf fī ʿAṣr mā baʿd al-Ḥadātha* (Cairo: Merit Publishing House, 1999), pp. 113–114.

(20) Ibid., p. 114.

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 credibility.

To insist that scientific judgements are separate from moral judgements (to use the Kantian idiom) and argue that science cannot answer existential questions about the meaning of life in this infinite universe (in contrast 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 to the exclusion of other types of human activity. In fact, these positions could betray dangerous tendencies, such as the exploitation of science by non-scientists for unethical ends.

Ethical decisions concerning how science should be used are the responsibility of those who use it, especially the owners and executives of major corporations, government decision-makers, and finally scientists themselves. No matter how much we reflect on 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 (not science), as they have the ability to understand 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 and makes no distinction between good and evil; instead, it uses the laws it deduces to explain phenomena, identify relations between variables, and distinguish correct from incorrect and possible from certain. It imposes itself through proof, not by dictating a point of view. Science is not a perspective; it deals with things that can be proved or disproved. Scientific thinking is imposed by force when human authorities adopt scientism as an ideology – i.e., treating science not 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 an all-purpose 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. An authority that promotes this approach is not promoting science but, instead, imposing a scientistic ideology upon society.

Foucault's opinion that the 18th century was characterized by the decline of philosophy and the advancement of mathematics, the beginning of the distribution of the sciences across institutions like universities, the homogenization of the sciences through encyclopaedias, and the replacement of coercion by dogmatic religious truth with coercion by science rests on the omission of this crucial distinction.(21) The claim regarding the decline of philosophy requires closer inspection. The scope of philosophy (until, say, the 18th century) was once very broad and used to include fields that now fall within the remit of various sciences. But it was also a subject that

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

concerned only a very small number of intellectuals. The scope of philosophy may have narrowed after the 18th century with the emergence of scientific disciplines, but it also began to attract wider audiences with the spread of education and as philosophers began writing in local vernaculars and translating classical philosophical works into them. At this time, as people took an increasing interest in public affairs, philosophy treated subjects that would be taken up by the social sciences in the latter half of the 19th century.

Postmodernists believe that the loss of the rational-philosophical grand narrative, the "compartmentalization of knowledge" into disciplines, and "the dissolution of epistemic coherence" have resulted in the loss of meaning and the scattering of narrative elements into what Lyotard calls "clouds of linguistic combinations" and "collisions among innumerable, heterogeneous language games." Within each game the subject moves from position to position, now as sender, now as addressee in a way that breaks the subject into heterogeneous moments of subjectivity that do not cohere into an identity. Even if we grant Lyotard's premises, they do not necessitate such a conclusion. One might just as plausibly conclude that the scattering of narrative elements compels the subject 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 in medicine and with nature through the sciences. Science has even penetrated the domains of society and state, where its struggle with ideological narratives continues – whether or not political scientists and sociologists realize it.

Foucault applied genealogy (the study of the origins and formation of phenomena) 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 "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

(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.

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 subject 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 early emergence in contrast to an Other, while simultaneously determining the truth and identity of that Other. 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 novelty? 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 malevolent spirits or demons. Instead of exorcizing those demons, the solution now is to isolate the mad and subjugate madness to reason. However, as knowledge advanced, so too did psychology and psychiatry, which have identified, analysed, and classified various kinds of mental disorders. It is therefore useful to trace the development of knowledge and science – a phrase I prefer to "the development of reason"(27) – in tandem with evolving definitions of madness. In our time, human reason is not 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. This pairing of reason and 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 connection between science's understanding of an object of research (whether natural or social) and its "control" over that object is purely metaphorical. Control, in the sense of exerting power over something, is exercised by humans, not by science or knowledge, for will cannot exist without human agency.

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(24) Aylesworth, "Postmodernism"

(25) Aylesworth, "Postmodernism."

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

(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.

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 scientific consensus, came to serve 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 excludes everything else.(28)

Relativists, applying their conclusions regarding the nature of science and scientific work, observed scientists' activities and formulated certain generalizations. In so doing, they acted just like the rationalists they criticize, with the difference that relativist claims 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 correct insofar as they can still be substantiated, but this does not make them relative. Relativism, in contrast, means that something can be correct and incorrect at once. It depends on perspective and the power relations that control the discourse and, therefore, cannot be verified or falsified.

When relativists present their ideas, they frame them in a rational, logical language in order to be persuasive. They know that – within the scientific community at least – persuasion entails more than dazzling audiences with rhetorical eloquence, appeals to sympathy, or catchy soundbites. Before proposing his theory on the scientific revolution and paradigms, Thomas Kuhn studied data and other sources from which he drew observations regarding the transformation of scientific paradigms – observations he then presented as coherent findings derived from 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 boundaries; it turns 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 clarified its domain of validity. Science is not relative in truth but in the scope of applicability of its laws. This is what escapes those who invoke the ideas of scientific revolutions and paradigm shifts to justify relativism.

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 is still used to make scientific inferences.

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

If relativism were true only for those who believe in 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 actually work there. The statement is true, devoid of any relativity, and the listener assumes it matches 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 the exercise of power within a given cultural context.

We are not sceptics about our perceptions of daily life. 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 go through life with a near-certain conviction that there is an external world that affects our perceptions and sensations, and we act accordingly. Why, then, does relativist scepticism fixate on science, which, if it differs from daily consciousness, does so only by being more precise in diagnosing external influences and more careful about sorting 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 generating 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 after controlled experiments have proven it safe and effective, even without a theory that explains why it is so. Attempted explanations may remain mere hypotheses long afterwards.

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 envisions, but all science can do is hypothesize their qualitative and quantitative attributes 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) In the same way, it 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

(29) Raja Bahlul, "Muqaddimat al-Tarjama al-ʿArabiyya fī Mā Lā Yufham wa-Mā Huwa Ghayr Qābil li-l-Fahm", in: Sokal & Bricmont, *Hurāʾ ʿAṣrī: Sūʾ Istikhdām Mufakkirī Mā Baʿd al-Ḥadātha li-l-ʿIlm*, Nagib El-Hassadi (trans.) (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2025), p. 47.

(30) Sokal & Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense*, pp. 54–55.

(31) Ibid.

is concerned with explaining a specific phenomenon or set of phenomena and deriving laws for predicting the behaviour of those phenomena. But 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 these totalizing (and absolute, in the case of religious faith) perspectives that are external to it, be they philosophical, religious, ideological, or otherwise (bearing in mind how ideology intertwines with philosophy and religion and the need to distinguish between these domains). One may adopt a relativist position toward such "truths", but this is not the invention of postmodern philosophy. In this sense, scepticism is as old as philosophy and religion.

The word "truth" is sometimes used in a misleading way to refer to what ought to be called reality. Metaphysical truth and religious truth, though distinct, are both forms of contemplative, belief-based truth. On the other hand, there are two kinds of scientific truth. One kind consists of mathematical and logical truths, which are axiomatic or deductive. It would be incorrect to describe them as relative. The other kind is arrived at inductively. They 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.

If a person relates what they did on a given day, and their account is shown to be false, it means the events they related did not occur – not 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, but the perceptual tools were insufficient to prove otherwise.

Scientists strive toward an objective understanding (in keeping with the principles of the scientific method) of the phenomena they study. In the process, they bear in mind the need to insulate their work from 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 selecting data, interpreting results, or drawing 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 to occur continuously during the conduct of scientific work and the review and verification 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. This is true both of science today and of assessments of earlier scientific enterprises.

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 the weak – which translates the resentment of slaves against masters, or the strong, into values of tolerance and equality, because the weak are unable to confront the strong with the latter's weapons[32] – 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 a moral interpretation of phenomena.[33] The postmodern shift has amplified this view by claiming that human beings exist in a state of irreducible plurality in terms of values and perspectives. To 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, one must judge "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 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 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 bad 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 distilled into mainstream culture.

However, postmodern theorists generally home in on only one factor: the isolated individual facing a moral dilemma with no pre-established 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

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

(33) 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.

– are historically variable and even contingent; no necessity governs their existence or extinction. This is a recurring theme among postmodernist thinkers – though they are not the first to discover it – and it has led them to conclude that all moral reference or grounding has been lost. However, this should not be read as moral nihilism. Rather it implies that the individual has been burdened with more responsibility – a topic to which we will 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 centreless, without a stable foundation – as though such a thing had once existed. But if the world 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, uncentred world where difference is all there is. 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 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 – especially in the case of national identity as opposed to sexual orientation and 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 how the formation of moral concepts relates 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, then precisely which ethical theories treat morality as universal rules and objective commands independent of human will?

Modern ethical theories are typically premised on the existence of a moral sense grounded in human empathy, or on rules that combine moral sentiment with practical

reason. They are generally formulated on the basis of a conception of human nature, or an aim such as maximizing happiness for the greatest number of people. Alternatively, some ethical theorists might proceed from a consequentialist standpoint, whereby action seeks to promote the values espoused by the agent. Others take natural dispositions expressed through empathy and aversion as the foundation on which moral values are built and from which other values are derived through accumulated human experience and social interactions, starting from the family and (as I argue) extending to society at large. All of these are philosophical explanations of morality; they do not claim to be scientific theories. Moreover, they are inherently relative in that they hinge on the different assumptions on which they rest, such as the human pursuit of happiness as the highest good; the existence of an innate moral capacity such as empathy; the desire for recognition; aversion to physical harm; the view that moral decision-making 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 capacity to voluntarily act according to what could serve as a law for all humanity (Kant's categorical imperative).

A philosophy concerned with defending difference or cultural specificity, while neglecting equality and even respect for the humanity of human beings, actually 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 impact figures like Trump could have on these freedoms, yet would never choose to live in a contemporary Arab or Muslim country – have attempted to advise Arabs that the most suitable political system for them is to be found in the period of Islamic rule before the third Hijri century (ca. 815–911 CE).

This premodern trait is also evident in the postmodern stance toward such universal values as the need to respect the humanity of all human beings without discrimination based on culture, place of birth, social function, or other attributes. Postmodernists regard this as a false universal that masks Western aspirations of domination, arguing that the hypocrisy of its proponents is easily exposed. Nevertheless, those who take satisfaction in exposing such hypocrisy fail to see that the tension between values and praxis is a crucial driver of criticism and change within liberal democratic societies and in these societies' relations with others. There is a fundamental difference between formal affirmations in charters 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 power balances and cultures, as well as 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

(36) Eagleton, p. 89.

is inseparable from discursive formations and power relations. This led subsequent postmodern thinkers to assume that he had debunked the Enlightenment conception of a "permanent moral reason"(37) that transcends history. In fact, Enlightenment thought did not assume the existence of a permanent moral reason. If it had, 18th-century thinkers associated with the Enlightenment would not have criticized the moralities of their own time and of earlier eras. Nor would Jean-Jacques Rousseau have stood out among them for denouncing the falsity of civilized morality and calling instead for the return to the natural morality inherent in human beings prior to the emergence of property relations.

Moreover, it is hard to rival Karl Marx in the harshness of his critique of the way bourgeois interests, such as private property, are formulated as universal values and in how he traced the origin and formation (or "genealogy", in postmodern jargon) of individual freedom to the conditions of free trade and the liberation 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 commandments, 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 one follows them or challenges them due to sensitivity to a given context.

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

(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.

> 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 a human subject – unless the "death of man" is simply a Nietzschean play on linguistic metaphors, 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 forays. But this does not mean 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. Even if lying is permitted in certain cases for a moral end, people generally regard it 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, such as saving a human life, or invoking dire necessity. 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 through the intermediary of 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, as

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

(40) In principle, there 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, Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure*, Robert Hurley (trans.) (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 25.

they link 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 make-up, social structures, cultural hegemony, prevailing norms (whether codified or not), and human will.

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 having set down Enlightenment thought in a philosophical system, approached the question by positing the existence of an autonomous individual who determines how to formulate a personal moral law that applies to humanity as a whole. This law is to accept for others what one accepts for oneself, i.e., a philosophical formulation of the "golden rule". This has long existed in practice – in the Christian tradition, for example, since the Sermon on the Mount. Philosophy did not invent it; it is hardly a Kantian achievement – especially when one considers 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 with 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 and philosophers, modern or otherwise, but by the interplay between human dispositions, social structures, and social evolution. When the rules change – as occurs with shifting norms of shame, taboo, chastity, sexuality, and the like – it is not moral philosophers who lead the process of change; they rarely participate in the cumulative struggles that bring it about. When campaigning for the full equality of women or protesting against the treatment of women as mere bodies or objects of sexual desire, activists gain nothing from postmodernists' assertion that to ground such demands in a universal moral rule is an expression of a hegemonic will, and that those advocating for this rule should understand that it is a relative norm tied 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 not confined to modernity. Indeed, from this perspective, a more accurate label for postmodernism in this realm might be "post-Stoic" or "post-Christian". Formulating universal moral rules is not, in fact, the task of moral theory. Instead, theorists should ask the following types of questions: why is the prohibition against killing a rule that different societies and cultures agree on, differing only in the exceptions that might permit its violation. Why do all people feel revulsion toward physical torture? Why is lying considered bad and inappropriate as a basis for interpersonal communication? 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 particular identity groups within which certain sets of moral rules apply.

In my view, the main challenge of modernity, overlooked by postmodern thinkers who were preoccupied with its opposite (i.e., the localization of values), has outlived them. That challenge is: 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 casting the morality of modern societies as the correct one that ought to prevail. Postmodern relativism, by contrast, finds no avenue toward a shared human morality that would enable dialogue within diversity. What dialogue can there be between particularist cultures with nothing in common?

Foucault shifted his focus from normative moral systems to "ethics" as a means of care for the self and its creative formation. 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?" But it can also be interpreted as orienting the individual toward self-centredness and a kind of narcissism of the strong, primarily concerned with refinement in conduct, style, and aesthetic appearance – as seen 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 and is practised, or as it ought to be. If his intent is descriptive, his claim can be refuted by showing that morality functions differently in reality, where moral behaviour is shaped by deep moral impulses, diverse motivations, and differing understandings of moral duty and ethical practice. 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 by imposing universal rules, but by disseminating one's own conception of humanity and, accordingly, the recognition of human dignity. To this, I will add a consequentialist observation: amid the struggles for justice and liberation, denying the existence of the humanity that connects 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 choices, 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 what morality might mean in a postmodern context. It emphasizes moral uncertainty in a world shaped by the decline of the authority of

(42) Ibid., p. 26.

universal reason, as formulated by modernity – which, to me, is one of those sweeping generalizations that are widely repeated yet rarely examined. Still, Bauman – whom I regard as a rational, critical thinker, despite being associated 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 relations to others.

Moreover, responding to the criticism that postmodernism leads to a relativism that permits 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 encounter between self "and the Other as Face" – a direct encounter that invokes 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 resembles the above-mentioned distinction drawn by Foucault.

Some "wordplay" is involved in Bauman's densely written account. No society can function without a majority that understands morality as duties – or more precisely, as prohibitions. This is particularly true in societies marked by fragmentation of the public sphere and the decline of public ethics and the individual's sense of responsibility toward the common good. At the same time, compliance with prohibitions is not sufficient in itself to distinguish individuals from each other in terms of how they understand what it means to do good, or what they do to develop their characters and create meaning in their lives. The debate over the nature of this morality 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 the search for meaning and individual identity in the values that define the self, or what Bauman calls "moral subjectivity". In my view, their perspective 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 from the dead in postmodernity.

Bauman holds that the absence of a unified moral code does not weaken the sense of responsibility but intensifies it. In the absence of a comforting external certainty, moral decision-making reverts to the conscience of the individual, who must assume full responsibility. But did such a comforting external certainty ever exist alongside the autonomy of the individual in modernity? Can any society – whether we call it modern or postmodern – exist without moral rules? Individuals face moral

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

responsibility in their relationship to the Other, whether or not moral rules exist. Moral rules 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 elsewhere, 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. Evidently, such modes of thought tend to arise in times 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, instructions, and orders in the name of doing one's job can be felt in his every word. 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. This helps clarify what motivated Bauman's reflections on moral choice: he is the author of Modernity and the Holocaust. It is also worth stressing here that there is no necessary 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 criminal orders in the future due to some mysterious feature of postmodernity that endows them with moral responsibility. On the other hand, Bauman's argument may be less an analysis of a historical condition distinct from modernity than a call for such moral responsibility.

I disagree with Bauman's assertion that moral action cannot be codified. Without some degree of codification, no society can function. Yet he correctly observes that genuinely moral acts often arise from responding 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

(44) Ibid., p, 13; Bauman, "What Prospects of Morality in Times of Uncertainty?", *Theory, Culture & Society* 15, no. 1 (1998): 11–22, p. 13.

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 sociality 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 morality is much broader. Individual morality starts with a conscious engagement with morals, through a tense, reflective relationship with them, and it extends beyond individual moral stances – even within the most traditional societies. However, the importance of such individual moral stances increases with the autonomy of the individual and the expansion of the freedoms that characterize modern society.

Bauman emphasizes the absence of what he calls "universal certainties", yet without relinquishing the call for moral commitment. He holds that postmodernity brings ethics back down to the human level. Rather than erasing the distinction between good and evil, the postmodern condition compels us to confront that distinction within the context of our own life choices. Bauman's work can thus be seen as a philosophical response to those who equate postmodernism with moral decay. He paints a picture of moral actors operating in an environment without universal assurances, each an autonomous moral subject bearing individual responsibility. It is a morality grounded not in rules but in dialogical relations with others, in line with postmodern emphases on alterity, localness, and difference.

The problem becomes apparent when people agree with the ideas laid out in some of postmodernism's most important texts on ethics. The adamant rejection of universal rules leads to an overblown portrayal of the gravity of individual moral responsibility, which is taken to an even greater extreme by Derrida in 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, he 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 choice 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 but merely compliance and execution. This is not correct. Complying with a moral rule – if the decision to do so is taken freely – is itself a moral choice.

For Derrida, however, true responsibility lies in the state of anxiety and uncertainty regarding what is right under any given rule, and in the fact that every decision has a cost: answering a call to one duty entails sacrificing another. In The Gift of Death,

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

he formulates this starkly: "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 constitutes the very core 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 a moral duty to help all other humans? 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 not helping someone help all others. Non-assistance is not something that occurs at the moment of assistance. On the contrary, acting in solidarity with the oppressed in one area may contribute to helping others. It can offer a model, for example. Certainly, people face dilemmas when having to choose how to allocate limited resources, but such dilemmas are not exclusive to morality.

Although one can discuss Derrida's position on moral responsibility, he does not, in my view, raise an essential problem. Moral action is rarely motivated by general rules but instead is usually a response to particular situations. This is not to deny that individuals may have internalized certain general rules, thereby making them part of their motivations, or that they may follow a moral sense or a desire to be a good or noble person. Indeed, they may simply conform to a social norm in their behaviour or political stances, believing this to be what is morally required.

One may find oneself facing the problem that taking on one responsibility entails neglecting another, or that 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 things? "Ordinary" moral persons (as opposed to philosophers) – people who are genuinely noble or altruistic – help those they can, knowing full well that they cannot help everyone. Nor does this mean that such help comes at the expense of others. To suggest that it does is a fallacy created by the semantic juxtaposition of 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 a moral problem. The real problem arises in cases of conflicting values and commitments, where meeting one comes at the expense of another. For example, one might find oneself torn between helping victims of injustice and fulfilling one's obligations toward one's family. This dilemma has been widely discussed in moral philosophy, and Derrida adds little that is new. We should add, in this context, that many people believe the most effective moral act, instead of rescuing a person or two from poverty or war, is political activism aimed at combatting 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.

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

Moral philosophy has grappled with other dilemmas that arise 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 murder or torture absolutely. But this is not Derrida's intent; his assertion is so general that every moral responsibility is reducible to one responsibility at the expense of another. The consequence is that moral action becomes a form of suffering rather than a source of personal fulfilment.

The fact is that Derrida places the discussion of Abraham's dilemma in a context to which it does not belong. The entire biblical episode is about a test of faith, not a test of morality. From a moral standpoint, there should be no dilemma. Killing one's son is an immoral act, and resolving the question of sacrificing him on an altar is straightforward for any human being. 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 interpret 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. The parts of Iraq and Syria that were controlled by ISIS still suffer the consequences of this today.

Moral individuals prioritize values over religious faith. They may interpret their faith in moral terms, which enables them to maintain their belief while rejecting any immoral practices carried out in their religion's name. The model presented by Abraham is one of combining absolute faith with absolute obedience, without questioning why. God tested him, and he passed the test by preferring obedience over parental love (after suspending morality altogether). Only then did God provide a ram to sacrifice instead of his son. But in all cases where fanatics prefer their literal understanding of sacred texts over moral values (despite acknowledging their existence), God does not address them directly, nor does He send a ram to prove they passed the test. Even so, they continue to prefer what they claim is a higher goal – visible only to a supposed elite of believers – over the values of ordinary people. They thereby "rise" above these values, when in fact they fall beneath them. Is this not reminiscent of the revaluation of values undertaken by Nietzsche – who believed in no religion and who scorned 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 have fed scepticism toward moral theories and universal morals. These have come to be viewed as a form of Western discourse aiming to advance Western power relations and global hegemony. 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.

Postmodern thought proceeds by questioning the very foundations upon which moral theory rests. Its scepticism encompasses every comprehensive moral theory, whether grounded in divine law, universal rationality, an assumed human essence, or aspects of human nature. Instead, it understands morality as multiple local narratives, each possessing its own legitimacy within specific historical and geographical boundaries, while none can claim to possess 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. They might be logically coherent, rational constructions, but they proceed from unproven hypotheses. They offer both an explanatory model and a set of values to aspire to. 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 a difference between critiquing moral theories that derive rules from a single principle and critiquing universal morality. The latter does not depend on the existence of universal moral theories. Moral conduct that stems from a belief in the shared humanity of all people is not necessarily derived from knowledge of any moral theory.

People's attitudes and behaviours in everyday life are one thing; the attempt to formulate these into general rules by moral philosophical schools, such as consequentialism, utilitarianism, realism, and deontology, is another. This philosophical endeavour is similar to that of postmodernist thinkers. It does not formulate moral laws; it formulates typologies of already existing modes of behaviour and attitudes. 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 morality is understood to apply to a group of people encompassing an entire society, 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)

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

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. At the same time, individuals differ in how they define the boundaries of the group. One person's horizon may encompass humanity as a whole, 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 flows with the course of life itself, both in modernity and beyond. Humans take moral positions in their daily interactions with others, from family members to strangers they encounter, without consulting moral theories. This is because they possess certain values, as well as both moral and non-moral impulses. 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. Clearly, to do so would not produce a postmodern society, but rather a state of disorder. Yet norms, laws, and prevailing values alone do not create a moral society. For that, there must also be a number of 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 necessarily base their policies on them. Universal values are those formulated to apply to all humans. They may sometimes be expressed as "natural rights" inherent in all humanity. They have been disseminated globally and legitimated, and they can be defended. It has become difficult to make critical moral judgements (beyond personal relations) about individuals' behaviour, institutional policies, or state actions in a way that is intelligible to others without invoking universal values.

We can assume that the source of postmodernists' scepticism does not primarily lie in the collapse of scientific theories before the eyes of these late 20th-century thinkers – even if they later drew on such figures as Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend to support their scientific relativism – but rather in a moral disillusionment triggered by major crises within Western civilization. Notably, they were moved by 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. But postmodern thinkers were no more sensitive to these shocks than others. 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 to correct the conflation of theory and moral values in historical materialism.

(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 and Sébastien Charles, *Hypermodern Times* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005). This book epitomizes the view that postmodern thought is a phenomenon linked to late capitalism.

The Frankfurt School – from Adorno and Horkheimer's Dialectic of Enlightenment to Herbert Marcuse's One-Dimensional Man and Reason and Revolution – grappled critically with mass culture and commodification, offering profound, emancipatory critiques of Western modernity. They opposed both capitalist exploitation and the authoritarianism of bureaucratic socialist regimes.

Therefore, in my view, these shocks are not sufficient to explain the postmodernists' moral scepticism and relativism. Rather, the cause of what Lyotard calls the "loss of authority" of traditional value systems was the fragility of the French philosophical milieu under a regime complicit with Nazism. Not only did the French and German philosophers in this milieu fail to criticize the Vichy regime directly, they did not hold themselves accountable for this failure while continuing to produce work under it. This angst-ridden current in French philosophy discovered ostensibly revolutionary critical elements in the thought of Nietzsche and Heidegger – the two thinkers least suited to serve as foundations for a critique of Nazism and fascism. Moreover, the Nazis themselves were more influenced by them than by any other modern thinkers (albeit – as others argue – through misinterpretation).

After the Second World War, postmodernists extended the scope of their critique to Western culture as a whole. When they took Nietzsche's elitist critique of prevailing value systems (with its premodern, aristocratic character, as noted above) as their starting point, the critiquing process developed its own internal dynamics. Nietzsche's premodern critique was transformed into a postmodern one. Then, in an irony of intellectual history, when that premodern critique of values was 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 source of morality becomes contingent on historical and cultural contexts. Such a claim explains everything and, hence, explains the specificity of nothing. The failure to grasp what distinguishes a phenomenon from others is a failure to understand it at all.

I should add that postmodern philosophy emerged after the student movements and cultural revolutions of the 1960s had failed to achieve political revolution, even though they contributed to transforming Western societies by strengthening the link between democracy and liberalism and expanding the scope of individual freedom. Radicalism thus remained largely at the level of discourse – one that emphasized 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 are aware of these tensions and acknowledge them. However, they are unwilling to view them in their entirety and, instead, take sides within the antitheses, such as between difference and identity, or plurality and unity. Due to this tendency, 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 justice and equality; it overuses postcolonial discourse while avoiding liberation movements and state-building.[49]

(49) Taylor, pp. 7–9.

In their critique of liberalism as a whole, 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 with all its contradictions and developments.

Postmodern thought is neither nihilistic nor devoid of morality. Rather, it reimagines morality as contextual, pluralistic, focused on alterity and on the formation of the self without foundations. 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 seen 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 thinker 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 nature of my relationship to this particular other in this specific time and place, and what moral obligations arise from that relationship?" Nevertheless, it quickly becomes clear that answering this question requires one to presuppose that humans are endowed with moral dispositions or rules that can be followed or broken. 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:

- The distinction between a person whose actions and behaviours are guided by value-based considerations and someone who readily sidelines morality in favour of other considerations;
- The distinction between two individuals in terms of the nature and weight of moral considerations in their lives compared to the influence of interests, fears, and other calculations;
- The distinction between an individual endowed with personal autonomy (whether labelled modern or not) and another constrained by the norms of a group and its definitions of what is good or bad;
- The distinction between an autonomous individual with strong moral commitments and another for whom morality merely means obeying laws and refraining from prohibited acts, while remaining indifferent to doing good for others outside his or her narrow circle or identity group.

In my view, the foregoing distinctions do not receive sufficient attention from most modern moral philosophers and tend to be ignored in postmodern critiques of modernism.

Many other distinctions between moral and immoral behaviour come to mind. All of them are more meaningful than the distinction between a "modern" and a "postmodern" moral subject. If an ordinary person were to judge the conduct of authors of densely-written postmodern texts – on the basis of their lives outside academia, or even within

academic settings – these distinctions would be far more useful than the labels "modern" or "postmodern". It thus becomes clear that critiquing universality, glorifying alterity and difference, and discarding normative models in favour of a Nietzschean aesthetic project of self-formation help little in determining whether a person treats others with respect, refrains from harming or degrading them, is sincere in the expression of their feelings, helps those in need, avoids ranking human beings by worth, opposes racism, or refuses to remain a passive observer in the face of the annihilation of another people.

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