

**Elucidating the Future:  
Soldiers and their Civil-Military Environment**

# ***Postmodernist Relativism and Value (Dis-) Orientation: The Context of Human Dignity Reconsidered***

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## **Introduction**

Human history has now entered an epoch called postmodernism. One can observe increasing interest and acceptance of postmodernist thinking in many areas of life on the one hand, and a critical stance, sometimes even total rejection, on the other. This is also significant for the military. Intense and highly controversial debates take place especially in regard to human development including the making of soldiers, their value orientation, and identity. The postmodern worldview is either made responsible for deficiencies in personality development leading to the fragmentation of the Self, or is propagated as a means promoting an optimum of personal growth and self-actualization. From a psychological perspective, both versions of postmodern individuality exist. The question to be answered refers to the conditions responsible for generating these types of individualities.

Anderson (1990) characterizes the postmodern challenge very vividly:

“The postmodern individual is continually reminded that different peoples have entirely different concepts of what the world is like. The person who understands this and accepts it recognizes social institutions as human creations and knows that even the sense of personal identity is different in different societies. Such a person views truth as a special kind of truth and not an eternal and perfect representation of cosmic reality. And – going beyond modern secular humanism – he or she sees the work of science as yet another form of social reality-construction and not a secret technique for taking objective photographs of the universe” (Anderson, 8).

But exactly this pluralism includes the potential to confuse many people with respect to their cognitive orientation. Today many people are convinced that we are living in a time of value disorientation or even in an era of a loss of all values, finally leading to a cultural collapse. It is

the idea of postmodernist relativism, including cultural and moral relativism, which is made responsible for the apparently disastrous value disorientation by critics of our postmodern world.

The distinction of good and evil can be found in all cultures over the world although great differences do exist. Central to understanding of human values with regard to ethics and morality is the idea of human dignity. Latest with the Declaration of Human Rights via the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 10, 1948, human dignity has become a central concept in our moral and political understanding of living.

In the following, the context of human dignity will be considered in more detail, whereby an attempt is made to show that postmodernist relativism will not necessarily lead to a cultural collapse. After discussing postmodern thinking and aspects of a postmodern worldview, some conditions for coping creatively with the pluralism of postmodernity will be outlined.

### **Postmodern Thinking and Postmodern Worldview**

According to Anderson (1990), five meta-trends characterize the postmodern worldview:

1. Changes in thinking about thinking (shifts in the public psychology).
2. Changes in identity and boundaries.
3. Changes in learning.
4. Changes in morals, ethics, and values.
5. Changes in relationship to tradition, customs, and institutions.

Hlynka and Yeaman (1992) outline the following key features of postmodern thinking:

A commitment to plurality of perspectives, meanings, methods, values – everything!

A search for and appreciation of double meanings and alternative interpretations, many of them ironic and unintended.

A critique of and distrust in ‘Big Stories’ that are meant to explain everything. This includes grand theories of science and myths in our religions, nations, cultures, and professions that serve to explain why things are the way they are. To acknowledge – because there is a plurality of perspectives and ways of knowing – that there are also multiple truths.

Another attempt to describe the postmodern worldview provides Wilson (1997):

“Postmodernism, as the term implies, is largely a response to modernity. Whereas modernity trusted science to lead us down the road of progress, postmodernism questioned whether science alone could really get us there. Whereas modernity happily created inventions and technologies to improve our lives, postmodernism took a second look and wondered whether our lives were really better for all the gadgets and toys. Postmodernism looked at the culmination of modernity in the 20th century – the results of forces such as nationalism, totalitarianism, technocracy, consumerism, and modern warfare – and said, we can see the efficiency and the improvements, but we can also see the dehumanizing, mechanizing effects in our lives. The Holocaust was efficient, technical, and coldly rational. There must be a better way to think about things” (Wilson, 3).

This description illustrates the important role of the different existing belief systems and their fight for dominance claiming objective knowledge.

### **Fundamentalism versus Postmodernism: The Problem of Objective Knowledge**

According to Anderson (1990) more and more people develop the ability to recognize that one’s own world view is a personal construction and cannot be equated with reality. There is no access to an ontological

reality or truth by means of rationality. On the other hand, more and more people are convinced that their world views (belief systems) are (the only) true representations of reality. This new polarization is growing and growing. Core of this polarization is a total different understanding of reality and objectivity.

Western epistemology and philosophy of science tries to distinguish objective knowledge from illegitimate concurrence products. How may be “genuine” rational acceptable knowledge be separated from myths, fairy-tales, unfounded speculations and irrational dogmas (i.e., objective knowledge in contrast to subjective prejudice)? To find an adequate answer is one of the main tasks of Western science. According to the realistic understanding of our every day life, science tries to describe and explain the world we live in. This represents the ideal of search for objective knowledge.

According to Richard Brown (1977) realists believe that they

“(…) are assumed to be able to identify a ‘sexual neuroses’ independently of the theories of Freud, or to be able to observe ‘role conflicts’ apart from the theories of James, Cooley, or Mead. (They) are expected to discover whether an exchange is an economic or a military one by consulting the exchange itself, while the same time holding no conception of it as economic or military. The data themselves are thought of as sending out their own self-identifying signals; as researchers, all we must do is tune out receiving instruments to the right channel and screen out subjective noise.” (Brown, 100).

As Segal (2001) stressed, the objectivist ideal of knowledge may be understood as deep-rooted wishes concerning our desire and even craving for truth:

- “1. We wish reality to *exist independently* of us, we who observe it.
2. We wish reality be *discoverable*, to reveal itself to us. We wish to know its secrets, i.e., how it works.
3. We wish these secrets to be *lawful*, so we can predict and ultimately control reality.

4. We wish for *certainty*; we wish to know what we have discovered about reality is true.” (Segal, 1).

Unfortunately, problems with this kind of objectivity appear: There exist not only one but numerous systems of representation of reality, and since humans are not able to share God’s eye view they have no access to the “true” structure of reality. Even so, scientific research all over the world is still dominated by traditional empirical science. This means that scientists via observation, experimentation and simulation try to explore and to find out more and more about the world and the universe. Many of them still believe in the idea of inductive metaphysics, an assumption that the integration of all sciences is possible resulting in a unified view of the world. Somewhere in the future a status of comprehensive knowledge will be reached offering total control of all and everything.

This standard view of science came under attack and has been challenged by different authors (cf., Bernstein, 1983). Although these so-called post-positivistic philosophies of science differ in many ways, some common characteristics can be identified: Rejection of foundationist epistemology, stressing the theory-ladenness of all observations, and acceptance of the ordering influence of worldviews.

Challenges to and criticism of the standard view of science in general and attacks of the foundationist epistemology in particular, often create strong emotional reactions and massive defenses. Thereby one may get the impression that these defenses are not only guided by rational principles alone, contrary to what is believed by most scientists. From a psychological perspective it may be very interesting to analyze the patterns of the observed emotional reactions and defenses and to look for possible reasons which may be covered by rational argumentation. The doubting of the foundationist epistemology by critics may provoke a special kind of anxiety by traditionalists: Cartesian anxiety. This term was coined by Bernstein (1983) which will be considered now in more detail.

I want to follow the vivid description and characterization presented by Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1991): “The nervousness that we feel is rooted in what, following Richard Bernstein, we call the ‘Cartesian anxiety.’ We mean ‘anxiety’ in a loosely Freudian sense, and we call it

‘Cartesian’ simply because Descartes articulated it rigorously and dramatically in his *Meditations*. The anxiety is best put as a dilemma: either we have a fixed and stable foundation for knowledge, a point where knowledge starts, is grounded, and rests, or we cannot escape some sort of darkness, chaos, and confusion. Either there is an absolute ground or foundation, or everything falls apart” (Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 140). How can this anxiety now be understood and interpreted?

According to Bernstein (1983)

“... it would be a mistake to think that the Cartesian Anxiety is preliminary a religious, metaphysical, epistemological, or moral anxiety. These are only several of the many forms it may assume” (Bernstein, 19).

And as Varela, Thompson and Rosch (1991) put it:

“This feeling of anxiety arises from the craving for an absolute ground. When this craving cannot be satisfied, the only other possibility seems to be nihilism or anarchy. The search for a ground can take many forms, but given the basic logic of representation, the tendency is to search either for an outer ground in the world or inner ground in the mind. By treating mind and world as opposed subjective and objective poles, the Cartesian anxiety oscillates endlessly between the two in search of a ground” (Varela, Thompson and Rosch, 141).

It was Jaspers (1985, first published 1919) who described this dilemma many years ago. Although he did not use the term Cartesian Anxiety he gave a psychological interpretation of it. Jaspers identified three ways of coping with Cartesian anxiety, which he related to different personal mindsets: The *chaotic man* becomes the slave of scepticism or nihilism. He or she doubts every kind of sense as well as all values. The *consistent man* stresses and defends his or her world view rigorously and fanatically. Searching for an absolute ground he or she denies the antinomies of the world and becomes at last a dogmatist. The *demoniac man* neither becomes the slave of scepticism or nihilism nor of dogmatism. He or she accepts the idea that all knowledge is provisional and that science is a never ending process. In differentiating various levels of knowing and existence (cf., Weinberg, 1989, first published

1959) the demoniac man is able to overcome both unsteadiness and rigidity.

To understand Cartesian anxiety from a psychological point of view two additional aspects will be discussed briefly. First, human thinking and decision making never happen in an emotion-neutral space. Empirical evidence shows that pure logical reasoning is a myth and that decision making without any participation of emotions is impossible (s., e.g., Damasio, 1994). Second, uncertainty has the potential to induce strong aversive emotional states. Generally, people tend to avoid such states or to escape from them (s., e.g., Palermo, 1989). The search for certainty represents a basic human desire. For many people the status of knowing what really had happened often is preferred much more than the status of uncertainty or disinformation. On the other hand, the ability to bear uncertainty is an essential part of the healthy individual to cope with life phenomena (Krystal, 1975). People differ in a high amount with respect to affect tolerance. The reasons for this are beyond the scope of this paper, but it should be mentioned that affect tolerance and the ability to bear uncertainty are not stable and unchangeable traits; they may increase or decrease in the course of life. Laymen and scientists may benefit from improving their tolerance of affect.

To sum up, the realist position can be characterized as following (Fischer, 2000):

- I. There is one well-structured world, which exists independent from our imaginations, descriptions respectively representations (ontological premises).

The above postulated world is in principle recognizable, and we can gain objective knowledge of it in the sense of true representation (epistemological premises).

An alternative view of knowledge is provided by the constructivist position (Fischer, 2000):

- I. We are not able to recognize a world which is independent from our thought.
- II. We construct our known world via mental operations (inferential processes), and with the help of our conceptions. This means,

that the idea of a thought-independent world (ontology or metaphysics) is obsolete.

According to von Glasersfeld (1997) two types of objectivity have to be distinguished: Knowledge that claims to describe the world as it is in itself (i.e., the classical realist position), and knowledge that claims to be intersubjective. The second kind of knowledge often has been criticized as relativistic and anti-scientific. But this is not in any way the case. Also from a constructivist position of knowledge criteria can be provided to make distinctions between good, bad, and pseudo-science. Constructivism doesn't necessarily open the door to arbitrariness in science. Most criticisms of postmodernist relativism can be exposed as misunderstandings and misconceptions. But there exist some versions of extreme relativism in the sense that every belief on a certain topic, or perhaps any topic, is as good as any other. This kind of trivial relativism is rejected by most of the post-positivist and postmodern philosophers and scientists and sharply commented by Rorty (1982) that no one holds this view.

### **Varieties of Postmodern Individuality**

According to the postmodern conditions, two basic ways concerning personality development can be outlined: Fragmentation of self or personal growth and self-actualization. In the first case the individual is not able to cope with the pluralism of the postmodern world and a sense of a coherent self will not be reached. Thus, the self is split into different parts without an integrating bond of union. People with a fragmented self have difficulties with their value orientation and with coordination of their course of life. In the second case people have learned to cope with postmodern pluralism, to find their orientation, to develop a coherent self, to gain personal growth and self-actualization.

Advancing from early childhood to youth, from adulthood to old age, people develop, via the processes of differentiation and integration, their unique personality in the positive, but also in the negative way.

Differentiation is, according to Watkins (1978), the perceptual recognition of differences and discrimination between two different

things, whereas integration is the bringing together of two or more elements so that they are consonant or can interact constructively with each other.

Through the processes of differentiation and integration, which are embedded in human-environment interactions, the *mental* (cognitive) development (e.g., various intellectual abilities, value orientation, world view, belief systems, self-reflection), *affective* development (e.g., affect-regulation, affect maturity, empathy, need satisfaction), and *motor* development (e.g., various motor skills, sports, dancing) takes place.

The traditional view of self-actualization is characterized as the increased realization of inherent potentialities (s., e.g., Maslow, 1962; Rogers, 1963). An alternative view of self-actualization (s. Butler & Rice, 1963) generally reflects the person's ability to create new experience and change by way of his own cognitive functioning. Expanding on Butler and Rice's position, a more elaborated view proposed by Wexler (1974) sees self-actualization as the degree to which the person characteristically engages in a mode of information processing in which he is his own source for creating new experience.

Linville (1987) developed a model of self-complexity which assumes that self-knowledge is represented in terms of multiple self-aspects. Greater self-complexity involves representing the self in terms of a greater number of cognitive self-aspects and maintaining greater distinctions among self-aspects. Gaining self-complexity can be viewed as an important part of personal growth which may function as an antidote toward trivial relativism and inhumanity.

### **The Embedment of Human Dignity in Interpersonal Relatedness**

Human dignity cannot be viewed and analyzed without considering its embedment in interpersonal relatedness and individual value orientation. The way how people treat each other constitutes and confirms or disconfirms the dignity of both. Although different approaches how to grasp and to understand human dignity exist all over the world, all cultures are familiar with the phenomenon of compassion. Violating human dignity always causes suffering. From the perspective of law

there emerge legal (e.g., legal punishing of criminals) and illegal (e.g., child abuse and rape) violations of dignity.

The problem of human dignity can be analyzed by means of rationality and by means of empathy. Rational approaches provided by philosophers, lawyers, political scientists, theologians and other experts may more or less differ from culture to culture (e.g., the treatment of women in Islamic and Christian cultures), empathic approaches seem to be more universal. People who have developed their ability to love are generally more sensitive to and sympathetic with suffering of other individuals. The ability of empathy, i.e., to feel with other people, presents a very important corrective to respect the dignity and rights of others.

To get a better understanding of personal relatedness and identity formation, the 'existential' conditions of every day life have to be analyzed at first. Every human being has to fulfill daily demands which may be induced from outside (i.e., environmental demands) or from inside (i.e., self-defined demands). At the same time the individual also has to take care of himself or herself, thereby self-regulating his or her subjective well-being (i.e., to fulfill personal wishes, needs, and interests). The fundamental relationship between individuals and their environments cannot be neglected. People cannot escape from establishing a kind of relatedness. Four basic areas of personal relatedness may be distinguished:

1. Relatedness to oneself;
2. Relatedness to other single persons;
3. Relatedness to groups; and
4. Relatedness to larger wholes (e.g., society, nation, world, and universe).

The ways how people create their relatedness are leading to two fundamental forms of self-experience and identity formation. Numerous personality theorists have postulated and discussed two central processes in personality development: Autonomy vs. Surrender (Angyal, 1951), Agency vs. Communion (Bakan, 1966), Philobatic vs. Ocnophilic

Tendencies (Balint, 1959), Power vs. Intimacy (McAdams, 1985), and Fission vs. Fusion (Spiegel & Spiegel, 1978).

Koestler (1972) characterized man with respect to these basic tendencies as a “Janus-faced Holon.” This implies that people are autonomous beings on the one hand and that they are, at the same time, part of a larger whole, on the other hand (e.g., family, association, company, and military). To cope successfully with this ‘antinomy’ (separateness versus connectedness) represents an important aspect of personal growth and mental health.

There exists great agreement among researchers and clinicians that interpersonal flexibility, the ability to adjust one’s behavior to suit changing interpersonal situations, is central to mental health and subjective well-being. Thus, personal boundary management based on the ability to handle the dialectics between interpersonal separateness and connectedness in an adaptive way has an important function.

Many people have developed more or less strong deficits in regulating their personal boundaries ranging from severe disturbances to more benign ones. As a consequence, problems and suffering in interpersonal relationships appear. These deficits also may have a strong impact both on one’s own dignity and on the dignity of others.

## **Conclusion**

Postmodernity offers perhaps the most complex context in human history regarding the potentialities of individual development. Success or failure in individual development in the sense of personal growth or fragmentation of self cannot be understood as an either/or principle. Although early personal relationships may have a strong impact on the generation of developmental patterns (Verlaufsgestalt), this does not represent an invariable fate. The human being is asked to take responsibility for himself or herself with regard to his or her relatedness to himself or herself, to other humans and living systems, and to the universe. Thus, the individual has to care for his or her dignity and has to respect the dignity of all other human beings.

Postmodernist relativism does not necessarily lead to arbitrariness and nihilism. The insight that we construct our world views and values implicates personal responsibility, including the affective dimension of the human being. With regard to human dignity, a more complex understanding of ethics may provide better orientation than pure rational approaches alone.

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