

# Philosophy at the Beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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**Résumé:** À la dernière moitié du 20<sup>e</sup> siècle, la post-modernité a rejeté entièrement la notion de réalité objective et celui de vérité. On doit s'en souvenir que la vérité en dépend de ce qu'il montre et s'il n'y avait aucune réalité objective il n'y avait aucune vérité non plus. Mais aujourd'hui, au commencement du 21<sup>e</sup> siècle, est survenue une nouvelle vue appelée la post post-modernité qui est un retour subtil à la modernité et qui tend à trouver des choses fermes dans la réalité et des certitudes dans la pensée. Ainsi, ce courant reconnaît que notre expérience nous enseigne qu'il y a un monde réel qui existe indépendamment de nous, indépendamment de nos expériences, de nos pensées et de notre langue. À ce moment il semble qu'il y a une opportunité de revenir à une position réaliste, qui a du sens tant dans la science que dans la théologie. Elle fournit une vision du monde qui se veut correspondante à la réalité, cohérente en lui-même et capable à répondre systématiquement aux questions de la vie.

**Mots-clé:** *vérité, post-modernité, objectivité, réalisme*

By the middle part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a growing discontent with modernity. The claim was that modernity had promised much more than it could deliver with its scientism or positivism. The idea that it was possible to have absolute certainty through the scientific method was seriously doubted. The conclusion by a number (such as Foucault, Derrida, Rorty) was that reality was not such that it could be known in some objective way as if one could read the truth of nature right off the page as there was no reality in an objective sense. Reality did not exist "out there" but was created by each community. The Enlightenment

had forwarded the idea of naïve reality, that we could look at reality and make truth statements about it that were 100% accurate. Of course, Thomas Kuhn in his influential ideas of paradigm shift encouraged thoughts away from this naïve realism but his view led to the idea that there were many realities. From this developed what has been known as perspectivalism where one's own perspective is what determines what is real so that, in the end, there are as many realities as there are perspectives. And when a different paradigm was discovered, it did not make the old paradigm wrong, just different.

One might have predicted this epistemological development based on Enlightenment thinking simply because it denied the universal— in a word, that which transcends experience. Concerning this, Richard Weaver wrote in 1948 warning that: "The denial of universals carries with it the denial of everything transcending experience. The denial of everything transcending experience means inevitably – though ways are found to hedge on this – the denial of truth."<sup>1</sup> The denial of truth, argued Weaver, leads to relativism where man is the measure of all things. This growing confusion over reality and truth led a number of thinkers to challenge the basic premise of modernity, namely, that there is a reality out there to be known. In fact, the conclusion by many was that the search for epistemological certainty had failed because it was built on the assumption that there was a reality independent of the mind. What followed this critique of modernity (and its assumptions) has been called post modernity which claimed that the assumption of modernity was wrong. That is, that there could be a unified theory of knowledge --- that truth statements could be determined to be right or wrong by a correspondence theory of truth.

In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, post modernity jettisoned the notion of truth (and objective reality) altogether, that

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1948, p. 4.

is, truth as it related to some objective reality “out there” so to speak. It must be remembered that truth depends on that to which it points. If there were no objective reality to which a truth -claim pointed, then there was no truth either. This in some way contributed to the more nihilistic view of life (built on the denial of God’s existence) that is a life without meaning. This was the practical outworking of the loss of the universal ---meaninglessness---as particulars are never strong enough to ground meaning. The reason for this is that nature is always changing. If nature is the grounding of truth, then truth is relative as meaning is determined by the relationship of one particular has to another. In this case, when one particular changes, then so does meaning.

By the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a growing chorus of voices challenging post modernity. It did not take long for those who labored in the physical sciences to strenuously object to the post modern view of reality. After all, if there were no reality independent of the mind, then how could anyone do anything meaningful in the name of science? If reality is in flux and ambiguous, then science was subverted as science requires stability to reality.

The postmodernist view saw the epistemological failure in modernity’s confidence in legitimizing truth-value claims by reason, but did not understand properly why it failed, which was the loss of the transcendent or the universal. While post modernity’s challenge to modernity at this point seemed right, unfortunately, it failed to understand the cure because it misdiagnosed the ailment of the Enlightenment. Consequently, it attempted a solution to modernity while maintaining the two crippling assumptions of modernity. One was the epistemological denial of universals (essentialism) and the other was the corollary assumption of naturalism. Both of these led to the epistemological impotence of modernity, but were still embraced by postmodernism.

The challenges to post modernity were soon sounded by those in the physical sciences. Edward O. Wilson (biologist at Harvard), a proponent of post post modernism writes of the postmodernists,

“Reality, they [postmodernists] propose, is a state constructed by the mind, not perceived by it. In the most extravagant version of this constructivism, there is no "real" reality, no objective truths external to mental activity, only rivaling versions disseminated by ruling social groups. Nor can ethics be firmly grounded, given that each society creates its own codes for the benefit of the same oppressive forces”<sup>1</sup>

Here even a naturalist clearly understands, even if he cannot understand why, how the ideas of post modernism lead to the ethical relativism hence moral relativism.

By the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a new view arose called post post modernity which is a subtle return to modernity. In Paul Kurtz’s critique of post modernism’s failure he makes a case for returning to the Enlightenment. He writes:

“Scientific naturalism holds a form of nonreductive materialism; natural processes and events are best accounted for by reference to material causes.”<sup>2</sup>

The affirmation is that

“Scientific naturalism enables human beings to construct a coherent worldview disentangled from metaphysics or theology and based on the sciences.”<sup>3</sup>

In one statement, post post modernism shows that it is following the thinking of the Enlightenment. That is, it remains hostile to the idea of anything transcending experience, but still

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<sup>1</sup> Edward O. Wilson, *Free Inquiry Fall*, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Kurtz (drafter), *Humanist Manifesto 2000*, Amherst, Prometheus Books, 2000, p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

claims it is possible to construct a coherent worldview from the particulars alone.

Edward O. Wilson, speaking for post post modernism, writes,

“Science offers the boldest metaphysics of the age. It is a thoroughly human construct, driven by the faith that if we dream, press to discover, explain, and dream again, thereby plunging repeatedly into new terrain, the world will somehow come clearer and we will grasp the true strangeness of the universe.”<sup>1</sup>

Still working from the two-circle theory of truth, both post modernism and post post modernism fail to see the fundamental flaw in Enlightenment epistemology. Post modernity simply gives up the notion of some totalizing metanarratives, while post post modernity believes it can still be done legitimately from science with some modifications of modernity. However, as long as the assumptions of the Enlightenment remain the starting point, there is little hope of moving beyond the present epistemological dilemma. Modernity has demonstrated that one cannot build a universal from a careful study of the particulars. Any such attempt is always defeated by skepticism and limited epistemic access to all the facts.

One could argue that the major point of the critique of post modernism (and post post modernism) is its *a priori* commitment to naturalism with its corollary dismissal of the possibility of an infinite personal God who could speak to man, a God who stands above nature, a God who created nature and who has spoken to man in a way that man can understand. That is to say, the transcendent One who provides a grounding for meaning in the study of particulars. Still, post post modernity boasts of a way out of the epistemological and moral relativism of post modernity and it is back to the Enlightenment. Of course they claim it will be

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<sup>1</sup> Edward O. Wilson, *Concilience: The Unity of Knowledge*, New York, Alfred A. Knoff, Inc., 1998, p. 12.

different this time around. Paul Kurtz explains (as he admits) that Enlightenment's role of "Reason as an absolute rather than as a tentative and fallible instrument of human purpose was overdrawn."<sup>1</sup> What he proposes to change is precisely this notion. He suggests that reason, while reliable, is still fallible. Of course, that is right and that is a good start. However, the failure to see the importance of the universal/transcendent, that which is above experience, will also subvert his attempts to avoid the same conclusion of modernity. If consistent to the end, he will have to choose either to accept skepticism or return to the scientism of modernity.

It is, in fact, this tenacious commitment to naturalism that will deliver post post modernity to the reductionistic notions of modernity—the clear failure of modernity. Edward O. Wilson actually hopes that

"We are approaching a new age of synthesis, when the testing of consilience [coherence] is the greatest of all intellectual challenges. Philosophy, the contemplation of the unknown, is a shrinking dominion. We have the common goal of turning as much philosophy as possible into science."<sup>2</sup>

There is a belief that recognition of the universal is unwanted and unnecessary on the one hand, and that scientific naturalism is sufficient to ground one's knowledge claims on the other hand. As Paul Kurtz explains:

"Scientific naturalism enables human beings to construct a coherent worldview disentangled from metaphysics or theology and based on the sciences."<sup>3</sup>

However, in the critique of postmodern, there is another possibility which has been noised about in the background and is

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Kurtz, *Humanist Manifesto 2000*, Amherst, Prometheus Books, 2000, p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> Edward O. Wilson., *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*, p. 11-12

<sup>3</sup> Paul Kurtz, *Humanist Manifesto 2000*, Amherst, Prometheus Books, 2000, p. 24.

now gaining a growing number of adherents. In an edited work titled *After Postmodernism: An Introduction to Critical Realism*<sup>1</sup> there is a suggestion that there is a *middle way* between the naïve realism of modernity (foundationalism: the idea that there are foundational beliefs that rest on no other beliefs and, hence, are indubitable) and the relativism of post modernity. This *middle way* is called critical realism. In a naturalistic universe, or “time-bound” universe, there is no possibility of God or that God has spoken --- no possibility of universals and no possibility of the transcendent – no need of essences. That is, that there is no truth from “out there” because there is no reality “out there”. Critical realism on the other hand, agrees with modernity that there is a reality out there, but argues that it is not known with absolute certainty. That is to say:

“The external world is real. Our knowledge of it is partial but can be true. Science is a map or model. It is made up of successive paradigms that bring us to closer approximation of reality and absolute truth. Each field in science presents a different blueprint of reality. These are complimentary to one another. Integration is achieved, not by reducing them all to one model, but by seeing their relationship. Each gives us partial insights into reality.”<sup>2</sup>

There is only one reality and it is knowable by man, however, it cannot be known with absolute certainty, but it can be known with a high degree of confidence. It claims that while man’s cognitive faculties are fallible, they are reliable. The difference between critical realism and post post modernity is that critical realism allows for the universal, that which transcends experience. In addition, and importantly so, critical realism recognizes that one method is not sufficient for knowing all reality. That is, the nature of what is known determines what can be known about the object

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<sup>1</sup> Jose Lopez and Gary Potter (eds.), *After Postmodernism: An Introduction to Critical Realism*, London, The Althone Press, 2001.

<sup>2</sup>Paul G. Hiebert, *Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts: Affirming Truth in a Modern/Postmodern World*, Harrisburg, Trinity Press International, 1999, p. 37.

and how it can be known. The scientific method is capable of making knowledge claims about nature, but theology can make knowledge claims about that which transcends experience.

Critical realism is promoted by both scientists and theologians: scientists such as John Polkinghorne, Roy Bhasker, Author Peacock, and theologians such as Alister McGrath, Bernard Lonergan, Ben Meyer, Kevin Vanhoozer. It is interesting to note that Catholic theologian Bernard Lonergan was writing about critical realism in the mid part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when a scientist, Michael Polanyi was coming to the same conclusion. Speaking about the nature of reality, Alister McGrath suggests that there are different aspects to reality and in this way ontology determines epistemology. He writes:

“These differing modes of interplay and representation are governed by the nature of the strata of reality under investigation, each of which demands its own distinctive mode of engagement. To set up a principle that is of decisive importance throughout this project: *ontology (the way things are) determines epistemology (the way things are known)*. The nature of reality is such that certain things can only be known to a certain extent, and in a certain way – and that is the reality of the situation. We are not in a position to determine whether and how things may be known; that is decided by the things themselves.”<sup>1</sup>

What this means, according to J. Wentzel van Huysteen (Princeton University), is that:

“Critical realism, of course, is neither a theological nor a scientific thesis; it is a philosophical, an epistemological, thesis about the goals of scientific knowledge and the implications of theoretical models in science. Hence it should not be seen as a theory about truth, but rather a

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<sup>1</sup> Alister McGrath, *The Science of God*, Grand Rapids, Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004, p. 107.



theory about the epistemic values that shape scientific rationality. In theology, critical realism should be seen as a response to the question: ‘What sort of philosophical account is possible of the aims and the structure of religious/theological reflection and of the epistemic attitudes presupposed by this kind of reflection.’”<sup>1</sup>

Critical realism affirms we have a direct perceptual access to our world, that there is a reality that exists independent of the mind. That is the realism part. The critical part is that it believes our cognitive faculties are reliable, but not infallible. Furthermore, it is unwarranted to say that all reality can be grasped by the methods of science as that would fall into the mistake of reductionism in modernity. Because data is processed by the subject, there is a subjective element to the knowing process — subjective, not relative. As a knower, man realizes that he is a subject in the knowing process and his processing of information is influenced by his worldview, or what we might call a web of beliefs. Therefore, the intellectually virtuous person does all he can to assure that his epistemic claims have passed a critical review using both the coherent and correspondence tests for truth. Such tests for truth are possible, according to critical realism, because there is a reality independent of the mind (call it objective reality).

The fact that post post modernity failed on the practical level is that it is impossible to live and have meaning in the world give the post modern paradigm. The reason for modernity’s failure is lodged in the fact it eventually dismissed the notion of universals, or the transcendent. Critical realism logically recognizes at least the possibility of universals (in some places it is actually called transcendental realism) which in turn brings theology back into the discussion of knowledge claims. Because it is *critical* realism, it avoids the epistemological arrogance of modernity. Because it is *critical realism* it avoids the totalizing

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<sup>1</sup> J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology*, Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997, p. 40.

relativism of post modernity. As a form of realism it acknowledges there is a reality independent of the mind and of the community that can be known even if it is known imperfectly --yet truly. Within critical realism there is an acceptance of certain anthropological givens. Although I would not suggest that John Searle is a critical realist (he is an anti-dualist), he does list what seems undeniable on intuitive grounds at least that certain facts are obvious. He suggests there are four, what he calls default positions:

1. We have direct perceptual access to that world through our senses, especially touch and vision.

2. Words in our language, words like rabbit or tree, typically have reasonably clear meanings. Because of their meanings, they can be used to refer to and talk about real objects in the world.

3. Our statements are typically true or false depending on whether they correspond to how things are, that is, to the facts in the world.

4. Causation is a real relation among objects and events in the world, a relation whereby one phenomenon, the cause, causes another, the effect. <sup>1</sup>

In other words, our experience teaches us that there is a real world that exists independently of us, independently of our experiences, our thoughts, and our language. At this moment it appears there is a window of opportunity to return to a realist position, one that misses the mistakes of both modernity and post modernity and makes sense of both science and theology. In addition, it provides a worldview paradigm that makes sense of our world practically, which is to say, it corresponds to reality, is coherent within itself, has explanatory power and answers the questions of life consistently.

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<sup>1</sup> John Searle, *Mind, Language, and Society*, New York, Basic Books, 1999 pbk, p. 10.