

# Good-bye to Postmodernism and All That

Jan Dejnožka

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Any good philosopher knows to check her own views to see if they are self-defeating before proceeding to consider arguments for or against them. For if they defeat themselves, there is no need to look any further.

Problems of self-defeat are more generally problems of reflexivity, or self-reflexivity, if this redundancy makes it any clearer.

Let's start a little indirectly, or at least apparently indirectly.

I think most philosophers would agree that you cannot defeat logic. For how are you going to argue against logic? Are you going to use logical arguments, or are you going to use illogical arguments? If the former, then you are assuming that logic is good in the very course of arguing that it is bad. If the latter, then your arguments are worthless.

Likewise for reason. In fact, an argument is simply a format where the premiss is put forward as a reason for believing the conclusion.

Likewise for objective reason. All reason is objective anyway. Otherwise it is not a(n objective) reason.

Likewise for objectivity itself. Are you going to argue against objectivity using objective reasons, or are you merely going to state your subjective preferences?

Most people should be able to see where all this is heading.

Postmodernism is one of the many views, or schools, or sets of views or schools, which deny that there is any objective reason, and deny that we can rationally attain any objective fact. All such views are self-defeating, I want to say by definition. This starts with Protagoras' view that all things are relative. Postmodernism is just another relativism.

Postmodernists says there is no objective reason because all reason is a form of social control, a form of politics if you will. No wonder they don't argue for their view. They know they can't. On their own view, any arguments for their view are not objective reasons, but forms of social control. They merely state their view without argument. This dazzles the philosophical beginners in art, literature, and so on. Such beginners do not realize that by accepting postmodernism, they are painting or writing themselves into a self-defeating corner. Nor can the postmodernist view be a self-evident objective insight that needs no argument. The view is precisely that there *is* no objective insight anywhere. And their view is far from evident, much less self-evident.

Of course, they can say that postmodernism is the only objective view, and the

only objective reasons that exist are reasons for believing postmodernism. It is only all the other views and all the reasons for believing all the other views, that are forms of social control. But how likely is that? And how much is that in need of objective verification? “There is no objective truth except for my own view, as it just so happens, and that’s why it’s my view.” Anyone could make that claim for any view, and just as uselessly. Sound like religion? “There’s no true religion but my own, as it just so happens. All religions have to be taken on faith, and there’s no objective reason to prefer any one of them, except for mine, because my faith is that my religion is true.” Perhaps postmodernism is more like a religion than a philosophy. Perhaps that’s why it’s so hard to argue against. Perhaps that’s why there’s no point in arguing against it. Perhaps that’s why even the believers in postmodernism cannot argue for it. It’s just an article of faith. Bringing objective reason into it means it could be wrong. In fact, bringing objective reason into it is impossible according to the very definition of postmodernism . Here postmodernism departs from religion, though. Religions claim to state objective facts. It would be self-defeating for religions claim that objective facts are *not* possible. This is the opposite of postmodernism. Religions also generally claim to be based on objective facts which are in effect objective reasons for believing the religions. These can range from reports of miracles and testimonies of witnesses to deep philosophical arguments, such as Thomas Aquinas’ five ways or arguments to prove that God exists.

I have a professional critique of all relativisms in my book, *The Ontology of the Analytic Tradition and Its Origins*, chapter 1, pages 20-38. But I think the following discussion will offer all the precision we need here.

Let’s say that “ $A \rightarrow B$ ” means that A entails or implies B, where A and B are any statements. In philosophy we want A to describe an objective fact which is our objective reason for objectively believing B, that is, for believing that B describes an objective fact. And of course we want the entailment relation to be, so to speak, an objective fact too. That is, we want it to obtain objectively. Otherwise the argument would be useless.

Our full argument form would be:

Premiss 1. A

Premiss 2.  $A \rightarrow B$

Conclusion: B

This argument form is called modus ponens (ponendo) in the tradition. The premisses are our two reasons to believe B. They are working together. Both premisses are necessary to the argument, except in the case where A and B are the same statement, in which case we really have the self-evident  $A \rightarrow A$ , which needs no argument; but if we did have an argument, we could drop out premiss 2 and just have premiss 1 as shown:

Premiss 1. A

Conclusion: A

The argument is worthless because it is circular and begs the question, but it is certainly an argument formally speaking. There is nothing wrong with its form. It has a premiss and a conclusion. This is merely by way of double-checking that you are with me on what an argument is. It is a formal affair with a conclusion and at least one premiss, such that it is purported or claimed that the conclusion follows from the premiss or premisses. "Follows from" is the inverse of "entails." B follows from A if and only if A entails B.

Now back to postmodernism. Postmodernism is the view, let us say, "There is no objective fact, including objective facts that might be objective reasons to believe that there are other objective facts, because everything is a means of social control, which essentially taints the objectivity." (Is an apple a means of social control? Well, it certainly could be. It certainly could be made to be if the other person is hungry. But is the apple, considered in itself, anything more than an apple?) Let's call the first part of the statement, "There is no objective fact," the genus of all forms of relativism, and let's call the rest of the statement the difference that distinguishes postmodernism as a species from all other species of relativism. Let's talk about the species postmodernism first. Then we'll talk about the genus. We'll then be trying to show in detail why the genus as a whole, meaning all forms of relativism, are self-defeating.

Let's look at  $A \rightarrow B$  again. For us to have an objective reason to believe an objective fact, we actually need four things to be objective facts: A, B, the entailment relation,  $\rightarrow$ , and the entailment of B by A. (Professionals, don't worry about my calling a relation a fact. I agree that technically, a relation is not a fact. I'm just using the word "fact" in a very broad and very ordinary way. Or if you please, we can reject the statement, "There exists in logic an entailment relation," as not objective.) Let's make A the statement, "Postmodernism is true." Let's make B the statement, "All statements are forms of social control, so their objective truth is essentially suspect." Since B is the definition of A, what we really have is just  $A \rightarrow A$ . This too is by way of making sure you are with me on the mechanics of the argument.

Now, let's try arguing for postmodernism. This means making conclusion B the statement, "Postmodernism is true." Well, what could we use for premiss A? Well, according to postmodernism itself, nothing. We can use nothing for premiss A. At least we can use nothing objective. For according to postmodernism, there are no objective statements at all. For every statement is tainted in virtue of being a means of social control. In fact, we must reject all four things in  $A \rightarrow B$  that we need to be objective. We must reject A as not objective. We must reject B, postmodernism itself, as not objective. We must reject  $\rightarrow$ , the entailment relation, as not being an objective relation. And we must reject the entailment of B by A as not objective. For according to postmodernism, no statement is objective. Therefore the statement, "A entails B," cannot be objective either, since it too is a means of social control. And it follows from all this that there are four reasons why for postmodernists, there can be no objective arguments either for or against postmodernism.

All this applies to relativisms in general. To see this, all we have to do is make conclusion B assert not the species of postmodernism, but the genus of all relativisms,

“There is no objective truth.” This defeats not only conclusion B itself, but also any possible premiss A (and any possible set of premisses  $A_1 \dots A_n$ ), as well as the entailment relation, and also the entailment of B by A.

I think many if not most philosophers would agree with all this, so I cannot claim any originality here. But we primarily seek truth, not novelty. And so, good-bye to postmodernism and all relativisms in general. For they defeat themselves as false.

As a homework example, let’s look at arguments like “There is no objective truth, therefore hedonism (or nihilism, or absurdism) are true.” Let’s pick absurdism. It’s a fun title. Can you evaluate this argument on your own now?

Question: Can we objectively argue for absurdism on the grounds that there is no objective truth? Or if you please, if there is no objective truth, does it follow that absurdism is true?

Hint: If there is no objective truth, does it follow that absurdism is objectively true?

Answer: Let “There is no objective truth” be premiss A. Let “Absurdism is true” be conclusion B. Then in  $A \rightarrow B$ , it follows that:

1. Premiss A condemns itself as false.
2. Conclusion B is condemned as false by premiss A.
3. The statement that there is such a thing as logical entailment is condemned,
3. There is no objective truth to the entailment claim that A entails B.

“God does not exist, therefore absurdism is true” is different. When we deny that God exists, we are not denying that there is any objective truth. To the contrary, we are asserting that it is an objective truth that God does not exist. Thus our premiss is not a self-defeating relativism. In order to regard “God does not exist” as implying that there is no objective truth, we would need an *additional* argument to prove *that*. What would such an argument be like? Could we prove that God *guarantees* objectivity? But I don’t think that objectivity itself, as opposed to our being objective, is the *kind* of thing that can be guaranteed by God. For then God could create any subjective or relative thing and call it objective, and it would be objective just because God said it was. And that seems absurd. Compare the claim that God can create or guarantee goodness in itself, as opposed to creating good things. If God could do that, then anything would be good if God said it was. God could do any horrible thing and call it good, and it would be good just because God said it was. And that seems absurd. Compare also the claim that God can create all possible things. But what *are* all possible things? What is it to *be* a possible thing? Is a round square a possible thing? Is a thing that is both round and not round a possible thing? Could God create a round square, or create a thing that is both round and not round? Can God create a rock so heavy that he can’t lift it? Can he create an immovable object and an irresistible force? What would happen if he set the force against the object? These are all logical absurdities. Can God be logically absurd?

I think we have to say that certain highly abstract logical features of the world are

not things that can or cannot be created *in* the world, but are features of the *logical scaffolding*, if you will, of any *possible* world, and in that sense are logically, or better, categorially independent of God's creations. God can create any possible world, and can do all possible things. But he can't create the scaffolding that all possible worlds have in common, since the scaffolding simply defines what it is to be a possible world in the first place. That some things are logically impossible does not detract from or contradict God's ability to do any possible thing. They don't have to be (and can't be) things God can do, because they are not the kind of things are possible in the first place. They are ruled out by the scaffolding.

Likewise for goodness. God can create all possible good things, but goodness itself is not a kind of thing that can be created. It is the independent *ethical scaffolding* or yardstick in virtue of which we can truly, objectively, independently, and meaningfully that God did a good thing, which is not possible for us to say if goodness merely means that God *says* it is good.

Thus when God says let there be light, and sees that it is good, even God is making an objective determination in accordance with an objective meaning of "good" that belongs not within the world as an arbitrary creation, but belongs to the ethical scaffolding of any possible world. And that's not to say that the theft of water in a desert world is not and cannot be ethically worse than the theft of water in a watery world. The ethical scaffolding would include if-then statements about such seeming relativities.

These views goes back some centuries, and makes sense to me. Compare Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

More simply, we can hold that no fact ever entails a value. As G. E. Moore would say, we can always meaningfully ask of any situation S, "S exists, but is S good?" For we can keep building new and different features into S, so that the goodness or evil of S flips back and forth. For example, it is good that Smith gives water to Jones. But it is evil if Smith knows that only then will Jones have the strength to kill Robinson. But that is good if Smith knows that only by killing Robinson will Robinson be prevented from blowing up New York City.

"God does not exist, therefore there is no morality" is a non sequitur on its face. For it purports to entail a value from a fact. David Hume's view is that no fact entails a value, or if you please, no "is" implies an "ought." So to speak, facts and values are fundamentally different sorts of things. They are essentially different. We may speak of the factual realm and the ethical realm. Facts can entail other facts, and values can entail other values. But there is no entailment between the realms. (And that would seem consistent with the theory that logical entailment occurs if and only if the conclusion is in some sense contained within the premisses.) Personally, I think we have the same duties whether God exists or not. In fact, this seems to be implied by Hume's fact-value dichotomy.

Actually, I think Hume is not quite right. For a technical criticism of Hume on fact and value, please see the second edition of my book, *Bertrand Russell on Modality and Logical Relevance*, page 126.FN1 See also my "Plato and Hobbes: On the Foundations

of Political Philosophy” paper, section 4D, “Transcending the Is-Ought Dichotomy,” which is elsewhere on this site:

[http://www.members.tripod.com/~Jan\\_Dejnozka/platoandhobbes.pdf](http://www.members.tripod.com/~Jan_Dejnozka/platoandhobbes.pdf).

We can more deeply explain Hume’s view by locating the whole ethical realm within the scaffolding of all possible worlds. And that would be consistent with the whole-part containment theory of entailment, since facts would be within the world, and values would be outside the world. But that’s only if Hume is right. Also, we would like to say that it is a fact that there is such an ethical scaffolding, which would seem to collapse the distinction between facts and values. But it seems to enough to distinguish facts that belong to the scaffolding from facts about things in the world, and to say that no fact about things in the world entails any ethical fact that belongs to the scaffolding. I see this as a fundamental distinction in the categorial structure of what there is, and not as a mere dispute of words. But for present purposes, it might as well be. Also, I think that this fundamental theory, that the actual world, and indeed any possible world, is essentially different from the logical and ethical scaffolding of any possible world, can accommodate my technical criticisms of Hume as technical exceptions. That may seem like accepting ellipses in the Ptolemaic theory that the sun revolves about the earth. But this is not science, and we do not have anything in ethics here that would equate to the the Copernican theory that the earth revolves about the sun, at least nothing that I know of. Here I may have gone a little beyond Philosophy 101, but I hope you can still follow me well enough. I refer you to Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* for further explication of the logical scaffolding of the world, and also, though perhaps more obscurely, of the ethical.

Of course, if we weaken postmodernism from “*all* statements are forms of social control and therefore their objectivity is tainted” to “*some* statements are forms of social control and therefore their objectivity is tainted,” that is, from what I call radical relativism to what I call modified relativism in my ontology book, then postmodernism need not be self-defeating, since it need not apply to (or taint) itself. Then we could assess which statements are forms of social control and which are not on a case by case basis. Of course, this would then be an empirical matter, and we would need a meaningful empirical test, an empirical method of verification. If a statement appeared to control social behavior, we would need a meaningful empirical test of whether the statement really controlled behavior or whether there were some other explanation, such as that people believe the statement is true and choose to act accordingly. This would be empirically interesting if we found that certain statements control behavior and no one had been aware of that previously. This also brings in the issue of free will versus determinism. Do we sometimes choose to act freely, or is our behavior determined? With respect to the statements in our language, what empirical tests would we use to assess that? Of course, if we modify postmodernism in this way, then it no longer belongs to philosophy, but to empirical science.

## Footnote

FN1. Where the four modalities are possibility, impossibility, necessity, and contingency, there are not just the logical modalities, such as logical possibility. Causation is causal necessity. Duty is moral (or value) necessity. Social obligation is social necessity. Knowledge is epistemic necessity. And so on. Here's a new one I just thought of: beauty is aesthetic necessity.