

## **Morality and Education in a Refutation of Postmodernist Idea**

**By**

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### **Abstract**

Postmodernism, whose tenets are similar to the concerns and skepticism raised by the earliest ancient Greek philosophers regarding the relativity of truth and the repudiation of absolute knowledge and grand standing, permeates every strata of human life and discipline in this millennium. This paper examined the notions, assumptions and presuppositions of the postmodernists claim with a view to refuting her stand using morality and education as a basis for justifying the objectivity of truth and reality. The methods employed in this work are criticism, analysis and speculation, such as is common in philosophical inquiry.

**Keywords:** Postmodernism, Morality, Education, Refutation, Truth and Objectivity.

## 1. Introduction

Postmodernism has tendencies in film, theatre, dance, music, art, architecture, philosophy, theology, psychoanalysis and historiography, cybernetic technologies and various cultural lifestyles. It stresses the heterogeneous, fragmentary and plurality of reality; thus denying humans the ability to arrive at any objective account of reality. It is a movement that permeates every aspect of modern life. It comes after modernity and all that modernity has brought such as democracy, scientific technology and human rights while at the same time, stresses on relative truth about phenomena in nature.

Suffice it to say that the earliest pre-Socratic philosophers had engaged in reflection about the status of truth since it must be amongst other requirements, non-inferential. It was the Sophists who pointed out that truth is relative and can be viewed differently such that everyone becomes right. Protagoras said that man is the measure of all things. Georgas said “nothing exists”; if it does, it cannot be known, if it is known, it cannot be communicated. This is where the problem of objectivity in truth is clearly identified. Hence the postmodernists only resuscitated an ancient problem and that is ‘plurality in truth and knowledge’.

If we follow the claims of the postmodernists especially in relation to morality and education, certain implications will emerge. Firstly, it will be difficult to hold any consensus on morality as what is right or wrong will be subjective or individualistic. Secondly, as touching education, from a postmodern perspective, it will affect the curriculum and considerations about what is worth teaching as plurality in this area will lead to just “anything goes” without a clear cut agreement about what is considered as relevant to transmit to pupils. This trend will leave education in a quagmire and in disarray.

This paper will consider these issues with a view to exposing the readers to the chief beliefs and notions of postmodernism as a movement. At the same time, it will show that the movement as it were cannot stand the test of time especially as it concerns the repudiation of objectivity in matters such as morality and education which happens to be the essential anchor on which every sane society is built upon. To the meaning of postmodernism, we shall now turn.

## 2. The Postmodernists Credo

Postmodernism is a movement or an attitude that relaxes the absolute, limiting it to the level of relativity as it concerns truth and knowledge inquiry. Summarizing the book *Moral Leadership in a Postmodern Age*, Gill (1997) contends that:

The book struggles with a paradox: an age which views itself as increasingly pluralistic nonetheless appears to yearn for moral leadership (p. vii).

This is the contradiction. The postmodern age is an age of plurality, relativity and “anything goes”. It is an age that is comfortable with just the periphery, or what one might call the basics. An age that frowns at objectivity. An age that gives wider consensus to as many variables as possible; an age that is against any grand totalizing or meta-narrative theory. The prefix “post” implies that

which comes after modernism. Modernism is replete with a lot of land marked achievement chiefly in science and technology. Speaking about the ideals of modernity, Ekanem (2012a) has this to say:

...modernity opens up a new era of individualism freedom, liberty, justice and scientific spirit. This is a paradigm shift from what was obtainable hitherto and can pass as the ideals of modernity. It affords us the opportunity to do things differently and getting desired results for the collective good of all (p. 49).

Postmodernism it will appear then, pushes modernity a step further by harnessing all the goodness that it offers in order to perpetuate freedom and liberty in the area of truth and knowledge, and in the process, destroys the foundations or structures that have been put in place by great figures of the past. Callinicos (1989) avers that despite the disagreements of the so called “poststructuralist” namely Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida and Michael Foucault:

All three stressed the fragmentary, heterogeneous and plural character of reality, denied human thought the ability to arrive at any objectivity of that reality and reduced the bearer of this thought, the subject, to an incoherent welter of sub-and trans-individual drives and desires (p. 2).

Postmodernism exemplifies an age of living in the surface without depth. Postmodernists seem to be interested in destroying already existing foundations without doing much to erect new solid ones. Revolution is a word that goes down well with postmodernism. Little wonder, her presence is felt everywhere in philosophy, architecture, literature, social and political theory, science and so on. Postmodernism rigorously questions every aspect of knowledge with a view to destroying every objective laid structure. It also subverts respected intellectual system.

Postmodernism, though a theoretical construct has such wave of influence that is contagious. Hence, Aronowitz and Giroux (1997) shares that “...the disparity between Ideology and practice has never been more dramatic than in intellectual knowledge” (p.185). Postmodernism as a form of cultural criticism has challenged a number of assumptions central to the discourse of modernism. Aronowitz and Giroux (1997) further capture this position thus:

These include modernism’s reliance on metaphysical notions of the subject; its advocacy of science, technology, and rationality as the foundation for equating change with progress; its ethnocentric equation of history with the triumphs of European; and its globalizing view that the industrialized western countries constitute a legitimate centre a unique and superior position from which to establish control and to determine hierarchies (p.114-115).

It thus appears that postmodernism reaches its climax when it tries reconstructing reality upon nothing. This truth is manifest upon the deduction that destroying the very foundation upon

which knowledge or truth is built should not be an end in itself. History has shown that knowledge or truth evolves especially when the base is broadened. Here new frontiers emerge as well as new horizons. So a case where knowledge is destroyed just because we don't want it built upon a foundation leaves much to be desired.

Thomas Kuhn (1996) in his work *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* gives us insight into what it takes when we discover that certain foundation or structure, as it has to do with knowledge is faulty. He maintained that, instead of abandoning that hypothesis as he calls it, one adds a corollary hypothesis in order to maintain the initial hypothesis. Even if we chose to deviate from Kuhn's position and abandon the initial hypothesis completely, at least we know that something came out from somewhere. A revolution came out from an initial evolution and Kuhn exemplifies this using 'normal science' that is research firmly, based upon one or more past scientific achievements supplying the foundation for its further practice.

When a problem is discovered with this 'normal science' or its foundation, we can say that an anomaly has been detected on the paradigm and that will necessitate a 'shift'. A shift in paradigm may not be an abandonment of the paradigm. This is true of science and other human activities, at least history can corroborate this. The question still remains: after destroying the foundation of truth or knowledge, on what will the postmodernist erect their new claims? Certainly it will be on another foundation, of relativity if you want. Is not relative truth or knowledge another foundation? For to doubt is to affirm something, as is the case with Descartes' methodic doubt "cogito ergo sum". Perhaps Derida's (1976) words may suffice here:

"Knowing" that there is nowhere an isolatable unit, not even an atomistic one and that conception of a unified present are merely an interpretation, the philosopher by an act of "forgetting" that knowledge, wins himself a "present". Within that created frame he, who has doubted the possibility of any stable morality, any possibility of truth, nonetheless speaks in one of the strongest polemical voices in European thought, not on taking sides but demolishing his opponents (p. xxxii).

In articulating the meaning of postmodernism, we need not to go into seminal details about the content of the works of each postmodernist but our concern is to give a holistic picture of the core belief of postmodernism or what we may call the 'foundation' upon which the belief of postmodernist's ideas rest upon and that it seems have been achieved. We now turn to looking at the next issue which is morality and her foundation.

### 3. Of Moral Foundation

Ethics, a branch of philosophical inquiry studies morality and all it entails. This is one subject that has gained worldwide or universal popularity and acceptance. Almost every sphere of life has an ethos. We hear of work ethics, environmental ethics, school ethics, religious ethics, ethics of private and public life and so on. Matters of ethics as it were are not swept under the carpet because they form the nexus of social life. Morality harps on what is good or evil, right or wrong. Esikot (2013) argues forcefully on the importance of moral optimism in a world full of pessimism when he avers thus:

Moral optimism therefore entails the acceptance that, there are moral codes and rules that govern man and society without which society will be one hell of a place to live in. For the moral optimist, even though human beings are not omniscient or do not always do what is right, that cannot discountenance her goodness as her moral failings can be attributed to a lot of factors such as social conditions or lack of self control through negligence (p. 84).

Ethics, from the Greek word (ethos) means custom or way of life. It is a normative science of human conduct, dealing with the standard or principle of right and wrong behaviours. It appears prima facie that man recognizes the right from the wrong in human conduct hence he knows the right way of life despite his fallibility. What then could be pointed as the foundation on which these fundamental principles of morality are grounded? In answering this question, three possible answers could be proffered. One could be based on our “conscience” as humans; others could be: the moral law and diverse ethical theories.

Conscience is defined by Blackburn (2005) “as the consciousness humans have that an action is morally required or forbidden” (p.74). The subject of the conscience has its own limitation especially when a conscience becomes mistaken about what is required or forbidden. However voluntary actions that are blameworthy can be used as a distinguishing mark from the involuntary action. And this will necessarily lead to the subject of responsibility.

According to Oke and Esikot (2005) “conscience as an internal arbiter is a function of practical intellect which judges the concrete action of an individual person as morally good or evil” (p.7). One significant thing about conscience is that its convictions are not overt and hence it does not provide an open standard accessible to others on the basis of which responsibility could be imputed to an agent. However, this is not a denial of the reality of conscience.

The moral law is a code that applies to all humans. It has close affinity with the “conscience”. In his *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant tells us that two things filled him with wonder; they are: the starry sky above and the moral law within. The moral law is within our hearts and this is a foundation for justifying universal morality common to all humans since all men have rationality.

Finally at this juncture, a lot of ethical theories have been propounded in a bid to synthesize the whole gamut of our ethical ideals. Some of these ethical theories are utilitarianism, altruism,

egoism, Kantianism, hedonism, situationism and so on. The tie that binds them all is the imperative of looking for grounds on which morality can be established especially as a universal concept whose influence on man and the society wields enormous consequences. We now proceed to examining the foundation of education.

#### **4. The Foundation of Education**

The need for education rests on man's desire for fulfillment and freedom especially from the trap of ignorance. Albeit, education remains a concept that is all inclusive leaving in its trail, conflicts in an attempt to understand it holistically. But a common agreement abounds as to the *raison d'être* of education. This is that it provides man the tool to be liberated from the shackles of mental slavery, ignorance, poverty and diseases. Thus it follows that education is a concept that ties a whole lot of activities together culminating in bringing out a refined man.

That said, education has an end in view. This point is made very clear by Peters (1973) when he states that:

Education is not a concept that marks out any particular type of process such as training, or activity such as lecturing; rather it suggests criteria to which processes such as training must conform. One of these is that something of value should be passed on (p. 87).

This idea of 'value' is one of the foundation to which education coheres. At least it is not in doubt that people strive to be educated because of the benefit that accrues from being educated. Man naturally will not move towards what will not be of value or benefit to him. This is just like the instinct for self preservation which is common with man. In the same vein, education provides the educated a vast and rich option that makes for a robust and successful living even though this truth can be contested but not overruled.

Education involves a lot of activities that culminates into the transmission of worthwhile knowledge that are useful to the one being educated. Whatever argument can be put forward as the rationale for education must involve some kind of utility which may be practical or theoretical but with some benefits either in the long or short run. Reasoning along this line, Ekanem (2012b) asserts that:

Education is for life...education is to help us make meaning of our existence and the world we live in. It is to help us make right decisions and choices. It is to help us to be creative and for our soul to be illuminated (p. 26).

Most educators, both the ancient from Plato to the contemporary such as Freire, agrees that education must be total and comprehensive. Hence, the goal set to be achieved through the educative process can pass for the foundation on which education is erected. To this end, diversities in the philosophy of education or the goal of education only goes to lay credence to the activity called education which has come to stay with us. Education as a discipline has its foundation on

some of the issues that bothers us as humans. This truth informs Barrow's (1975) opinion when he asserts that:

Why as a matter of fact, does religious education feature on all school curricula? What factors in our society are contributing to the relatively low correlation between equal educational opportunity and equal educational achievement? How do various children respond to various kinds of punishment? Is it immoral to punish children? Hence the study of education is taken to involve primarily the application of these four disciplines to the educational sphere (p. 20).

The subject of education as it were today has gained unprecedented global acceptance as it has been held to be a catalyst for all round development of man. Moral and science education coheres very well objectively from pole to poles despite differing idiosyncrasies and intellectual prejudice. The ideal utilitarian who emphasizes more on things like the pursuit of truth, the creation of beauty, the enjoyment of sensitive personal relationships, defines atleast, a way of life. The extension of such activities and their outlook, defines the main constituents in a civilized life. Peters (1981) makes the claim that "...it is precisely these sorts of activities into which we strive to initiate children in schools" (p. 50). These activities further constitutes some of the cardinal importance and foundations for education which every society strives to transmit to her young ones even though very unfortunately, as Kay (1975) will say, "...most people find themselves frustrated by institutions" (p.199).

## **5. Evaluation and Conclusion**

The postmodernist attempt at reducing the whole of reality to cultural relativity is a dangerous position that if not resisted vehemently will leave in its wake, a terrible and negative consequences to humans and generation to come. Right from antiquity, man has always been aware of the concept of truth and knowledge and has been on a quest to grasp these concepts holistically. It is not in doubt that culture, which is peculiar to people of a particular group to a large extent, affects the way they view reality. But to reduce the whole of reality to a figment of cultural perception commits the fallacy of ad ignorantia.

Knowing objective reality has always been doubted by moderate and total skeptics. This is why deductive and inductive arguments have always been at loggerhead. Nonetheless, no one will doubt the power of the mind to be able to order and organize knowledge objectively. This is what could account for certain universally true principles, both of morality and education. Kant theorized that the universal applicability to experienced things can only be experienced on the supposition that they are necessary preconditions of experience. To even qualify as experienced, a thing must be experienced in space and time (Moore and Bruder, 1999).



The postmodernist epistemological claim on the relative stance of truth is fraught with antagonism. It smacks of delusion arising from a predicament of limitation as far as is common to humans. Christian (2009) was right on point on his averment that:

It is one of the purposes of philosophy to help the individual build a world view that is functional. We each possess what we might call a naïve worldview in which many elements remain unsynthesized. The threads of experience have yet to be woven together into harmonious picture; loose ends remains. Our “collection” of experiences is a hodgepodge of contradictions in values and beliefs (p. 77).

Pessimism of nothingness, emptiness and uncertainty is a dangerous position that will not augur well for man. It is true that reality is vast and bewildering and the finite mind of man may not grasp it holistically except in fragments. But central to the major issue of postmodernism is “truth”. Truth has enjoyed universal interest and appeal both in theory and practice. It is an absolute that man has always wanted to know. So whether it cuts across culture, belief, customs, tradition, there is an awareness that it exists and because it exists, it is knowable.

If individuals and communities determines the status of truth, then it follows logically that truth in the first place is a “given”. How we go about excavating it is secondary. At least the notion of truth must be something real before we can begin to search it out. Hence, modernity accepts absolute truth from whence it is able to, through reason, science and technology, synthesize knowledge objectively in order to have recorded the optimism that we have witness in the last two hundred years.

The relevance of this paper is contingent on the belief that we live in an age where the notion of truth and knowledge has been watered down so much that everything or anything seem to be the norm. And the young at heart are the most vulnerable. The tendency is that we are living in an age where people hold all kinds of unverified belief based on their idiosyncrasies and this affects almost everything they do. Is it any wonder that we find all kinds of uprising and revolution in almost every parts of the world because of such kind of erroneous belief which the adherents are prepared to die for?

Contrary to the postmodernist’s claim that truth and reality are relative and differs from one culture to another, it is not in doubt that morality is objectively verifiable amongst all tribes, ethnic group or race. Perhaps relativity in the postmodernists’ perspective may mean objectivity in disguise. So whether a nation or people chose to want to legalize what is morally detestable such as homosexuality and abortion (which have great moral burden), the fact remains that there is an objective acknowledgement that is unacceptable. And it goes to show that we can learn from animals even though we claim to be more rational than them. For we can never find a situation where in the animal kingdom, a male dog runs after another male dog in a bid to having sexual relationship. In the same vein, we don’t find animals performing abortion or aiding others to doing that. We can only pretend to accept vices that are immoral; the truth is that we know better as we



are yet to find nations who legalize stealing, killing, terrorism, corruption and other vices that threaten our individual and collective existence.

In the case of truth, there is a universal consensus that the mind of man can access it. The mind is active and not passive towards knowledge and truth. Hence, education selects from a vast array of worthwhile knowledge and transmit same with the purpose of making man find all the fulfillment he can get within the confines of legality and what is commendable or praise worthy (even though what the majority calls praise worthy may not always be right). Hence education, not in the Marxian sense, contributes to refining man giving him direction that enables him make the right choice and take the right decision in the course of his life.

In conclusion, postmodernism seems to deny those salient matters from which we find our basis as rational beings with dignity by creating another foundation of relativity. It is the conviction of this paper that, it is an aberration, contemptuous and treasonable for anyone or group of individuals to destroy those foundations that make for a sane and peaceful society. This is where postmodernism as an ideology, movement or philosophy becomes guilty. Thus, postmodernism is anti-goodness and is an enemy of man, by man and for man. It is also an enemy of nature and the society for perpetuating doctrines that are inimical to the overall progress of man and all he represents.

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