

Postmodern Dialogue Secularists v/s Religionists

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Abstract— *This paper simply an attempt to challenge the epistemological anarchism by using scientific rationality as the sole guardian of rationality. This increasing interrogation of the objectivist claims of scientific knowledge received a reinforcement with the advent of recent theories which offered rigorous critique of foundationalist epistemologies. The philosophical quest for certainty and truth has been challenged by relativists of multiple hues and colours. The Jaina doctrines of Syadvada and anekantavada emphasized on grasping the relativistic positions or points of view with regard to the same phenomena whereas pre-Socratic Sophists brought out a relativistic critique of philosophy in ancient Greece. . On the religious plane, such religions as. Hinduism. Buddhism, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity. Islam etc., have historically claimed to be repositories of truth. In modern times, such movements or ideologies as Humanism, Capitalism Socialism, etc., have competed for attention as liberating panaceas across the globe. Various religious value-systems or even secular-rational value-frameworks have also claimed to resolve all the social political and economic problems faced by contemporary world*

The increasing interrogation of the objectivist claims of scientific knowledge received a reinforcement with the advent of recent theories which offered rigorous critique of foundationalist epistemologies. Further the development of hermeneutics as a method for historical studies and the proliferation of postmodern trend of thought in different fields have led to a problematization of rationality as a privileged concept.

While this attempt to question rationality along with the entire ensemble of universalistic notion has been hailed as liberating move by some others have expressed misgivings about the tenability of an unqualified relativism

There are many issues related to this problematic. The present paper is an attempt to evaluate the two extreme positions and will be an attempt to justify relativistic position.

Relativism as a critical or methodological position has been a pervasive feature of philosophical discourse.

Ancient philosophers in Greece as well as in India have advanced relativistic standpoints stemming from various modes of apprehending reality. The philosophical quest for certainty and truth has been challenged by relativists of multiple hues and colours. The Jaina doctrines of Syadvada and anekantavada emphasized on grasping the relativistic positions or points of view with regard to the same phenomena whereas pre-Socratic Sophists brought out a relativistic critique of philosophy in ancient Greece. In pre modern European thought Montaigne may be said to be a radical champion of philosophical relativism. With the advent of post modernistic formulations in the second half of twentieth century relativism has again been pushed to the center-stage of philosophical discourse making it an important facet of contemporary intellectual life. The acceptance of relativism has been one of the pervasive features of post-modern thought. Various historians, sociologists and philosophers have been attracted by the notion of relativism in our times

and climes. In fact, it has become quite fashionable in contemporary methodological debates and discussions.

Man's perennial quest for truth and certainty has crystallized into multiple philosophies, ideologies, theologies, moralities blueprints and agendas. On the philosophical plane, various 'isms or systems of thought such as idealism, realism, materialism, monism, dualism etc., have been worked out as systematic accounts of what is ultimately real. On the religious plane, such religions as Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam etc., have historically claimed to be repositories of truth. In modern times, such movements or ideologies as Humanism, Capitalism, Socialism, etc., have competed for attention as liberating panaceas across the globe. Various religious value-systems or even secular-rational value-frameworks have also claimed to resolve all the social political and economic problems faced by contemporary world. All philosophical, theological, ideological and ethical claims have presented themselves as sure, certain and true propositional gestalts. More often than not, they have deemed themselves to be sole repositories of truth and certainty. During the course of historical evolution, these philosophical, theological, ideological and ethical schemes have either been dialectically confronting one another or actually engaging themselves in bloody competitions. While philosophers have mostly been involved in verbal disputations, theological and ideological enthusiasts and zealots have been at daggers drawn to impose their so-called truth-claims on opposing camps. Adherents of Semitic religions such as Christianity and Islam have fought long drawn out battles across Asian, African and European lands since the advent of Islam with a view to impose their world-views in value-systems upon each other. Besides, hundreds of thousands of Buddhist, Christian and Muslim missionaries have been engaged in Asia, Africa and Europe to preach their respective gospels of truth and win as many converts to their folds as possible. These theological and ideological disagreements and clashes have been widely prevalent throughout twentieth century and may not altogether disappear in twenty first century.

Exponents of relativism have always argued that these world-view and value-systems do not have any absolute and objective status, but are relative to traditions, mores, historical backgrounds, cultures, patterns of socio-economic development and technological wherewithal etc. The rise and fall of these views and values is negotiated through concrete historical, geographical, cultural and technological conditions. They are not unqualified or objective accounts of natural or human phenomena but elucidations or formulations

operating within given conditions and contexts. For example, during the ancient or primitive times, the cultural and technological developments were too nebulous to allow any elaborate metaphysical or theological formulations. Instead elaborate mythological accounts or explanations were rampant during the primitive stage of historical development. The two millennia from fifth century B.C. upto around fifteenth century were ripe for carrying out metaphysical system building and religious world-views and value-systems. Critical assessments and rebuttals of theologies and philosophies could be worked out only in Post-Copernican or post-Renaissance period of European history. In ancient and medieval times various cultural traditions, by and large, developed and functioned in blissful ignorance of one another. However, when various cultural traditions confronted one another due to intercontinental explorations and cross-oceanic circumnavigations could modern man take a critical look at well-entrenched theological pre-suppositions, philosophical predilections and ideological prejudices. In fact, the mingling of cultures was instrumental in the development of various sociological and anthropological sciences. Contemporary resurgence of relativism is deeply rooted in massive historical and anthropological data available to modern man. Historians, sociologists, ethnographers, anthropologists, philologists etc., have furnished us elaborate accounts of ancient-cultures, traditions, mores and myths. Detailed accounts of contemporary cultural and ethical diversity have also been furnished to modern man with increasing methodological sophistication and rigor.

Ethical norms and values differ from culture to culture. Relativists may account for such variations as a function of different historical, geographical, philosophical and economic conditions. Like other phenomena, behavioural norms, arise out of complex sets of circumstances and we find ourselves subscribing to various notions of what is right and wrong. Furthermore, the relativists argue that cognition or the representation of the world to ourselves too reflects the very selective structure of our perceptual apparatuses. There are many possible world-views. No world-view is so privileged or objective as to see things as they "really" are. Objectivity, at its best, is the agreement between individuals about what exists and how the world works. However, even such a compromise is obtained within a framework of a particular culture.

For absolutists, beliefs and values are based upon certain and universal standards grounded in a trans-human perspective. For example, the cognitive and moral certainty of men of religion or theologians, is rooted in some sort of

supernatural explanations of the natural phenomena. Truth is arrived at through divinely ordained revelations or by consulting an authoritative text or through instructions from a trusted mentor. Knowledge and morality are intimately linked to the Absolute in the transcendent realm. The supposedly eternal and universal standards stem from that very transcendent realm of Absolute. Unfortunately, there seem to be a number of rather different Absolutes and valiant disagreements as to which of them constitutes the Truth. Religionists do not have a patent on absolutism. It can operate vehemently and arrogantly in secular discourse as well. Non-religious forms of absolutism can display an equal disregard for the multiplicity and contingency of human experience. Racial ideologies, caste-agendas, fascist, blueprints, patriotic interpretations, egalitarian viewpoints, utopian dogmas etc.. all seek to monopolise truth, justice and rationality. Thus it is assumed that there are things so sacred that they must be protected by the arm of the state from any irreverent challenge. Those who scoff at the absolute truth and/or virtue must be punished. Many Americans may argue that American flag must be defended at all costs. In Communist China it is the monolithic and utopian absolute of the party line which must go unchallenged. Similarly, free-market may be dogmatically defended as the only mechanism of economic growth. Socialist model of economic management may be defended to be the only instrument guaranteeing distributive justice. Even scientific arguments may be marshalled demonstrating the inherent superiority of the Aryan race or the inevitable ascendance of the working class or the inevitability of the social stratification or the unavoidability of 'survival of the fittest'.

The so-called secularists, modernists and humanists have put up a valiant methodological struggle to set up rationality as a foundation for deriving universally acceptable cognitive beliefs and ethical values. Relativism always challenges the basis of this inherent human wishful thinking and contends that an objective rationality against which we could measure or evaluate our ideas as to what is true and what is right is impossible of formulation. Peter Winch, Bary Barnes, David Bloor, Richard Rorty, Alasdair Macintyre etc., argue that rationality operates within an already given set of assumptions and motives and even our conception of rationality is related to a context. They will never be able finally to rationally justify our most fundamental beliefs about how the world is or our basic values. These beliefs and values constitute the context within which our version of rationality works.

Thus, there are competing notions of rationality and what is rational is ultimately linked to our pre-rational convictions. It does not matter whether these convictions are based on authority, revelation and tradition or on empirical evidence. A person, operating in a religious culture and accepting claims of scriptural texts is accepted to be a rational person. However, such a person is condemned to be irrational by those who espouse a scientific or evidential standard of rationality. Thus, both secularists and fundamentalists may advance their respective claims with impeccable logical and practical consistency and yet the grounds for holding their respective claims do emanate from conflicting background assumptions. Such a situation entails charges and counter-charges of irrationality and nothing substantial can be done to eliminate these in ineliminable bickerings. For example, the secularists might try to justify his world-view by pointing out how it leads to technological sophistication, how it generates material wealth, how it promotes freedom of thought and expression and how it encourages social justice etc. However, our fundamentalist friends may not be persuaded by this kind of pragmatic justification. They may well show us the equally fruitful results of their Weltanchnung; its social cohesiveness, its impact on moral refinement of the individual, its optimism, its never-say-die attitude, its purposive ness, its meaningfulness and above all its spiritual satisfaction and more importantly, satisfaction over success. Thus both these world-views operate quite perfectly in keeping with their respective standards, although it needs to be stressed that these respective standards emanate from radically different assumptions about how the world is how we should act and what constitutes a good life etc. The respective assumptions of these two world-views and value systems are beyond the pale of pragmatic justification.

Such considerations show that both the fundamentalist and the secularist have the ability to offer acceptable justifications in support of their respective world-views and values systems. Both these camps can demonstrate the coherence of their beliefs and values with equal rigor and sophistication. Therefore, both may be counted as rational and both need to withdraw the charges and counter-charges of irrationality. The secularists can have complaints against fundamentalists and vice versa. However, the basic ethical and cognitive commitments of any view are not themselves open to a rational critique. The criteria justifying beliefs, values and goals perused in one culture may seem flawed when judged by the standards of a rival world-view. However, all the beliefs, values and goals perused within competing cultural

frameworks are rooted in pre rational starting points which are not amenable to rational evaluation.

Our cultural and historical legacy generally endows us with a set of assumptions. Certain beliefs and values are inculcated in every person in his or her numberless interactions and relations. These beliefs and values are not premised on rational criteria. They are given or handed over to us by multiple circumstantial factors. They may be said to be pre-rational assumptions and postulates of our understanding or our actions. We want these beliefs and values to be self-consistent and can, if the need arises, forward plausible reasons with a view to justify them. However, there can not be any ultimate justification or validation for these beliefs and values. The 'rational' is embedded and elaborated within a non-rational context of preferences and assumptions. Therefore an ultimately rational justification of values and world-views generated by human culture can not be worked out. For example, men of religion are widely committed to the authority of sacred texts. The knowledge and values transmitted by these sacred texts serve as the pre-rational set of commitments on which their very rationality operates. Suppose we ask a Muslim fundamentalist as to why we should establish an "Islamic State his stock response would be because Allah has asked Muslims in the Quran to establish such a State. Now if something is really or allegedly divinely ordained or recommended in the Quran then any further discussion or debate on the matter would be sacrilegious to the fundamentalist. The belief in the divine infallibility of the Quran is the ultimate weapon in the armory of the fundamentalist. He can not offer a yet more basic commitment to justify his belief in the infallibility of the Quran. All our rhetorical skills and persuasive strategies will not change his basic belief about the Quran. The belief in the truth of the Quran is the cognitive bed-rock of the fundamentalist.

The secularist or the rationalist espousing evidence, experiment and scientific consensus as the ultimate standard of rationality, will also find himself in a quandary if he is asked to justify these very features of his rationality. He can try to justify his beliefs and values by recourse to scientific rationality. However, he has no more basic or fundamental set of arguments or reasons to justify scientific rationality itself. For example, inductive statements and the so-called law of uniformity of nature are beyond the ken of any philosophical or methodological justification. Belief in the inductive generalization and regularity of nature is itself at the core of scientific rationality.

The world has no built-in guidelines as to how we should conduct ourselves. There is no ultimate or privileged

description of what exists and how things fit together. All accounts of Absolute seem to be arbitrarily formulated stories. There is no ultimate guarantee either for our cognitive stances or for our ethical choices. However, the desire to justify one's beliefs or values is widely prevalent. Most of us find it important to be self-consistent by not holding obviously contradictory beliefs and by acting according to our avowed values. If we are self-consistent chances are we shall be able to offer justifications that are, by and large, acceptable. This ability to offer justifications which are acceptable to ourselves and others is one general characteristic of being rational.

Philosophers are notorious for engaging in endless disputations. Indeed, disagreement is the hall-marks of all philosophizing. There are positions and counter-positions, arguments and counter-arguments, propositions and counter-propositions theories and counter-theories, systems and counter-systems etc., characterizing the core of philosophical dialectic. There are idealists and materialists, realists and anti-realists empiricists and rationalists, objectivists and subjectivists, foundationalists and anti-foundationlists, theists and atheists, monotheists and polytheists etc.. offering there "isms" as universally and eternally justified and justifiable world-views and values systems. All of them hope that in course of time the outstanding merits of their view-points will persuade their opponents to join their camps by giving up their beliefs and values they so ardently but unsuccessfully defend. They all hope, their watertight compartments not withstanding, for the gradual emergence or sudden discovery of an ultimate philosophical consensus on their respective philosophical positions. However, pious wishes or wishful thinking, fortunately or unfortunately, are no substitute for sophisticated methodological analysis. The philosophical struggle of thousands of years for hammering out a consensus with regard to our beliefs, values and goals and the multidimensional contemporary methodological critiquing of such a long drawn-out tradition indicate that there is no consensus waiting to be discovered by some ultimate philosophers. Philosophers may well be like blind men in dark a room searching for a black cat which is not there. The ultimate consensus does not remain undiscovered. It most probably does not exist. All philosophies, theologies and ideologies are attempts to decipher what is indecipherable or say what can not be said. All of them struggle to formulate universal and eternal panaceas; a project outside the cognitive limits of homoserines.

Philosophers have long aspired that the application of reason might unite us in a single worldview and value-system. They have believed in an ultimate rationality that can

deliver a consensus amidst multiple disagreements both cognitive and ethical or generate a universally agreed upon set of beliefs and values. However, the differences in respective positions are radical enough to allow such a project to come to fruition. The underlying assumptions about beliefs and values are cross-culturally too radical to admit of any such reconciliation. Even what counts as rational and self-consistent discourse may vary from culture to culture. Therefore, for two philosophical disputants, there may be no shared fundamental value that is binding enough to serve as a common ground. Human beings as seekers of knowledge and doers of action are inherently perspectival with limited outlooks and specific needs. These inherently perspectival cognitions and actions are further stamped upon by cultural specifications. We may all be rational in the sense that our actions are, in general, pragmatically consistent with our motives and our pictures of the world. But this conception of rationality still leaves potentially unbridgeable gulfs between our motives and our world-views. In a world characterized by radical cultural diversity, neither scientific nor religious world views and value systems can be supported by any ultimate standard of rationality, even though both types of beliefs and values may be respectively self-consistent, intellectually satisfying and pragmatically effective. The possibility of different perspectives that are equally consistent and effective and shaped by multiple or different constraints can never be ruled out in view of our limited cognitive resources. Therefore, the very project of philosophical inquiry to establish for all times, places and persons some ultimate and necessary truth about reality can never be worked out or arrived at. The possible success of such a project seemed brighter in ancient, medieval and even modern phases of philosophical evolution. The assumption that some self-evident propositions about the world were waiting to be discovered, at some point of time, set the stage for final solution to philosophical problems. However, the anti-foundationalist turn of the post-modern era has called into question the whole project of classical objectivity. It is being plausibly argued that the correspondence theory of truth is not tenable. Our theories about the world have no isomorphic relationship with the world "in itself". They are not evaluated on the basis of their correspondence to the world. We are not living in a world unconditioned by our points of view, our needs and goals etc. So far as we are concerned, there is no theory-independent world. Our knowledge is always representation of reality from a particular perspective. Although there may be an ultimate reality our knowledge of that reality can never be ultimate.

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