

“RELATIVISM” AS A PARADIGM OF CULTURAL EPISTEMOLOGY (A CRITICAL ANALYSIS)

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Abstract: The search for a universal principle and unifying law that would explain the phenomena of the world and that would be regarded as the paradigm of epistemology as well as ontology has been the hallmark of all the conceptual endeavours and scientific researches. But *Relativism* is contrary to all those doctrines which claim any absolutistic frameworks and paradigms. It claims that values, either of goodness, beauty or truth all are relative to a relativistic frameworks and no absolute standard exists between the competing paradigms. Here we find two extremes, first the *Absolutism* which propagates that there are and there must be some unifying and absolute paradigm as a standard for the epistemology and ontological researches, the other is the *Relativism* which is against any framework and claims that every criterion is relative. Anthropological researches show that every claim of knowledge is relative to its relevant circumstance and background. In this research paper an analytical and critical elucidation of the controversies and claims of the two extremist doctrines will be presented and their arguments will be analyzed. Then an acceptable view will be tried to reach with the objective that how can anyone use any theory for the advancement of knowledge.

Key Words: Absolutism, Cultural Framework, Enculturation, Epistemology, Relativistic Paradigm, Universal Laws.

Relativism is such a term which, if anyone who belongs to philosophy and tries to find its true meaning the one will feel oneself at the logger's head. The reason is that this term in fact has been used in anthropology though its origin is in philosophy. Moreover it is not an astonishing fact because the genesis of all knowledge has been credited to the Greek philosophers. It was latter schematic and specialization approach that made compartments of knowledge and formed its branches. Same way the term "Relativism" has been found in early Greek philosophy. It is said that it was the Greek philosopher, Protagoras (490 to 420 BC) in whom we can find the traces of Relativism¹. He claimed that: "Man is the measure of all things; of things that are that they are, and of things that are not that they are not".

That dictum of Protagoras was a reaction against the "absolutist"² prevalent approaches of searching a universal principle of the universe. It was he, who reacted against that in vogue tendency and focused "an individual" as the central theme of his philosophy. His above said maxim, give us an optimistic idea about human beings' creativity and strength, And this also implied the epistemological relativism. In fact that epistemological dictum is the base of his Relativistic ontology.³ Protagoras maintained that all customs are equally arbitrary and, hence, equally valid.⁴ This means that since the beginning, the term "Relativism" belongs to Individualism, Subjectivism in epistemology and also contrary to absolutism. In modern times it has been widely used in anthropological researches and cultural contexts e.g. in discussions to know cultural frame-works and their knowledge. So it has epistemological importance in the respective fields.

Herodotus (c. 485–430 BC) the historian throws light on the importance of Relativism by narrating an event that how much a people can be associated to their relating norms and customs. He narrates:

Darius, after he had got the kingdom, called into his presence certain Greeks who were at hand, and asked—'what he should pay them to eat the bodies of their fathers when they died?' To which they answered, that there was no sum that would tempt them to do such a thing.

He then sent for certain Indians, of the race called Callatians, men who eat their fathers, and asked them, while the Greeks stood by, and knew by the help of an interpreter all that was said—'What he should give them to burn the bodies of their fathers at their decease?' The Indians exclaimed aloud, and bade him forbear such language.

The consequent of this event is the objective, to present that how much a group or a nation might be associated to explain the things which are related to their cultural frame of work that there is nothing on the earth which can force them to leave their own cultural references and paradigms. Moreover, Herodotus presented another example of the importance of Relativism e.g. marriage between a brother and sister was considered natural among the Egyptians and was even prescribed by their religion, while to the Greeks it appeared disgusting and reprehensible.⁵ The above mentioned story and the latter customs and practices followed by different people having different cultures are the paradigms of their lives and cultural knowledge.

In the Philosophy of modern era⁶, the most noteworthy supporter of Relativism is Michel de Montaigne (1533–92). His relativism is based on somewhat open-mindedness and tolerant nature. For the denial of the existence of any single and universal human nature and principle, his argument is empirical in its nature that relies on the diversity and variety of the experiences of human beings not only on individual but also on the levels of social collectiveness also. Diversity as an empirical fact reveals that there cannot be a single universal law for all the mankind. In his opinion, if there is anything of such a type of universal law then there could be found an agreement on ethics, laws, customs and conventions. But in fact, reality is contrary because there is nothing on the earth except the laws, customs and conventions among the people which exposes such a great variety and diversity. Due to this empirical exposition he makes a conclusion that human laws are found on the opinions, customs and traditions rather on any universal and natural truths. Moreover, when we come to the questions and discuss the matters relating to falsity and truthness then we find nothing as the test of reason and truth except the customs and patterns of opinions of the people with whom we live together at a certain habituated land.⁷ So, Montaigne claimed that the criterion of truth is the customs and opinions of the persons relevant to their culture.

Latter, John Locke (1632–1704) introduced his empiricism. According to this, mind is Tabula Rasa and sense data has been received by the medium of sense organs which are to be stimulated by the external objects. This stimulation is due to certain qualities which the external physical objects possess. Locke divided them into two types of qualities e.g. the primary and secondary qualities of things. He categorizes

solidity, shape and extension as the basic qualities and essential characteristics that any physical and external object actually possesses. He termed these qualities as the Primary Qualities. These are essential features of the natural and physical world as it exists outside, independent of human conceptions and perceptions. Without these Primary Qualities nothing can be called a material thing. There are other qualities also which he terms as the Secondary Qualities, these are the smell, colour or taste of the external things which later, are known as 'sense-data'. These Secondary Qualities are not properties of the objects. This demarcation between essential and secondary qualities makes room for the possibility of Relativistic Approach in epistemology. Thus the doctrine of secondary qualities as the sources of knowledge about external world on the basis of individual perception is in fact relative since the truth of assertions according to the experiential and mental states of individual perceivers. This theory opened the way to relativism and relativist approach in epistemology.

Later, the devastating theories of David Hume (1711–76), and other Empiricist philosophers' assumptions motivated some of the relativist positions in philosophy. That Relativist approach as reaction against One Absolute and unifying Principle culminated in the existentialism.⁸ Afterwards, in the previous century Relativism took prominent place in anthropology under the names of Cultural Relativism and Sociology of Knowledge.

Now the question arises, What is Relativism? A.R. Lecey defined it as: "Any doctrine could be called relativism which holds that something exists, or has certain properties or features, or is true or in some sense obtains, not simply but only in relation to something else"⁹ This definition has been much criticized because it is too much broad as the last phrase, 'only in relation to something else' depicts its broadness and even vagueness. Moreover this definition e.g. "the denial that there are certain kinds of universal truths",¹⁰ is too much narrow because it does not explain anything except the denial of the universal truths. It limited itself to the epistemic judgments and truths. But epistemology is not the whole of relativism. Epistemology is just one aspect of a multi-dimensional system termed as Relativism. So, after describing a too much broad and a too much narrow definition, here is a balanced definition of relativism.

The nature and existence of items of knowledge, qualities, values or logical entities non-trivially obtain their natures and/or existence from certain aspects of human activity, including, but not limited to, beliefs, cultures, languages, etc.¹¹

So in the light of the above mentioned brief historical sketch and aforesaid definitions of Relativism we find other aspects with reference to philosophy e.g. Moral Philosophy and Aesthetics can be described by Michael Krausz as: “Relativism claims that truth, goodness, or beauty is relative to a reference frame, and that no absolute overarching standards to adjudicate between competing reference frames exist”.¹²

Though this is a preliminary type of definition yet it has served the purpose of giving us a general sense of the term. But this preliminary definition does not throw light on the points, mentioned below:

1. It does not clearly mention that what type of frames of reference it includes e.g. either only cultural or conceptual or historical?
2. It does not draw a line about that what fields of knowledge e.g. either cognitive or aesthetic or moral fields are in its spheres of research.
3. It does not specialize any branch of knowledge as its field of special interest. It means either it deals with Epistemology or Ontology.
4. It does not explain about the standards of values e.g. truth, beauty and goodness.
5. Does relativism have any type of Absolutism e.g. Foundationalism, Objectivism or Universalism?

After analyzing the characteristics researched out in the above five points, the following prominent and salient elements of Relativism have been deduced. These have been termed as variables¹³ of the relativistic research.

Relativism has different types of the frames of references, (cultural, conceptual, historical). It has an Epistemology, (knowledge, cognition, aesthetic, morality). It has standards of values of truth, beauty and goodness. It possesses to some extent Foundationalism, Objectivism or Universalism and a local form of “Absolutism”, (it means relativism has to have any standard related to its own frames of reference otherwise there would be anarchy). It has an ontology where it applies its research

and its subjects promulgate their relativistic conceptions. So as a result there is not a single type of Relativism, instead there are numbers kinds of it.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the term “Relativism” gradually crossed the boundaries of philosophy and the branches of conceptual thinking and jumped into the fields of sociological frameworks and anthropological spheres aiming at the cultural based researches and exploring the epistemological as well as ontological dimensions of human relativistic doctrines in particular cultural referents and their effects on knowledge and society. Moreover, field-work based anthropology and Ethnographic¹⁴ data collected by sociologists and anthropologists reveals there are substantial differences in the customs, conventions, beliefs, practices, the worldviews and mental outlook of different people belonging to different cultures. This knowledge based on the empirical observations of varied cultural references became what has been termed as ‘cultural relativism’.

The traditional sense of Relativism as contrasted to Absolutism¹⁵ took new meaning within the referent of anthropology and Cultural Relativism. One of its strongest proponents, M. J. Herskovits, the anthropologist has presented its description in following words: Relativism is an attitude and approach to understand the nature of culture and the study of the role values in it. It is an inductive and scientific approach and assault to old philosophical theories with the help of utilization of the data collected from cross-cultural studies and the analysis of the values and diverse customs as well as conventions prevalent in the diverse societies.

The basic principle of Cultural Relativism is that the judgments must be based on experience and must be interpreted by every individual with reference to one’s own enculturation. They insisted that the facts of the world also to seen through the glasses of enculturation.¹⁶

I. C. Jarvie regarded Cultural Relativism¹⁷ as such a doctrine which has taken its appearance in American Cultural Anthropology, and according to him Cultural Relativism has two components e.g. The first is named as the Factual and the second is termed as the Philosophical. The former belongs to the judgments about the values which vary from culture to culture and about the world. The latter is about the consideration and measurement of the claims regarding the world and about the assessment

of morality which they regard as culture dependent. It means that there is no morality or moral principles and moral truths which are transcendental and above cultural paradigms. So the customs, rituals, conventions, art, social structures and world views are relative and dependent variables ruled by the variances of the relevant cultures. So we reach the assumption that according to anthropological researches Relativism is based on cultural variations and it has particular Epistemology, referential Ontology and relativistic paradigms about the world.

The hallmark of human thinking, in the history of philosophical and scientific investigation has been the search of any universal principle and aspiration for unifying force. But Relativism breaks with the tradition and claims that: according to Melville J. Herskovits,¹⁸ The ruling principle of Cultural Relativism is that: “Judgments are based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his own enculturation”.¹⁹

He further elaborates that those who are the upholders of any fixed typed of values, they would find such things in other cultures which would make them to reconsider and reinvestigate their assumptions and doctrines. He asserts that cultural relativism not only claims value-judgments but also puts even “reality” itself into question and in doing all this; anthropology contributes in the analysis of human being's place in the world.²⁰

In the light of the above we can analyze that Cultural Relativism generally relies on the following postulations:

- 1- The first postulation is Descriptive which means that empirical data and observations are explicit that there is a multiplicity of varied point of views and systems of values which are irreconcilable and incompatible.
- 2- The second is epistemic conjecture that there is no single as well as particular and reliable paradigm which might be regarded as a sole method for different value-systems and world views which are in contrast with each other and incommensurable.
- 3- Third is the normative assumption which demands respect for others' views and toleration for others' instead of the imposition of ours' own theories on others.

Despite these assumptions there is a variety of such theories which can be regarded as relativistic ones. Among them the main three has been pointed out by Paul Boghossian²¹ in his article Three Kinds of Relativism, these types are as follows.

1-The first type of Relativism is “thoroughgoing factual relativism”. This type of Relativism has been demonstrated by Einstein with reference to ‘time order’ and ‘mass’ theories. The first type e.g. “Thoroughgoing relativism about morality” has two more subdivisions²² which are: ‘Hermeneutic Thoroughgoing Relativism’ and ‘Thoroughgoing Relativism about Morality’.²³

2- The other type of Relativism is “Alethic Relativism”.²⁴ The main theme of this type of relativism is the claim that the values of the central propositions of one domain aren’t absolute but relative to other parameters also.

3- The third type in his context is “Absolutist Relativism”²⁵. Apparently this is self-contradictory term but here it means the concept that there are no absolute facts regarding morality and moral judgments are at their best with reference to relativism rather than in absolutist context.

If we accept Relativism, as an Epistemological Paradigm then certain odd and perplexed conclusions will be reached. This is why that Barry Barnes and David Bloor considered Relativism as an abominated²⁶ doctrine in the academic spheres. Along-with both of them, the critics called the theory of Relativism as “pernicious” and “threatening tide”.²⁷ The latter thinkers say that if knowledge is relative to culture, persons, places or history then there will be no universality in knowledge. Science and knowledge will be reduced to only small fragments encircled within or limited to a small territory. There would be such constricted concepts like “Jewish Physics” or “The Muslim Chemistry” or “The Catholic Law of Gravity” etc. This all means that there is no universal Physics or there is no universally accepted Chemistry or there are no universal laws of nature.

Moreover in other fields of knowledge which work not under the umbrella of physical or natural sciences and they fall in the category of social and philosophical paradigms, extreme Relativism leaves no room for any standards. How anyone could call a man “good”, if there is no standard of “accepted goodness” is present. In fact there must be

“something” which must be called a “standard of relativism”. We may conclude that absolute relativism (without any common standard) is not possible. We have to accept some criterion if we want universality in knowledge.

End Notes

¹ Robert Audi, ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary Of Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 790. “Relativism”, the denial that there are certain kinds of universal truths. There are two main types, *cognitive* and *ethical*. Cognitive relativism holds that there are no universal truths about the world: the world has no intrinsic characteristics, there are just different ways of interpreting it.

² Nicholas Bunn and Jiyuan Yu, eds., *The Blackwell Dictionary of Western Philosophy* (New York: The Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004), 03. “Absolutism”, is a term which has been used in different areas with different references. In metaphysics, it is opposed to *subjectivism* and *relativism* and claims that there is an ultimate, eternal, and objective principle that is the source and standard of truth and value.

³ “Man is the measure of all things; of things that are that they are, and of things that are not that they are not”. This maxim expounded by Protagoras is related to the knowledge about the world that how one can acquire knowledge and what are the sources of knowledge. He made sensuous data received by the physical organ by an individual as the source of knowledge. Rather he goes beyond that, he makes the sense organs of individuals as the source of the existence of external things. So he makes his epistemological principal as an ontological one.

⁴ Nicholas Bunn and Jiyuan Yu, ed., *The Blackwell Dictionary of Western Philosophy* (New York: The Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004), 570.

⁵ Maria Baghramian, *Relativism* (London: Routledge, 2004), 17.

⁶ First I present, what is “Relativism” then I will explain “Cultural Relativism” and differentiate both of them in several respects according to the use of them in respective backgrounds. The former term has been used in philosophy since Protagoras. Moreover it has deep concern with various branches of philosophy like Ethics and Aesthetic. But in the previous century it took a remarkable place in anthropology and researches relation to cultural studies. But it does not mean it broke with philosophy. In fact it took the shape of existentialism which was reaction against Hegel’s Absolutism.

⁷ Maria Baghramian, *Relativism* (London: Routledge, 2004), 40

⁸ The Existentialist are against any universal principles, even about the main tents of this *tendency* there are not even two philosophers who agree upon any one theme. I use the word tendency because the proponent doesn’t like to call it a movement or school of thought because it signifies absolutism. So their doctrines show a great the Relativistic tendency and relativism in philosophy.

⁹ A.R. Lacey, *A Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 295.

¹⁰ Robert Audi, ed. *The Cambridge Dictionary Of Philosophy*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 790.

¹¹ Timothy Mosteller, *Relativism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 3.

¹² Michael Krausz, “Varieties of Relativism and the Reach of Reasons,” chap. 4 in *A Companion to Relativism*, ed. Steven D. Hales (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 70.

¹³ The above mentioned features e.g. frames of references, cultural epistemology, values, truth, beauty has been termed as “Variables” by the social and cultural researches because in research they vary time to time, culture to culture, place to place, era to era. etc.

¹⁴ The branch of anthropology that provides scientific description of individual human societies.

¹⁵ Relativism, the denial that there are certain kinds of universal truths. Robert Audi, ed. *The Cambridge Dictionary Of Philosophy*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 790.

¹⁶ Maria Baghramian, *Relativism* (London: Routledge, 2004), 67.

¹⁷ I. C. Jarvie, “Cultural Relativism,” in the *Philosophy of Social Science* 5 (1975): 343-53. (This article was commissioned in 1995 for the Italian *Enciclopedia delle Scienze Sociali*. Acknowledged in 1996, it was not printed. An article by another hand appeared instead.)

¹⁸ An American anthropologist did a lot of work in the field of Culture and Cultural Relativism.

¹⁹ Melville J. Herskovits, *Cultural Relativism* (New York: Random House, 1972), 15.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Paul Boghossian, “Three kinds of Relativism,” chap. 3 in *A Companion to Relativism*, ed. Steven D. Hales (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 53-69.

²² Steven D. Hales, ed. *A Companion to Relativism*. (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 57.

²³ C.f. Paul Boghossian.

²⁴ *This type e.g. “Alethic Relativism”* (alethic or truth) relativism has been the focus of much attention within analytic philosophy in recent years. Paul Boghossian, 58.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 63.

²⁶ Barry Barnes and David Bloor, “Relativism, Rationalism and the Sociology of Knowledge,” in *Rationality and Relativism*, ed. M. Hollis and S. Lukes (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), 21.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

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