

## REVIEW ESSAY

### Against Relativism

Christopher Norris on Neo-Pragmatism

Rakesh Batabyal

Christopher Norris is well known for his critique of postmodernism. In two new books, *Resources of Realism: Prospects for 'Post-Analytic' Philosophy* (St Martin's Press, New York, 1997) (RR) and *Against Relativism: Philosophy of Science, Deconstruction and Critical Theory* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1997) (AR), Norris continues his mission. In this essay, an attempt has been made to give a perspective to Norris' thoughts on some philosophical issues.

#### History and Scientific Explanation

In 1942, the philosopher of science Carl G. Hempel wrote an article, 'The Functions of General Laws in History', in which he claimed that historians explain the events of human history in the same way in which natural scientists explain physical events. His thesis was a counter to the Hegelian distinction between nature and spirit which, in turn, suggested a further distinction between those sciences studying the physical world and those studying man as a spiritual being. Hempel's work seemed to challenge this dualistic conception of science at its very foundations.

While the debate over Hempel's conception of history was on, Willard Quine was questioning the positivist assertion that metaphysical statements are without sense. One of the principal aims of analytic philosophy, just prior to Quine, was to banish metaphysics from philosophy. As Rudolf Carnap explained in his celebrated essay, 'The Elimination of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language', the basic strategy was to show the meaning of a statement by displaying its logical structure. The strategy depended, roughly, on viewing statements of logic and mathematics as analytic and the statements of science as synthetic. Since metaphysical statements were neither, they were thought to be without sense. However, in his 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism', Quine challenged the distinction itself. The challenge meant that natural sciences did not have a privileged position vis-à-vis metaphysics to speak 'the truth'.

Thus, while Hempel was arguing for explanation of past events in the same manner as the physicist, Quine contended that scientific observations themselves are theory-laden 'in the sense of invoking some presupposed ontology, paradigm, and conceptual scheme'.

These seemingly recent developments, however, were part of a long history of discomfort with the absolute conception of truth which dominated much of classical epistemology at least upto Kant. In 1962, Thomas Kuhn's book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, placed the natural sciences under sceptical and, in particular, a historical scrutiny. For Kuhn, the allegedly different components of the scientific enterprise such as observation, experiments, theory and ontology in fact comprised a single field whose 'boundary' only was coloured by direct experience; there was ample scope for internal readjustments relative to varying ontological schemes.

Thus, while history was thought by Hempel to be explaining events on the basis of objective scientific methodology, Kuhn pointed out that the natural sciences with their claims to represent 'truth' were themselves subject to history. In this sense, he was putting into practice Quine's critique of the dogmas of logical empiricism to bear upon the truth claims of natural science. The work of Kuhn and Quine thus is mostly responsible for propagating the idea that knowledge is relative to particular frameworks of beliefs.

#### Varieties of Relativism

These ideas culminated in several extreme positions. For one, philosophers of science such as Paul Feyerabend debunked the very claim of the methodological superiority of science. For another, Kuhn's ideas led to extreme ontological relativism in sociology, and later in cultural relativism propounded by Clifford Geertz. Each of these forms of relativism rejected any notion of truth beyond the currency of beliefs held-true within some given historical or cultural context.

As such, the alternative idea of

construction of reality gained ground and found its philosophical bases in certain ways of interpreting Kant. The components of this new constructionism were: (a) the only independent reality is beyond the reach of our knowledge and language; (b) the known world is partly our construction; (c) the concepts used to construct a known world differ from group to group; and (d) worlds in fact vary across groups. Each such world exists only relative to an imposition of chosen concepts. This constructionism has been the mainstay in the writings of epistemic relativists, cultural relativists, and those streams of philosophy of science which go to the extent of questioning the notion of reality itself.

Not surprisingly, a scepticism regarding reality was naturally followed by a new conception of semantics since semantics is supposed to give an account of the relation between language and the world.

*taking the plunge, the neo-pragmatists have argued that the only way open for doing philosophy is to accept holistic accounts of meaning*

Donald Davidson took the first step in that direction by adopting Alfred Tarski's 'disquotational' theory of truth where "true" has the role of a metalinguistic predicate that applies to each and every veridical statement in a given language, but which then cancels itself out—for all practical purposes—so as to leave those first order statements quite unaltered' (RR, p. 2). Thus, the totality of metalinguistic expressions such as

'snow is white' is true in language L iff snow is white,

when carried out for each sentence of the language suffice as a theory of meaning for the language. In effect, truth-definitions meant that all that there is to the meaning of the sentence 'snow is white' is that there be circumstances for its use. Thus, the definition itself does not prevent a use of 'snow is white' just in case grass is green. What prevents such a use are the constraints imposed by principles of charity that uphold the overall coherence of truth-claims. Davidson has argued that this formal definition of truth offers the best and, perhaps, the only account of the radical variations of meaning

across and between language games, paradigms, and discourses.

Davidson, Norris complains, comes perilously close to suggesting that the concepts of truth and meaning no longer play the role of harnessing language to reality. There is no *prior* theory of meaning that guides speakers of different languages to communicate, but rather the act of communication is based on principles of charity which allow speakers of one community to communicate with that of the other with the help of a *passing* theory. Passing theories come and go within the historical fact of a discourse. The concept of truth, as Paul Horwich suggests following Quine, is merely a 'generalizing device' for capturing the passing aspects of meaning.

All of this has prompted neo-pragmatists like Richard Rorty, Mark Okrent and others to declare the death not only of analytic philosophy but also of epistemological foundationalism and realism. The passage from the Davidsonian conception of language to such wholesale rejection of classical philosophical concerns is not obvious, but plausible. Therefore, taking the plunge, the neo-pragmatists have argued that the only way open for doing philosophy is to accept holistic accounts of meaning. Let the cultural conversation of humanity flourish without any privileged position being assigned either to natural sciences, human sciences or even to language, as these are all merely different symbolic forms in which cultural conversation goes on. Languages, as Wittgenstein would put it, are there for use.

It is not surprising that soon the neo-pragmatists began to assert that even the very claim to represent truth was itself based on an altogether inadmissible philosophical strategy to effectively prevent a scrutiny of its own truth or falsehood. According to this position, it is not just that epistemology was misconstrued, but the very search for truth takes place, in the mainstream of western philosophy since Plato, by virtue of this inauthentic strategy. Thus, philosophical questioning, it argued, should start afresh with the intention of *unravelling* the structures of *historical meaning* rather than indulge in debates over truth. Inspired by Heidegger, this line of inquiry has, through the writings of Gadamer, Derrida and other continental thinkers, emphasised *unrevealing* (Heidegger) the meaning that is *embedded* (Marleau-Ponty) in different life-worlds (Husserl). This

has strengthened the arguments of those who seek to present the centrality of the perspectival as a counter to the non-perspectival truth claims of science, or even of that kind of history which demands a privileged position.

### Retrieving Truth and Meaning

Christopher Norris is clearly unhappy with these attempts. He begins by criticising Davidson for giving a death certificate to truth and language (Davidson, 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs'). According to Norris, Davidson's charity principles, for example, leave no room for entertaining the possibility 'that speakers may in fact be wrong in their beliefs or be subject to various kinds of error, confusion or partial understanding'; 'after all', he says, '... people do sometimes say false things' (RR, p. 57).

Davidson, Norris feels, must have been aware of certain streams within analytic philosophy itself which are still robust enough to provide sustenance to the classical notions of truth and meaning. In his *Resources of Realism*, Norris tries to outline these alternative resources. For one, he recommends *naturalised causal realism* proposed by David Papineau, among others. Papineau advanced the notion of *humanity* as against the principle of charity. Norris thinks that Papineau's principle of humanity should be taken seriously to throw light on the issues sketched above. Humanity, in Papineau's formulation, allows us to make due allowances 'for limited knowledge, prejudices, and the like, so that we can have good grounds ... for attributing false beliefs to other people while nonetheless claiming to correctly interpret those same beliefs' (RR, p. 59).

Norris also shows how William Empson's ideas (*The Structure of Complex Words*), surprisingly ignored by philosophers, have much to offer. Examining the structures of semantic entailment, Empson claimed that 'modes of logical analysis can usefully be carried over from the level of sentences, statements, or propositions to that of individual "complex words"' (RR, p. 42). Thus, the interpreter may avoid having recourse to ill-defined rhetorical terms like 'ambiguity', 'paradox', etc., by analysing the import 'carried by certain words in context'. Therefore, without giving in to a formal theory of truth or surrendering to meaning holism, Empson's theory helps to show how meanings, attitudes and beliefs can be analysed in terms of propositional content which then

provide a hold for construing the speaker's intentions.

Further, Norris argues, Davidson has also overlooked Empson's distinction between *head meaning* and *chief meaning*, which was akin to Davidson's own distinction between prior theory and passing theory. But since the notion of 'chief meaning applies only to local occasions', it avoids invoking the principle of charity. In that sense, Empson's distinction preserves truth, but only locally.

### Recovery of Realism

*if meaning variance and incommensurability are the defining criteria of a paradigm which establishes world views, then how does communication across paradigms take place?*

The attempted appropriation of analytic philosophy is just one face of a more general problem. Norris is also apprehensive of a large number of other issues which ensue from the invocation of meaning holism. In *Against Relativism*, he tries to examine in detail some of the implications of meaning holism and ontological relativity for the very concept of knowledge. Consider, for example, the nature of scientific knowledge. In Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer's sociological reading of the differences between Boyle and Hobbes (*Leviathan and the Air Pump: Hobbes, Boyle and experimental Life*), Hobbes' anti-experimentalism becomes at least as valid as Boyles' experimental mode of science (AR, pp. 267, 276). Further, Norris raises the standard criticism that neo-pragmatists not only confuse epistemology with ontology, but also that they carry over judgements derived from contexts of discovery into contexts of justification.

Norris's criticism of relativism has political and ethical dimensions as well. The prioritisation of meaning in place of truth makes it very difficult, Norris shows, to point out the differences between 'mythic, everyday—common sense, and scientific knowledge' (AR, p. 78). Selective readings of Derrida, Heidegger and other continental philosophers compound the problem even further. Heidegger's critique of, say technology, is routinely picked up without incorporating other ethical and political issues which attach to his philosophy. For example, Heidegger's involvement in the

Nazi movement or his wholesale anti-modernism are simply ignored.

What exactly is the relativist argument? In the entire anti-realist discourse of relativism, Norris witnesses a 'highly questionable leap of thought from ubiquity of language in our dealings with the world' to the agenda that our knowledge of the world is 'nothing but a construction out of various language games, discourses or scientific paradigms that happen to be prevalent at some particular time and place' (AR, pp. 133-36). The thesis that language is the carrier of meaning rather than truth and the alleged facts of meaning variance together lead to the notion of incommensurability. This has provided some of the followers of Thomas Kuhn with a license for ontological relativism and the idea that the world changes as paradigms change.

This familiar line of argument begs crucial issues of communication and reference. If meaning variance and incommensurability are the defining criteria of a paradigm which establishes world views, then how does communication *across* paradigms take place? And if such communication *does not* take place, how does the relativist occupy his favorable location? Critics of Kuhn, including interestingly Davidson himself ('On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme'), have always posed these questions without securing much response from the neo-pragmatists. Even in Kuhn's model, a transparadigm reference is needed for communication to take place and for a later arbiter to suggest that some paradigms have indeed shifted. Therefore, the acceptance of some reality outside of any paradigm has to be minimally acknowledged as well.

### On History

*the ontology of the past is accepted while acknowledging the changes in the historians' knowledge of the past*

This brings us back to the issue of historical explanation for which, we saw, Hempel had advocated an epistemology which Quine and Kuhn showed to be fundamentally flawed. When the conception of a fixed reference, having the quality of representing reality, is challenged, then the question of a fixed past, to which historians can refer, is challenged as well. Does this then mean that changing paradigms in historical knowledge mean changed

pasts? Arthur Danto had argued that the past, though it is not approachable by the historian, is fixed. Nevertheless, historians are entitled to explain it from within their present traditions, predicaments and prejudices. Thus the ontology of the past is accepted while acknowledging the changes in the historians' knowledge of the past and the ways of knowing the past.

Most of the attacks on realism, and upon the natural sciences, are conducted under the assumption of an underdeterminacy, according to which new findings are compatible with alternative theories. But, as Danto had shown (*Analytic Philosophy of History*), the notion of underdetermination not only retains the notion of truth for a referential past, but it also gives due allowances to meaning changes that occur with changes in facts, figures, opinions, or advances in knowledge. It thus retains the distinction between ontology and epistemology, and between past and present. The relativists, however, have argued that this fixity of the past is part of Danto's epistemological bias. This led to the other extreme. Joseph Margolis, for example, argued that even the supposedly fixed past has to have a meaning which itself changes with time. Thus, for Margolis, 'truth is always internal and relative to the various changing cultural contexts through which they and we can alone gain access to it' (RR, p. 187).

These positions, Norris rightly argues, collapse epistemological and ontological distinctions by assuming that 'what is real can only be a matter of what is real under this or that description—and then concluding by purely circular process of reasoning, that reality just is a product of interpretation' (RR, p. 199). This argument brings out the interesting point that the entire postmodernist effort at critiquing truth is mistakenly based on attacks on epistemology. The confusion, according to Norris, is that epistemology itself was seen as defining ontology.

However, it is possible to doubt the effectiveness of the preceding argument since it requires the slippery distinction between epistemology and ontology. There does not seem to be an independent hold on how the world *is* from the ways in which we come to know it. It is well known that relativists, from the time of Plato onwards, are able to use this slippery wicket.

RAKESH BATABYAL is a Fellow at IAS, Shimla