

Postmodernism: A Realm Beyond Renaissance Humanism

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Theme: [History](#)

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There is a fundamental distinction between scientism, or scientific worldview, which is an ideology based on unproven hypotheses and empirically proven science. Karl Popper addressed the demarcation problem between scientific worldview and science proper (empirical and verifiable science) in his theory of falsifiability.

Take biological evolution, for instance: natural selection is a scientifically proven fact; it can be said about speciation that it is the logical extension of natural selection; but how can “primordial hot soup theory” regarding the origins of life be designated as science?

There are obvious shortcomings in scientific worldview that need to be addressed. Therefore, teaching biological evolution in public schools without teaching valid criticism on the theory of evolution and its corollary, scientism, is nothing short of indoctrinating children. As the adage goes: “Teach a child a religion and you indoctrinate him, teach him many and you inoculate him.”

Regarding postmodernism, it is a belief in the subjectivity of existence, a post-human condition and a context-based empirical as opposed to ideological approach to social and moral issues. All the latest moral theories, like virtue ethics for instance, emphasize the importance of affect or emotion over reason.

It’s regrettable that Renaissance humanism derives its moral inspiration exclusively from rationalism; the utilitarian maxima, for example: the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers. But it reductively defines happiness in simplistic pleasure-pain equations.

Virtue ethics posits that morality is based neither on consequentialism nor on any deontological principle. More than the consequences of an action, it concerns itself with how the action reflects on the moral character of an individual. Human beings are moral beings, which means they have a hardwired sense of justice.

I would not get into the meaningless nature vs. nurture debate. By nature, human beings are merely tabula rasa; our mindsets are structured by our social environment. Moreover, it’s our upbringing and culture which make us moral beings.

Like I have argued earlier, that morality is based less on reason and more on affect or emotion. Reason falls well short, the best it can come up with is reciprocal altruism, which by definition isn’t “altruism” at all, since altruism implies self-sacrifice; and without it, it is merely selfish reciprocity of you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours.

All morality is based on love, compassion and empathy. And what is the fountainhead of

love? It is the institution of family which infuses compassion in its members: the love between parents, children and siblings; and this familial love then transcends immediate family and encompasses the entire mankind.

Since the Renaissance humanism onwards, we have taken an essentialist approach toward social and moral issues: that all traditional values are essentially redundant and all modern values are worth-emulating; a rationalistic fallacy which derives everything from deduction and rarely from induction and observation.

There are two types of traditionalisms: unconscious traditionalism and deliberate traditionalism. Deliberate traditions are a set of values which were devised during the agricultural phase of social evolution for the wellbeing of individual and the social cohesion of group. Whereas unconscious traditions are the beliefs and superstitions which develop spontaneously without any conscious design and therefore are more harmful than beneficial, as such.

A better social and moral paradigm should retain the time-tested and empirically proven deliberate traditions and eradicate harmful customs. Although I do concede that priorities change over time in the light of new discoveries; some of the deliberate traditions might also not meet the requirements of modern times.

While devising a new model, however, it should be kept in mind that an empirically proven fact must always take precedence over any theoretically derived reform: the onus lies on the reformer to prove beyond doubt that suggested reform is an improvement on the original tradition as it was practiced over the course of centuries.

Regardless, it is also a fact that most social and moral values are basically survival instincts, but here we must keep in mind that they are the survival instincts of social groups, not individuals. Human beings are socially constituted and socially situated.

Throughout our anthropological history, we lived in social groups. During our nomadopastoral phase, we survived not because of our physical superiority over all other species, but because of our intelligence and social cohesion. We were pack-hunters who were far more innovative than any other known specie, which gave us a comparative advantage in the race for survival.

All I am trying to say is that an individual is important but he is only secondary to the group and the collective survival instincts - which include empathy and altruism for fellow beings - must constitute an integral part of comprehensive new scheme of morality.

Let me clarify, however, that I am not against individual autonomy; it's only when the individual self-interest collides with the collective interest that we face a dilemma. In such a scenario, in my opinion, collective interest must prevail over individual interest.

Notwithstanding, individualists generally posit that an individual holds a central position in society; the way I see it, however, being human is inextricably interlinked with the institution of family. The only things that separates human beings from the rest of species is their innate potential to acquire knowledge, but knowledge alone is not sufficient for our collective survival due to excessive and manifest intra-special violence; unless we have social cohesion which comes from love, compassion and empathy, we are likely to self-destruct as a specie.

The aforementioned empathy and altruism, however, are imparted by the institution of family; within which, spouses love each other and their children, and in turn, children love their parents and siblings. This familial love then transcends the immediate environs of family and encompasses the entire humanity. Thus, without the institution of family there will be no humanity, or individual, in the long run due to intra-special violence.

Additionally, some social scientists draw our attention to the supposed “unnaturalness” of the institution of family and the practice of polygamy and polyamory etc. in the primitive tribal societies, but if we take a cursory look at the history of mankind, there have been two distinct phases of cultural development: the pre-Renaissance social evolution and the post-Renaissance social evolution.

Most of our cultural, scientific and technological accomplishments are attributed to the latter phase that has only lasted for a few centuries, and the institution of family has always played a pivotal role in the social advancement of that era. Empirically speaking, we must base our scientific assumptions on the proven and verifiable evidence and not some cock and bull stories peddled by reductive biologists and anthropologists.

Regarding the erosion of the institution of family, I am of the opinion, that it has primarily been the fault of the mass entertainment media that has caused an unnatural obsession with glamor and consequent sexualization of modern societies.

In order to sum it up in a nutshell, techno-scientific progress alone cannot ensure the survival and well-being of individuals in the long run; unless we are able to bring up individuals, who, along with intelligence and knowledge, also possess love, compassion and empathy; and such sentiments cannot be taught in schools and academies, which makes family an indispensable social institution which is necessary for our collective well-being and progress.

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