

SCIENCE AND THE "END" OF EPISTEMOLOGY: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE POSTMODERN PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS FOR AFRICA

Joseph N. Agbo,

Macaulay A. Kanu,
Senior Lecturers, Department of Philosophy,
Religion and Peace Studies
Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki, Nigeria.



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Abstract

The emergence of science as an autonomous discipline separate from philosophy was coeval with the ascendancy of epistemology as a theorizing about knowledge. The modern period, as the “Age of Reason” enthroned science as the very paradigm of institutionalized rationality. This paper undertakes a critical analysis of the challenge posed by the occupation of the epistemic cultural space by the symbiotic relationship between science and epistemology. The result was that epistemology created a permanent, neutral, trans-historical, trans-cultural algorithm for the legitimization and justification of all knowledge claims. Employing expository, historical and analytic methodologies, the paper then goes on to discuss how postmodernism, with its twin doctrines of plurality and relativism, posited hermeneutics as a principle that will keep the cultural space said to have been created by the demise of epistemology open for dance and display for all cultures. The paper then goes on to analyze the significance of the opening up of this epistemic space for Africa, and concludes by arguing that the relativism of postmodern hermeneutics is safer and easier to handle by our world when we compare it to the evil brought up on humanity by the dominating and regimenting ideologies of epistemologism and scientism

Keywords: Africa, Epistemology, Hermeneutics, Postmodernism, Science

Introduction

According to Richard Rorty “Hermeneutics is an expression of hope that the cultural space left by the demise of epistemology will not be filled, that our culture should become one in which the demand for constraint and confrontation is no longer felt.”¹ The question of the scope

and possibility of human knowledge is no longer an issue. What has remained an issue, even in the twenty-first century, is its universality. But the universality in dispute here is the universality of a particular model, type or school of Knowledge. However, the desire to want to know is a universal human trait and

¹ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1979), 165.

feature. That is why Kant said that human beings even have a natural propensity to want to know what cannot be known, from where he drew the conclusion that this propensity is the source of metaphysics. No period in the history of man has been more epistemology-based than the modern period. Of course, the immediate background for the emergence of modernity (and all it came to represent) was an attempt to escape or deliver man from the hopelessness, helplessness, and haplessness that man got entangled in as a result of the doctrine of the "original sin" during the medieval period, rightly regarded as the "Age of Religion".

The place of Science in the epistemological-tilt of the modern period cannot be occupied by any other enterprise or endeavor. For indeed, science is modernity and modernity is science. Infact, one cannot be properly discussed, even defined, without the other. What we call "Postmodernism" today, if we are to reduce it to rejections, would amount to a rejection of two things: Method and Reason, the "method" being the method of Science. In his *History of Western Philosophy*, Bertrand Russell had written that "almost everything that distinguishes the modern world from earlier centuries is attributable to science, which achieved its most spectacular triumphs in the seventeenth century. The new conceptions that science introduced profoundly influenced modern philosophy".² Russell went ahead to aver that Rene Descartes (1596-1650, the acclaimed father of modern philosophy

within the Continental tradition) was one of the principal creators of that seventeenth-century science.

The link between science and what became christened epistemology is, therefore, obvious. And traditional epistemology has always sought to do what Godfrey Ozumba call "building doxastic house"³ or a search for "apodictic truths",⁴ by which he means the conceptual construction or contextual definition of what human knowledge should hanker after: an objective, external world (the cogitatum) that exists independent of the perceiving subject (the Cogito). At the dawn of science, the issue of what would be the ultimate conveyor and harbinger of knowledge, and with it rationality, appeared settled: to know anything, to be rational, one need must go through or possess a matrix known as the "scientific method".

Jonathan Chimakonam gives a vivid and an interesting example of this hegemony and domination with an analogy from the animal kingdom:

In an animal kingdom where only one cock crows, the reaction which trails the sound of another cock crow is not simply that of anger but that of shock and disbelief the question from the onset is not on whose authority it crows but how dare the cock make a crow like sound? It is not that it has no permission to crow but that it cannot crow and must not attempt to. Even if the crow

² Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1971), 512.
³ Godfrey O Ozumba, *A Concise Introduction to Epistemology* (Calabar: Jocharisa Publishers, 2001), 123.
⁴ *Ibid.*, 131.

like sound is actually a crow, it is nothing but a crow like sound. It is when the question of audacity is confronted with an accusation, properly so, that of prejudice that it quickly melts into concerns of merit and criteria. Before then, it does not matter if the only cock that crows get worn out and falls short in its duty on all the hens. It does not matter that many hens are all left unattended to; does not matter that others are not properly attended to. The custom and what the salient community is used to is that only one cock crows!⁵

Every culture has an understanding and interpretation of nature (which is what science is) as well as how to confront that nature with some devices (which we call “technology”).

This paper shall examine the meaning, plausibility and feasibility of an "end" of epistemology and what hermeneutics has come to mean and how the historicity brought about by it is crucially significant to the making and letting "a thousand flowers bloom or more cocks to crow at the same time. Postmodernism provides us a tilt away from the search for certainty and absoluteness which traditional focus on "to know has been based upon. But what would be the implication of a relativizing of reality? Does the demand that a thousand flowers should bloom (plurality) necessarily condemn us to

relativism? This paper celebrates the postmodern insistence on plurality and multiplicity (which provides for the Africans a chance to be listened to, heard out and possibly interpreted un-biasedly), but argues that this position does not condemn us to relativism of the radical type.

However, before this conclusion, we shall try to trace the intricate link between modern science and epistemology and how that helped in fostering the rejection of both science and epistemology by postmodernism. We shall equally discuss the reasons why postmodernism specifically rejects traditional science as well as why it collapsed all the distinctions that are well-known in the philosophical endeavor. At the penultimate sub-heading, we shall; critically examine the ambivalence between rationality and historicity, and explain why, for the postmodernists, the historical is more important than the rational.

Modern Science and Epistemology

The emergence of science and its tenacious hold on all fields of enquiry including philosophy itself, led to the pejorative concept "scientism" which is "the belief that the methods of natural science, or the categories and things recognized in natural science, form the only elements in any philosophical or other enquiry."⁶ Let us remember that Edmund Husserl's project of phenomenology was an attempt to make philosophy itself scientific.⁷ This was

⁵ Jonathan O. Chimakonam, *Introducing African Science; A Systematic and Philosophical Approach* (Bloomington: Authorhouse, 2012), 3.

⁶ Simon Blackburn, (ed) *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 344

⁷ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* trans. by W. R Boyce-Gibson, (London: Gorge Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1969).

initiated by him despite the fact that Galileo Championed the centrifugal movement of science from philosophy in the 17th century so that the former can be pursued as an autonomous discipline. Of course, we know that the words "science and "epistemology have the same root. "Epistemology" comes from the Greek word episteme which means "knowledge while "science comes from the Latin word "scientia" (from "scire") which means "to know. The term "epistemology therefore, means an attempt to theorize on or about knowledge. The scientist and the epistemologist are both interested in gaining knowledge of the truth, whatever it may be.

Many of the epistemic problems of modern philosophy arose on the heels of scientific controversy. The men who inaugurated this period had two serious merits: immense patience in observation and boldness in the formulation of hypotheses. Following the attempt to fashion the epistemic along scientific methodological construal, epistemology became an attempt to build a "system" of what should constitute knowledge.

During this period, Cartesian geometry, the infinitesimal calculus of Leibniz and Newtonian Mechanics ruled the intellectual roost of Europe. The rationalist metaphysical "system" was best exemplified in Leibniz's *Monadology*⁸ and Spinoza's *Ethics*.⁹ The scientific works of the 17th century had a radical and instructive effect on how men conceived the universe. Nicholai

Copernicus (a Polish monk) in the year 1543, overthrew Clandis Ptolemy's Geocentric theory of the Solar System with a Heliocentric conception, according to which the Sun, not the Earth, is the centre of the Universe, with all other planets, including the Earth, revolving round it in a circular manner. It was left for the young mathematician, Johannes Kepler (1571-1630), whose main achievement was his discovery of the 3 laws of planetary motion, to articulate an elliptical, rather than a circular orbit. Galileo discovered the importance of acceleration in quantum dynamics. When Isaac Newton's book, *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*¹⁰ appeared, it became a reference point in the conception of methodology. Infact, Newton's 6 steps in scientific enquiry became the first fully developed, prescriptive and analytic method in science.

In an apparent parody of the Bible book of Genesis, Russell expresses the importance of Newton in the development of the entire modern outlook in the following words: "Nature and Nature's Law lay hid in the night, God said 'Let Newton be' and all was Light".¹¹

The change in the outlook of educated men led to the expression of self-confidence and the reinterpretation of human nature as internally good and rational. In his book, *Against Relativism: A Philosophical Defense of Method*, James F. Harris writes that before the 18th century, "human beings were at the mercy

^{8.} Gottfried Leibniz, *The Monadology* (New York: Create Space Independent Publishers), 2017

^{9.} Benedict De Spinoza, *Ethics*, Digireads.com (2019)

^{10.} Isaac Newton, *Mathematical Principles Of Natural philosophy* trans by Andrew Motte (New York, Daniel Adee publishers, 1848).

^{11.} Russell, op cit. p527

of a hostile environment, original sin and a future of suffering”¹². Harris observes that the modern period led to the conception of the rational goodness of man so that man can take his political destiny into his hands. He credits Hobbes and Locke in Britain and Rousseau and Voltaire in France as the men responsible for this shift, especially Rousseau, whose book, *Emile* is more like a modern education manual and "architectonics". For Harris, science is fundamentally and essentially concerned with the epistemological justification of beliefs and the basic problem of adjudicating between properly held beliefs and improperly held ones”¹³

The implication of the modern intellectual liberationist agenda, which resulted from the bogus image of science, was that epistemology became an edifice constructed with the JTB (Justified- True-Belief) building blocks. Before Edmund Gettier's 1963 3-page article in *Analysis*¹⁴ cast serious aspersion on it, the about 2,000year old view of epistemology was that knowledge involves seeing what we claim to know as true, believing it, and being justified in believing that it is true. The erecting of this structure, culminated in the search, (typified by Kant's Critique of Pure Reason¹⁵) for a neutral, permanent, transcultural, algorithm with which

knowledge must be legitimized. Here knowledge became the opposite of “opinion”, with the latter conceived as subjective and unstable and the former objective and enduring.

Postmodernism and the Attack on Modern Science

There is a sense in which it can be said that postmodernism is first of all a rejection of science. This is because what made science the beautiful bride of modernity was its "method and that was the first thing that postmodernism had to attack. One can easily remember Paul Feyerabend's celebrated book, *Against Method*¹⁶ which struck at one of the pillars of modernity: method.

Interestingly, Feyerabend's other important work was an attack on another central pillar of the modern period: Reason. The book is titled: *Farewell to Reason*¹⁷ With opposition to Method and bidding of farewell to reason, modernity and its central foundation, Science, appeared to be condemned to oblivion! But on what grounds does the postmodern opposition to modern science rest? Aside from Feyerabend, Thomas S. Kuhn¹⁸ is another classic expression of the postmodern attitude to science. Kuhn's observation is that a look at or a study of

¹². James F Harris, *Against Relativism: A Philosophical Defense of Method* (Illinois: Open Court, 1993), 10.

¹³. *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁴. Edmund Gettier, “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?” *Analysis* vol.23 (1963),121-123.

¹⁵. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* trans. By J.M.D. Merikle John (London: Everyman's Library, 1979). For more Analysis on this book and its place in the emergence of epistemology as “Theory of Knowledge”, see Joseph N Agbo, "A Critique of the Critical Philosophy of Immanuel Kant in, *FLASH: Journal of Philosophy and Religion* vol. 2. No.1 (August, 2008).

¹⁶. Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* (New York: Verso Press, 1975).

¹⁷. Paul Feyerabend, *Farewell to Reason* (New York: Verso Press, 1987).

¹⁸. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The structure of Scientific Revolution*. 2nd edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970).

how science has progressed in history does not give it the total impression of rationality per excellence that it claims. And although Kuhn's use of the word paradigm is vague and obscure, what he claims is that there would necessarily be problems when trying to compare theories across different paradigms because the paradigms may be "incommensurate; that is, inadequate or not being in the same proportion".

According to James Harris, since Kuhn's book appeared, "traditional epistemological and metaphysical issues have been catapulted into the forefront of the philosophy of science".¹⁹ Kuhn's book questioned both the traditional rationality on which science is based on an epistemology itself as an enterprise of philosophy. In the book, Kuhn says that "the study of paradigms is what mainly prepares the student for membership in the particular scientific community with which he will later practice. Because he joins men who learned the basics of their field from the same models, his subsequent practice will seldom evoke overt disagreement over fundamentals".²⁰ This period, when there is agreement on a shared model of "practicing" science, is what he calls the period of "normal science. It is in his characterization of the transition from normal to revolutionary science, and in the conception of the incommensurability of paradigms, that his post-modernist fervor is detected. Joseph

Agbo has, in a relatively recent essay, discussed the implications of the Feyerabend and Kuhn's postmodern science for Africa.²¹ Kuhn claims that rational explanations cannot be offered for scientific changes since there is just no way rival theories can be compared: for they are not just incompatible but incommensurable!

A second thing that postmodernism rejects about modern science is its (science's) claim to be in possession of a matrix that would, if followed by reasonably intelligent people, lead to the acquisition of the knowledge of the truth. According to Newton-Smith, "No more lively and entertaining critique of the Scientific method has been provided than that offered by Feyerabend in his *Against Method*, which might well have been called *Against Received Opinion*".²² Feyerabend argues that the logic of discovery and the standard of evaluation is not exclusive to modern Western science, insisting that astrology, witchcraft and traditional medicine are other rational sources of knowledge and truth.²³ For science, the beginning and end of its enquiries are not as important as the method used.

A third thing that postmodernism rejects, following the rise of Positivism, was the "unity of Sciences". The idea of the unity of science simply says that "Science is Science", whether it is physical or human

^{19.} Harris, 73.

^{20.} Kuhn, 10.

^{21.} Joseph N. Agbo, "The Post-Modern Scientific Thoughts of Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend: Implications for Africa" in *FilosofiaTheoretica: Journal of Philosophy, Culture and Religions*, vol 3, no.2(2014), 9-37.

^{22.} W.H. Newton Smith, *The Rationality of Science*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 125.

^{23.} Feyerabend, *Against Method*, 72

Sciences. For postmodernism, the idea of a "unity of science is another attempt to privilege reality on a grand, trans-cultural, trans-historical meta-narrative with which the choice of theories would be legitimized. It is another way of "imposing" the methodological principles of physical Science on any inquiry that would dare to answer the name or acquire the tag "science". The significance of this post-modern view is that if every scientific enquiry is conceived as an autonomous pursuit, separate from the other, it would enable it articulate its own goals, objectives and methods in line with its subject matter.

Peter Winch is usually credited with doing more to effect the centrifugal movement of the social sciences from the natural sciences. In his book, *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy*,²⁴ Winch abandons the explicit attempt made by the social sciences, at infancy, to ape the methodology and technique of the "empirical" natural sciences. For example, Darwin's evolutionary anthropology had to borrow a lot from biology. In the book, Winch argues that the various aspects of human cultures, which constitute the subject matter of social science enquiries, are not (and need not be) amenable to the methodology of the natural sciences. He anchored his "disunity" on the later-Wittgenstein's conception of language games, insisting that the data available to social science always requires some interpretation (hermeneutics).

Niko Chavchavadze observes that "by the term knowledge; Kant means science, or more precisely mathematics and the natural science".²⁵ To Kant, therefore, while theoretical reason circumvents within the world of experience, due to its structure, it is practical reason, not satisfied by what is but by what should be, that need must go beyond the experiential domain to attempt to find principles and maxims for its activities. If the postmodern reaction against Science is against method, it is safe to say that the postmodern reaction against epistemology is against "reason, or better still, "rationality". According to Simeon Blackburn to accept something as rational is to accept it as making sense, as appropriate, or required, or in accordance with some acknowledged goal, such as aiming at truth or aiming at the good".²⁶

Shrinking Distances, Collapsing Dichotomies

One of the main features of modernity is the distinction between certain realities in nature. In philosophy, there are legendary divisions of reality into two, beginning from Plato to Descartes. In Descartes, for example, there is a distinction between the Cogito (the subject) and the Cogitatum (the object), while in Husserl, there is even a distinction between the above two and a third one: the cogitatio (the act of perception). But the most popular distinctions in philosophy dominant in the modern period include subject/object, self/others, appearance or experience/reality, knowledge / opinion, fact / fiction,

²⁴. Peter Winch, *The idea of A Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958).

²⁵. Niko Chavchavadze, "the Primacy of Practical Reason", in N. Y Chavchavadze, P Peachy and M Foley (Eds) *National identity as an Issue of Knowledge and Morality*(Washington D.C.: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1994),279.

²⁶. Simon Blackburn, op cit 319

and so on.

Hans-Georg Gadamer's book *Truth and Method*,²⁷ whose anonymous English translation appeared in 1975, and set for itself the task of tracing the origin, development and nature of hermeneutical consciousness is instructive. In a more precise expression, we can say that Gadamer's major preoccupation in the work is to use what he called the universality of hermeneutics to overcome what he referred to as the hermeneutics of historicism". Gadamer agrees that a suspicion of certain ideas or elements of ideas of a particular tradition need not justify a total or complete break with such traditions. We would address Gadamer's constructive theory of general hermeneutics shortly, but for now, we are interested in the reason for and significance of his rejection of dichotomies. For Gadamer, there is an interrelation between history, literature and art. It Believes that the epistemological method generated by modern philosophy both generates and is dependent upon dichotomies which separate and divide the universe in an arbitrary and unjustified manner".²⁸ These distinctions give rise to some epistemological issues like conditions of knowledge, the problem of other minds and perception theories. Gadamer argues that the reason for the dichotomy is the result of the alienation, from the natural world, which has become the lot of the industrial society. Another reason for this dichotomy is the imposition of the model of natural science upon social, humanistic

investigations. Gadamer laments the situation in which we treat the world wherein we are as "data to be collected and analyzed objectively, almost without recourse to subjectivity. The artificial objectification and relinquishing of our connection with the past and with others, leads to an abnormal perception of history and the world around us as "externals to be studied or collected or researched".²⁹ Gadamer, therefore, sees method as originally emanating from a process or desire to separate or isolate us. The idea is that method usually makes itself useful by creating artificiality. For Gadamer, "method creates a need for itself by first artificially separating people from the parts of their existence which ought to be familiar and natural and then proffering itself as the only way of bridging the gap and overcoming the separation. However, Gadamer claims, that "the attempt to use epistemology (as theory of knowledge) to re-establish the unity of experience is doomed to failure".³⁰

Let us clearly state the problem as succinctly as possible. What Gadmer is saying is that there is a relationship between method, objectivity, theory, experience, justification and knowledge. A relationship fostered by epistemology to, , impose itself on reality.' For him the distinction between knowledge and opinion, for example, is imposed in order to objectify our experiences, set it "outside us", where it can be analyzed and scrutinized, using the instrumentality of method, so that "evidences can be provided to justify its acceptance. And for

²⁷. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

²⁸. Gadamer, in Harris, 110

²⁹. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 58.

³⁰. *Ibid.*, 110.

epistemology, opinion, because it is exclusively subjective and idiosyncratic, is not amenable to such "fortunate" attention! Gadamer argued that the fundamental problem with any claim to knowledge based on the methodology of natural science is that it is intolerant and claims unquestionable universality. In another work, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, Gadamer argued that natural science-based knowledge "tolerates no restriction of its claim to universality".³¹ And this is where our interest lies!

The gap erected by what Helen Lauer calls "false dichotomies" has been a very big challenge to both the acquisition of knowledge and cross-cultural understanding. Consider for example, the ones between civilized / uncivilized, advanced / primitive, logical / pre-logical mentality, developed / underdeveloped, First / Second / Third Worlds, traditional / modern, and so on. Lauer examines the last pair (tradition/modern). Her major complaint over these false dichotomies is that they "can distort and eclipse our veridical first-hand experience as well as material and historical facts themselves, thereby curtailing the depth of our self-reflections and our capacity for self-determination as persons and nations".³²

What Lauer says agrees with what Gadamer said: these dichotomies distort history and "data-lize" experiences! Is it

any wonder Mary Hesse, regards the empiricist philosophy of science as being essentially another "imperialism".³³ In a recent monumental contribution to African Philosophy, Jonathan Chimakonam has offered Ezumezu as a system of Logic, both for African philosophy and other areas of African intellectual studies. In what he regards as "African Philosophy's Postmodern resurgence", Chimakonam calls for the "villagisation of knowledge" which for him "entails the accommodation of different cultural epistemic visions and the recognition of their epistemic cannons". This need becomes necessary because there is no absolute knowledge perspective and also because epistemic justice is far more important than even economic, political and social justice.³⁴

And for us in Africa, this is where the collapsing of these distinctions begins to foster understanding and toleration. The distinction made, by evolutionary anthropology, between advanced and primitive" cultures was engendered by the concept of a universal human nature, which is another way of creating a totalizing metanarrative.

The colonial masters, propelled by racist philosophies, did not mind lumping all cultures on one evolutionary ladder, and then place Africa at the primitive wrung of the ladder, without reference to her history and experience. This is how the rejection

³¹. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, David Linge. (trans.) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976),34

³². Helen Lauer, *Tradition Versus Modernity: Reappraising a False Dichotomy*,(Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2003),67

³³. Mary Hesse, *Revolutions and Reconstructions in the Philosophy of Science* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980),169

³⁴. Jonathan O. Chimakonam, *Ezumezu: A System of Logic for African Philosophy and Studies*.(Switzerland: Springer, 2019), 85

of dichotomies and the bridging of gaps by postmodern philosophical hermeneutics resulted in the emergence of Africa and Africans from the doldrums of cultural imperialism and intellectual hegemony. And to that philosophical hermeneutics we shall now turn.

Between Epistemology And Hermeneutics

Is hermeneutics indeed the opposite of epistemology? In what sense is it? Or is hermeneutics just another post-modern epistemology? The postmodern opposition of hermeneutics to epistemology can be either stated (as well) as the opposition of historicity to rationality or sociology to science. In postmodern analysis, science eventually becomes sociology, as found in Kuhn and Feyerabend. We have deliberately avoided defining postmodernism because even some post modernists believe that definitions are anti postmodernist. However, by the time we understand the "hermeneutical" in the postmodern analysis, as well as the critique of method and reason, the goals and objectives of postmodernism would have become clearer, or at least less arcane. But for the purpose of satisfying the curious and enabling us to concentrate on our limited goal, of delineating the implication of hermeneutics for Africa, we would adopt Lawrence Cahoone's view that philosophical opinion on what postmodernism is revolves around three connotations. In his "Process Thought and Harmony", WarayuthSriwarakuel says that one of the spectre's roaming about in the academic sphere today is "the spectre of postmodernism", and goes ahead to

express Cahoone's three connotations of postmodernism as "(i)the final escape from the legacy of modern European thought, authoritarianism, colonialism, racism, and domination; (ii) the attempt of the left-wing intellectuals to destroy Western civilization; and (iii) a collection of hermeneutically obscure writers who really talk about nothing at all".³⁵

From just applying hermeneutics to the social sciences, men like Rorty and Lyotard proceeded to conceiving of a general "theory" of hermeneutics that would apply to all facets of human enquiry. Let us remember that Gadamer's hermeneutic historicity was directly influenced by Martin Heidegger, whose existentialist, I-here (facticity) understanding of man and his place in nature, treats history as having ontological primacy. Heidegger's understanding of Husserl's views, rejects the claim that there is an exclusively essentialist, abstract characterization of human nature. Man is what he is, is made by the particular historical situation that cultures him! Is it any wonder that some scholars, in an "un-postmodern" manner, trace the genealogy of post-modernism from Nietzsche, through Heidegger to Foucault and Derrida? Etymologically, the word "hermeneutics" is coined from the Greek word "hermeneuo" which means translate or "interpret. The term came into philosophy via Aristotle's work *On Interpretation*, and so, "hermeneutics" has come to mean the art or theory and practice of interpretation. It first began as interpretation of texts before embracing the interpretation of the social, historical, psychological and cultural world, and it

³⁵. WarayuthSriwarakuel, "Process Thought and Harmony", in Edward J. Alam, (Ed) *Christianity, Culture and the Contemporary World*(Louaize, Lebanon: Notre Dame University Press, 2009),101

insists that meaning is context-dependent.

At this point, one begins to see that the emphasis on context, circumstance, situation, culture, and so on in the understanding of reality sharply contrasts with the emphasis on certainty and objectivity found in traditional epistemology.

In Gadamer, therefore, philosophy, art, literature, history become modes of communicating what he calls "a truth... that cannot be verified by the methodological means proper to science".³⁶ The idea is that when a particular generation interprets (hermeneutically) its history, the different interpretations, within its culture, is part of the meaning of its past while its past is (equally) understood in terms of that present. Gadamer insisted that hermeneutical understanding (*verstehen*) does not seek to reconstruct the author's original meaning (for him, reconstruction is a "limited undertaking" since it is repetitive), but to interpret. To understand the meaning of the text (interpretation) is different from an attempt to reconstruct what the author really had in mind. The latter is the stock-in-trade of traditional epistemology: dealing with what the author (subject) meant by the text instead of interpreting the text directly as given.

Similarly, in "The Postmodern Condition" Lyotard sees in postmodern philosophical hermeneutics the "end" of epistemology, which for him imposes some cultural imperialism³⁷ with the assumption of a unanimous agreement among rational

human beings on a meta-narrative with which to legitimize theory choice. The postmodernists argue that we need to bridge the distances that separate us as individuals and nations, and also that we should never allow reality, civilization, theory, mores, and so on to occupy our cultural spaces via any universal idealization or theorization or regimentation.

This attempt (and failure) to use a grand theory to legitimize science and knowledge, and the emphasis on dialogue and plurality or heterogeneity, became the launch-ground for the emergence of postmodernism. Lyotard contrasts postmodern knowledge and scientific knowledge, insisting that the idea of knowledge is broader than science, since science appeals to a "narrative discourse". The fact that science rests on justifying presuppositions that themselves need to be justified, is constantly affirmed by postmodernists. For them, rationality becomes historically conditioned and the claim is made for multiplicity using the theory of "language games developed by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*. However H.O. Mounce argues that the "notion of language game has since been put in uses which Wittgenstein himself might not have agreed, Or, if he had, it would have been wrong to do so"³⁸ The cultural space earlier monopolized, filled, and occupied by epistemology became vacant, not because a meeting was held where it was "decided" that "epistemology should die". Rather, in the argument of post modernism the demand to "keep talking", the recognition of the arbitrary, imposing

³⁶. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, xi.

³⁷. Jean-Francois Lyotard, "The Post Modern Condition", in *After Philosophy: End or Transformation*, Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman and Thomas McCarthy (eds.) (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 38.

³⁸. H.O. Mounce, "Understanding a Primitive Society", in *Philosophy* vol.48, no. 196 (1973), 347

character of Western Enlightenment (with the increase in communicative interaction) eased-out epistemology.

Africa and the Cultural Space of Postmodernism

Postmodernism is an attitude that one appears to be caught up with and in, no matter how a die-harder one is concerning modern scientific thinking. There are several things to be said, any time postmodernism comes to the intellectual or social fore. The accusation of radical relativism leveled against postmodernism and desire for a somewhat "common ground" for human interaction have stood at variance.

And there is no doubt that our world is becoming increasingly pluralistic, multiplistic or heterogeneous. It is very easy, within intellectual circles and for the purpose of argument, to argue like James Harris that "the general attempt to 'delegitimize, relativized and hemerneutralized knowledge surely amounts to one of the grandest narratives ever told about the nature of knowledge. Lyotard surely intends his critique of epistemology and science to be a general critique applicable to all knowledge".³⁹

Such criticism from self-referential point of view, as far as we are concerned, do not affect the postmodern position. What they have said is that reality or rationality is not a Western or European (or any culture's) birthright. After all, in the process of stating his so-called stronger argument against skepticism, John Kekes, in his *A Justification of Rationality*, still averred

that "truth and falsity... are unattainable ideals".⁴⁰ But is relativism more devastating to our world than a grand norm? It does appear that the evils of regimentation of ideas (such as capitalism, socialism, scientism, statism, Zionism, nationalism, Marxism-leninism, Democratism etc) are historically well-known. Relativism, whatever its faults, has the advantage of learning from the experience of a world that used to be conditioned and coded according to certain so-called legitimate, "rational" theories. It was disheartening that 48 hours to the kick-off of the FIFA World Cup in South Africa, and when it was almost obvious that the continent "would" host the fiesta, news reports from the BBC and other Western nations talked about the tournament in terms of whether the country "could successfully" host it! In fact, in a style typical of the football field itself, the award of the hosting right to South Africa in 2004 was an attempt by the world football-governing body to allow all continents to freely "play in the field of hosting". Those who did not believe that Africa "could" do it, at least got a chance to either prove themselves right, or wrong.

Cultural space, like the football field, provides an opportunity for all cultures, all nations, all peoples, all persons, to play. At the dawn of slavery and colonial domination, certain rational justifications had to be offered in the manner of a "theory" of knowledge. Time had to change all these and the attempt by the West to destroy the history of one culture to elevate another could not continue because, in truth, as Heidegger had

³⁹. James F. Harris, 114.

⁴⁰. John Kekes, *A Justification of Rationality* (New York: The State University of New York Press, 1976), 60.

observed, history has an ontological primacy in the definition of man's place in nature. In his paper, "Person, Cultural Identity and Democracy", George F. McLean writes that if we take time and Culture seriously, then we must recognize that we are situated in a particular culture and at a particular time; hence all that can be seen from this vintage point constitutes one's horizon.⁴¹

Another significant implication of the invitation to the cultural space" is that there is nowhere to hide in the name of relativism. As relativistic as postmodernism is said to be, the claim of relativity does not constitute a roped square where gladiators fight without an umpire. The paradox of postmodernism is that although it celebrates the particularity and time-based, culturality of points of view, the expression of this point of view is within a world where domination has become more difficult, or as one commentator puts it "where our now postmodern bodies are beret of spatial coordinates". Commenting on relativism, Kwasi Wiredu suggests that what gives it its punch is the fact that ironically, anti-relativism is liable, through a certain adulteration of logic with psychology, to be transformed into some form of authoritarian absolutism, which turns-off many intellectuals who have their hearts in the right place.⁴² This "authoritarian absolutism" has been championed by modern epistemology's rationalistic

search for certainty and absolute truth. In "The Possibility of African Logic", UdoEtuk talks about "those analytic philosophers who insist that philosophy is nothing other than epistemology and logic."⁴³ and this is another response or reaction to the attempt made to choke the cultural space of philosophy by Western Philosophy.

Postmodern philosophical hermeneutics offers cultures that have long been drowned in the cacophonous symphony of Western mode of thinking a chance to express themselves and in their own terms! Plurality of opinion does not need to condemn us to relativity or incommunicability. Those who decry relativism on the ground of lack of "standard(s)" need to answer the questions: must the standard(s) be universal before it (they) is (are) given a hearing? And must the standard we promote be an exclusive "product" of a particular race or culture? Or is it standard(s) we have all consensually agreed on? And when the standard is based on such contributing consensus, would we be right to call it relative"? There is no doubt that the exclusivist logic is no longer feasible or plausible. It is postmodern hermeneutics that has opened the way for the recent emergence of the method of conversational thinking grounded by a background logic called Ezumezu, as prototypes of African philosophy and a major contribution to

^{41.} George F. Mclean, "Person, Cultural Identity and Democracy", in N. Y Chavchavadze, P Peachy and M Foley (Eds) *National identity as an Issue of Knowledge and Morality* (Washington D.C.: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1994), 92.

^{42.} Kwasi Wiredu, "Custom and Morality: A Comparative Analysis of Some African and Western Conceptions of Morals, in *Conceptual Decolonization in African Philosophy 4 Essays of Wiredu*, Selected and Introduced by Olusegun Oladipo (Ibadan: Hope Publications, 1995), 42.

^{43.} UdoEtuk, "The Possibility of African Logic", in Oladipo, Olusegun (ed) *The Third Way in African Philosophy: Essays in Honor of Kwasi Wiredu* (Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2002), 100.

epistemic decoloniality.⁴⁴ Thus, Warayuth Sriwarakuel states that the logic: Either Us or them, Not Them, therefore Us, is no longer needed; and that what we need is an inclusive logic: Them, Us; Therefore, both Them and Us.⁴⁵

Conclusion

The idea of an "end" of epistemology must be understood against the backdrop, not of the "end of knowledge", but against the idea of a "structure" or "system" of knowing that constructs a universal model for legitimacy. All the criticisms heaped on a postmodern relativism have not rendered the claim or recognition of multiplicity and plurality either untrue or unreal. In her paper, "Knowledge on the Cusp", Helen Lauer considers the contest that excludes other models. She calls this "knowledge on the cusp", and invites us to "rise up and become "aware that modern scientific discourse implicitly distorts and delegitimizes the customary knowledge couched in the narrative discourse of their home culture".⁴⁶

"all knowledge is historically-conditioned" (Gadamer), that all paradigms are incommensurate" (Kuhn) or "that all statements are reversible" (Quine).

McLean's view, drawn with insight from Gadamer, shows us that hermeneutics is not just an attempt at another "methodological sureness, nor just mere dialogue but actually an "open interchange" geared towards drawing out

meanings that would help eschew domination and imposition in order to stabilize our world.

Whether one accepts it or not, there is no doubt that the pluralistic and multiplistic attitude of postmodernism is appealing in a world where the regimentation of ideologies of domination and control has been at the heart of the various crises that have engulfed the world in the past century or thereabout. Perhaps only those who want to maintain this dominating condition would want to wholly reject postmodernism.

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⁴⁴. Jonathan O. Chimakonam and L. Uchenna Ogbonnaya, *African Metaphysics, Epistemology and a New Logic* (Switzerland: Springer, 2021).

⁴⁵. Sriwarakuel, 110.

⁴⁶. Helen Lauer, "Knowledge On the Cusp", in, Oladipo. Olusegun (ed.) *The Third Way in African Philosophy* (Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2002), 203.

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