Just Say No to Knowledge:  
Religious Postmodernism’s Attack on the Natural Sciences

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A Saudi cleric recently explained at a lecture in the United Arab Emirates that Galileo was wrong and that the earth is stationary with the sun and the rest of the heavens revolving around it (Vale 2015). Most people, and most natural scientists in the academy, would regard this as an example of retrograde religious dogmatism in the face of contrary empirical evidence. This view, however, is not universal with all academics. The sociologist Steve Fuller testified in the Dover, Pennsylvania, evolution case, for example, in favor of teaching the intelligent design of nature by a supernatural force or entity alongside Darwinian evolution, arguing that to do otherwise would allow ‘a self-perpetuating élite’ of natural scientists to enforce adherence to their own dogmas (in Talbot 2005: 77). In a similar vein, the philosopher Steven Toulmin, grounding his claim in the sixteenth-century philosopher Montaigne, declared that because ‘there is no general truth about which certainty is possible,...we can claim certainty about nothing’ (1992: 44). If Toulmin applies this relativistic view consistently, we cannot even be certain that the earth orbits the Sun.

Fuller and Toulmin are but two examples of a relativistic metaphysics that is widespread in much of social science, particularly in sociology, anthropology, history, and cultural geography, and in some humanities such as literary theory, religious studies, and philosophy. Examples of this relativism can be found as far back as the pre-Socratic sophists and in some early modern theorists like Montaigne, but its present incarnation in the academy is more recent and begins with Thomas Kuhn.
In 1962, Kuhn published *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* and argued that the natural sciences did not produce reliable knowledge about reality. Instead, these sciences constructed unstable ‘paradigms’ that the community of scientists agree on for some period of time but eventually replace them with newer paradigms, even if the ‘newer’ one is simply a reversion to an earlier one. Most significantly, Kuhn argued there was no guarantee that the new paradigm was better because all advocates of any scientific paradigm engage in ‘necessarily circular’ reasoning, using the assumptions of their preferred paradigm ‘to argue in that paradigm’s defense’ (Kuhn 1962: 93; 1996: 94). Because these conflicts among scientists regarding their dueling paradigms could ‘never be unequivocally settled by logic and experiment alone’, and no ‘external standards’ exist to resolve the conflicts, Kuhn argued that it was time ‘to relinquish the notion, explicit or implicit, that changes of paradigm carry scientists and those who learn from them closer and closer to the truth’ (Kuhn 1962: 93, 107, 169; 1996: 94, 108, 170). In his 1969 Postscript to the second edition, Kuhn specifically rejected the idea that ‘successive theories grow ever closer to, or approximate more and more closely to, the truth…[or] what is “really there”’, because there was ‘no theory-independent way to reconstruct…the notion of a match between the ontology of a theory and its “real” counterpart in nature’ (1996: 206). While Kuhn asserted that his theory of science was not ‘a relativist’s position’ (1996: 206), David Weinberger noted that throughout the rest of Kuhn’s career he could never ‘bring himself to call paradigms “true”’ (Weinberger 2012).

Kuhn’s book had the effect of commencing what would eventually become the postmodernist attack on the natural sciences (Gross and Levitt 1994). According to documentary filmmaker Errol Morris, who was a graduate student of Kuhn’s at Princeton, by 1972 social scientists were making pilgrimages to Princeton to hear Kuhn lecture, and the book is still considered a foundational text of postmodernism (2011).

While the relativist paradigm of the past half century may have been commenced by *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, today Kuhn is little cited. Aside from occasional observations by natural scientists that ‘Kuhn was wrong’ in his understanding of how natural science works and progresses (Primack and Abrams 2006: 24), natural scientists have gone about their business seemingly unfazed by Kuhn’s critique of their enterprise. The social sciences and humanities have been another matter.

While Kuhn’s primary target was the natural sciences, Michel Foucault expanded the assault to all systems of thought that make claims to true knowledge about reality. In 1977, Foucault set forth in an interview his concept that all human attempts at accurate knowledge of reality create
only a ‘regime of truth’ (1980: 131). For Foucault, ‘truth’ is not real knowledge of the world but rather a ‘regime’ of ideas ‘produced and transmitted under the control, dominant if not exclusive, of a few great political and economic apparatuses (university, army, writing, media)’ (1980: 131, 132). Thus, ‘“Truth” is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements’ that are ‘linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend [said] “regime” of truth’ (Foucault 1980: 133). For Foucault, then, real knowledge about the world can never be obtained because attempts at accurate knowledge about reality can never be disentangled from the systems of power that inevitably thwart such efforts. Foucault’s argument, however, is incoherent. One need not read very many of his writings to notice that he is very certain about the ‘truth’ of ‘power’. Why this ‘truth’ is unquestionably real, while everyone else’s attempts at knowledge create only a ‘regime of truth’ Foucault never explains. Be that as it may, Foucault is the preferred authority in those parts of the academy that analyze reality from a relativistic frame.

As this relativistic mode of thought unleashed by Kuhn and Foucault in the 1960s and 1970s developed, it eventually evolved into a ‘nihilistic and cynical’ form that environmental philosopher and Leopold scholar J. Baird Callicott labels ‘deconstructive postmodernism’ (1994: 185). This worldview, according to Callicott, ‘claims that all religious and philosophical worldviews are fabricated to justify the power of a dominant elite’ and anyone’s ‘preference for and loyalty to this one or that depends on how well it serves his or her interests’ (1994: 185). Because of the inherently narrow selfishness of human perspectives, no particular worldview can be said to be ‘true’ (1994: 185). Callicott uses the ecofeminist philosopher Jim Cheney as an exemplar of this style of thought. Cheney, finding a reality that is ‘shattering into a world of difference, the postmodern world’ (1989: 302), declares that from the postmodernist perspective, this is a good thing. Because all ‘comprehensive worldview[s]’ allegedly have the ‘underlying political agenda’ of justifying ‘the power of a dominant elite’, the exposure and destruction of these agendas is to be celebrated, and no effort should be made to reconstruct a new, better worldview (Callicott 1994: 185-86). Instead, humans should embrace ‘an ethic of difference’ (Cheney and Warren 1993: 116).

Cheney—and now Sideris (2013)—provide examples of the influence of Kuhnian and Foucauldian relativism in the humanities. The political ecologists Richard Peet, Michael Watts, and Paul Robbins provide good examples of this influence in the social sciences. In their 1996
formulation of the field of political ecology, Peet and Watts extolled ‘exciting new developments’ associated with postmodern ‘critiques of Western reason’ (1996: 3). Following Foucault’s assertion that ‘Western rationality’s claim to universal validity [is] “a mirage associated with economic domination and political hegemony”’ and Jacques Derrida’s assertion that ‘the white man takes his own mythology, Indo-European mythology…for the universal form of that he must still wish to call Reason’, Peet and Watts argued that under Foucauldian and Derridean analysis, ‘Enlightenment reason’ and the Western science it validates become merely a Gramscian ideological ‘regional logic supporting, reflecting, and justifying a history of global supremacy rather than a universal path to absolute truth’ (1996: 14). Peet and Watts assert that by ‘criticizing the modern belief in rational humans speaking objective science’, postmodern theory ‘opens a space in which a wide range of beliefs, logics, and discourses can be newly valorized’ (Peet and Watts 1996: 16). What beliefs and logics Peet and Watts desire to ‘valorize’ as better than the now de-legitimated and marginalized Western science is unclear, unlike what they want to attack.

One of the traditional conservation positions that is overturned by political ecology, according to Peet and Watts, is ‘Darwinian and Malthusian thinking’ represented in ‘the pressure-of-population-on-resources view of environment’ (1996: 4, 6), a rather obvious reference to Ehrlich and Holdren’s IPAT model (Ehrlich and Holdren 1972). Citing David Harvey’s assertion that proposals for the conservation of wild nature in developing countries ‘in the name of planetary health and sustainability’ is little more than a cloak for the developed West to gain and assert ‘control over the resources of others’, namely, poor developing countries (Peet and Watts 1996: 10), they criticize various conservation projects in the developing world, saying that ‘the facts of degradation are contested, and that there will always be multiple perceptions (and explanations)—one person’s degradation is another’s soil fertility’ (Peet and Watts 1996: 6). Thus, ‘Enlightenment reason’ or ‘science’ becomes an ideological ‘logic supporting, reflecting, and justifying a history of global supremacy’ by Western developed countries. Through a Marx-inspired ‘ruthless criticism of everything existing’ (Marx 1978 [1844]), political ecologists can now expose the socially constructed myth of ‘rational humans speaking objective science’ as just a neo-colonial form of oppression (Peet and Watts 1996: 14, 16):

The simple notion that truth is socially and culturally constructed, rather than discovered already existing as a quality inherent in things,... re-emphasizes the imaginative and discursive aspects of reasoning as a
creative, constituting act which transforms realizations about what already exists into projects of how to make new things exist (Peet and Watts 1996: 37).

Political ecology therefore helps overthrow western rationality, including western science, thereby allowing the birth of a more anarchistic era of human freedom. As descriptively noted by Andrew Szasz, many social theorists embraced the postmodern theoretical turn because of its ‘liberatory’ potential. Its ‘break with modernity mean[t], fundamentally, to break with the domination of white, male, bourgeois, Eurocentric discourses’, and open up ‘cultural space for discourses by heretofore voiceless others’ and a new ‘celebration of multiplicity and difference’ (Szasz 1994: 60). This brand of relativism has leaked out of the academy and into the larger culture. For example, during a 2015 measles outbreak in Kearny, Arizona, a mother of three children reportedly said,

I strongly believe in getting children the vaccines they need to protect them from any childhood disease out there, but that is my opinion... I also strongly believe other parents have the right to choose not to get their children vaccinated due to religion or health reasons (Healy and Paulson 2015).

This background sheds light on the religious project Sideris is undertaking. She attacks what she is labeling the ‘New Genesis’ project—led by E.O. Wilson, Richard Dawkins, Michael Dowd, Thomas Berry, and others—as having ‘pernicious implications’ and ‘hegemonic ambitions’ and then accuses this project as being guilty of what are the standard ‘pernicious’ traits used by the new religious movement of postmodern relativism. The New Genesis, according to Sideris, is hubristic, anthropocentric, intolerant, exclusive, hierarchical, authoritarian, and dismissive of diversity and multiculturalism (pp. 150-51). Sideris does not, however, devote any space to the historical roots of the intellectual tradition that lies at the base of such a critique, and it is telling that she feels no need to do so. The intellectual ‘paradigm’ or ‘regime of truth’ that Sideris’ attack rests upon has become so ubiquitous in the social sciences and humanities that this approach is now simply assumed, an axiom beyond any need for explanation. It is a new religion.

I realize that some theorists reserve the word ‘religion’ for ‘a system of beliefs and practices that are relative to superhuman beings’ (Smith et al. 1995: 893-94), and this remains the vernacular understanding. More expansive understandings of the phenomenon, however, are increasingly being used. I adopt the approach of anthropologist Carolyn Rouse, who defines ‘any strongly held belief and [cultural] orientation to the world’ as ‘religion’ (2004: 139). Thus, ‘atheism, secular humanism, Marxism,
and of course Judaism, Christianity, and Islam’ all become manifestations of religion and ‘all individuals are religious’ (Rouse 2004: 139). For Rouse, myself, and other like-minded theorists, it is the ‘strongly held’ character of the belief or cultural orientation that marks it as ‘religious’. It is the (dare I say evangelical) zeal with which many academics hold their postmodernist convictions that bring them within the ambit of religion.

If one were to reduce the postmodern relativism inspired by Kuhn, Foucault, Derrida, and their many followers to a slogan, reminiscent of Nancy Reagan and the so-called ‘war on drugs’ (Boyd 1986), it would be ‘Just Say No to Knowledge’. But is it really helpful to go down this path? Are we really duty-bound to valorize the Saudi cleric’s insistence that the earth is and has always been the center of the universe—Copernicus, Galileo, and the Apollo missions notwithstanding—as just one more equally valid ‘paradigm’ or ‘regime of truth’? When confronted with such calls to tolerance of all views and celebrations of difference, I am reminded of the African American Rodney King’s 1 May 1992 plaintive cry ‘Can we all get along?’ uttered at a press conference during the Los Angeles riots triggered by the criminal acquittal of the white police officers who had brutally beaten him (The Learning Network 2012). Academics like Sideris and her intellectual forebears whose works I have illustratively sampled here seem to be making a similar plea. And the proposed pathway for ‘getting along’ is the abandonment of the quest for ‘certainty’ and solid metaphysical ground on which to stand. Once all human ideas are seen as equally uncertain and therefore equally valid, we can all get along because there is nothing worth disagreement. It is the postmodern academics’ equivalent of millennial vision or hope.

It is axiomatic that people in the grip of certainty have through the course of human history inflicted all manner of mayhem, bloodshed, and all-around misery. It is therefore understandable that a hoped-for millennium of love, understanding, and ‘getting along’ might be found if only humanity could hold hands together and abandon all claims to certainty or questing thereafter. But alas, there is unavoidable incoherence in the whole postmodern relativist project. It is grounded in a dogmatic certainty that ‘certainty’ is impossible. This is their central truth with a capital ‘T’. But even its most ardent proponents do not really believe it. They count on road-building engineers knowing something ‘real’ about the world such that they can design bridges that do not fall into rivers. They regularly board long aluminum tubes, confident that when hurled down a runway under the thrust of explosive fuel the contrivance will lift-off and carry them to their destination rather than just explode at the end of the runway. And if they break their bones skiing, they will go to
the emergency room, ‘certain’ that the physicians there actually ‘know’ something about human healing.

Ultimately, the envisioned peaceful and environmentally sustainable millennium is more likely to emerge from more empirically grounded science, not less. Admittedly, Sideris does acknowledge that science is ‘indispensable for guiding and informing our ethical interventions in the natural world’, but immediately afterward she declares allegiance to the relativists and boldly denies that ‘science enables alignment with Reality (with a capital “R”), and an ultimate encounter with Truth (with a capital “T”)’ (p. 148). Really? There is admittedly much we do not know and that science has not yet revealed, and may never reveal. There will be, no doubt, some things we think are true now that further scientific enquiry will contradict. There may be facts about the universe (or perhaps multiverses) that will be forever beyond our detection from this remote corner of the universe. But no passage of time will vindicate the view of that Saudi cleric. There are some truths (with a capital T) that have been settled. Any ideology, religious or otherwise, that insists—in the name of love, tolerance, humility, tradition, revelation, or any other asserted justification—we must re-value a geocentric universe in the name of ‘getting along’ is indeed a pernicious ideology, one we might hereafter call ‘Rodney King Syndrome’.

References


