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William D. Harpine

University of South Carolina - Aiken, williamh@usca.edu

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RUNNING HEAD: Is Modernism Really Modern?

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Uncovering a Fallacy in Postmodernism

William D. Harpine

Professor, School of Communication

108 Kolbe Hall

The University of Akron

Akron OH 44325-1003

330/972-6219

harpine@uakron.edu

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Abstract

Some postmodernists criticize the view that the logics of Western thought can be employed universally. In doing so, they assume without adequate proof that different human societies have greatly different rationalities and employ completely different logics. This essay argues that, on the contrary, widely different cultures often share noteworthy similarities in rationality.

Is Modernism New?

Uncovering a Fallacy in Postmodernism

Different authors construe *modernism* and *postmodernism* in different ways. Some postmodernists take a Marxist perspective; others do not. Some ponder about value issues, some on societal issues, and others on logical questions. A number of postmodernists believe that the methods of logic and argumentation taught by Eurocentric scholars are the creation of a particular milieu, which they call “modernism” or “modernity,” and do not apply in diverse societies. Accordingly, postmodernists sometimes put forward the idea that patterns of reasoning vary dramatically across time, place, and culture. This view has influenced the theory of argumentation, including the work of Willard, Brummett, and others.¹ This essay offers anthropological evidence that such a claim is significantly exaggerated.

The claim that methods of thinking and argumentation are greatly different in various societies is not a philosophical assertion. It is an empirical claim. It is subject to confirmation or falsification by observations of various societies. As Gill (1994) points out, many attacks against postmodernism² have proven vulnerable to the postmodernists’ response that their critics are “informed by outmoded narratives of logic and metaphysics” (p. 206). In other words, previous critiques of postmodernist theories may employ modernist assumptions, and thus argue in a circle. This essay, however, questions not the postmodernists’ conclusions, but rather an

assumption that some of them make, and does so from a point of view that is sensitive to culture and tradition.

The Postmodernist Theory of Modernity

The postmodernist theory of modernity takes different forms in the hands of different authors, but the basic idea often goes something like the following.

Modernism, many postmodernists claim, arose during the Renaissance or Enlightenment in Europe. Modernism implies a reliance on logical forms of discourse and linear modes of thinking. Modernism, the story goes, attempts to impose a certain kind of logical standard on the diverse modes of thinking of different eras and peoples.

The key building block is the claim that different societies use much different methods of argumentation, no one of which has *prima facie* more merit than any other. Rorty (1979) is often favorably cited for his view that rationality is tied to culture and historicity. He provocatively suggests a new approach to philosophy in which “Our focus shifts from the relation between human beings and the objects of their inquiry to the relation between alternative standards of justification” (pp. 389-390). He further suggests that it is pointless to look for a universal way to examine the functions of knowledge “and that cultural anthropology (in a large sense which includes intellectual history) is all we need” (Rorty, 1979, p. 381).

Rorty’s view assumes that there exist in human societies significantly different and incommensurable methods of rational thought. Similarly, in his critique of modernity, Toulmin (1990) complains that, in the “‘modern’ age,” “the modes of life and thought in modern Europe from 1700 on (modern science and medicine, engineering and institutions) were assumed to be more *rational* than those typical of medieval Europe, or those found in less developed societies

and cultures today” (Toulmin, 1990, p. 11). Toulmin contends further that “it was assumed that uniquely rational procedures exist for handling the intellectual and practical problems of any field of study, procedures which are available to anyone who sets superstition and mythology aside” (Toulmin, 1990, p. 11). In her textbook on rhetorical theory, Gill characterizes postmodernism as rejecting “the flawed nature of Western reason. In rejecting that reason, postmodernism celebrates heterogeneity” (Gill, 1994).

The evidence of modern ethnographic research is that the similarities in how people think, speak, and behave rationally are substantial. One feature that may sometimes lead one astray is the obvious fact that different peoples do hold dramatically different *beliefs* and *opinions* on many subjects, but this is mostly because they have had different experiences and possess different information. In his important examination of the traditions related to medicinal herbs and nutritional habits in various pre-industrial societies, Johns concludes that many populations form dramatically different opinions about what causes illness and how illness should be treated. He also finds, however, that “the intellectual methods by which humans process the information do not vary significantly” (Johns, 1990, p. 279).

This illustrates how the very diversity of human societies, ideology, and behavior may easily lead us to the questionable inference that we think in radically different ways. The content of different societies may include widely different beliefs and social practices. Geertz (2000), for example, argues in favor of several kinds of relativism in anthropological research. He explains that what “relativists want us to worry about is provincialism.” We should not allow the limitations “of our own society” to limit our thinking. This is certainly a valid concern, and to support it Geertz cites the wide varieties of social practices in different societies (pp. 42-46). This

does not, however, prove (nor does Geertz claim otherwise) that the members of different societies think and reason in greatly dissimilar ways. This line of reasoning shows that scholars should be open to the possibility of diversity. However, scholars should also be open to the possibility of similarity.

Modernism Was Never Modern

The misleading notion is that the group of ideas and attitudes called *modernism* was a creation of the European Renaissance, or of Aristotle, or what have you. Actually, much of the sort of rationality that is alleged to be modernist is widespread among many cultures and historical eras, including many pre-industrial societies. Logical, discursive thinking, deductive and inductive forms, syllogistic thinking, and hypothesis formation and hypothesis testing have a prominent place in numerous societies. (This is not to say that all people are adept at solving problems in propositional logic, which would claim too much.) Let us look at some of the empirical evidence for this thesis.

Culture and Evolution

Human cultures exist for a simple natural reason, which is that one human being, having been able to acquire some important item of knowledge or some useful behavior, is able to transmit it to his or her offspring, acquaintances, and pupils. Trial and error learning can be very expensive in terms both of time and of risk. The cultural transmission of information and behaviors enables people to learn more quickly, easily, and safely, thus gaining the benefits of new knowledge with a minimal investment by the individual learner. The other side of the coin is that human beings are great imitators, prepared by natural selection to acquire ideas and

behaviors from others (Boyd & Richardson, 1985, pp. 4-15; Handwerker, 1989). This feature of human life has brought a benefit to our species in its struggle to survive and reproduce.

Human beings quite likely have inherited “*genetic propensities*” to obtain knowledge and analyze information. The possession of reliable information about an organism’s environment can have positive survival value (Wuketits, 1995, p. 361; Hahlweg & Hooker, 1989, p. 28). Furthermore, in human beings the mechanisms for obtaining knowledge are in large part cultural (Boyd & Richardson, 1985, 1992; Ruse, 1989, pp. 188-189). Thus, all human societies require the ability to analyze their environment with reasonable accuracy.

In general, the ways in which people reason may be similar in different societies. Levi-Strauss (1963) suggests that “the kind of logic in mythical thought is as rigorous as that of modern science.” He believes that “the difference lies, not in the quality of the intellectual process, but in the nature of things to which it is applied” (p. 230). As anthropologist Ward Goodenough (1990) puts it:

My own experience and that of others who have lived and worked intimately with what used inappropriately to be called “primitive” people, learning to speak their language and to communicate with them in their terms, is that these people draw analogies and make deductive inferences in ways thoroughly familiar to us.

(Goodenough, 1990, p. 607)

“Logic begins,” Goodenough continues, “with the mapping of our experiences of things and relationships into words and with generalizations about relationships that can be rendered into

propositions” (Goodenough, 1990, p. 607). Logic, in other words, came into being as a tool for human beings to adapt to and survive in varying new environments.

Syllogistic Reasoning: A Look at the Research in Ethno-Logic

Hamill (1990), a leading researcher in ethno-logic, writes that the syllogism has been found in every society in which it has been looked for. Hamill argues that “The structure of categorical reasoning is the same regardless of language or culture” (p. 103). People in different societies derive valid conclusions from syllogisms. The patterns of syllogistic reasoning in all cultures vary from those taught in logic manuals because no culture interprets “some” the way a logic manual does. Contrary to logic manuals, in all natural languages (including English) “some” means “both ‘there is one’ and ‘there is not one’” (Hamill, 1990, p. 103). However, categorical syllogisms in all cultures in which syllogistic reasoning has been studied share similar structures, or can be interpreted by the propositional calculus. As Hamill (1990) points out, “The syllogism is a logical pattern found in every language and culture researched thus far” (p. 16). Different societies have different stores of premises and accept different categorical statements as being true, but the conclusions are drawn in structurally similar ways (Hamill, 1990, p. 104).³ Similarly, not all societies interpret “or” in the same way as propositional logic (where “or” means “at least one”), so that it functions as a different logical operator in many societies than it does in propositional logic.

Working among the Trobriand Islanders, Hutchins (1980) arrived at the conclusion that culture does become involved in the formal aspects of problem solving. He also concluded, however, that “a model of folk logic developed from purely western sources is quite adequate as an account of the spontaneous reasoning of Trobriand Islanders” (p. 127). The reasoning of

Trobriand islanders differs from “Aristotelian logic, because it contains plausible as well as strong inferences, but then so does our own reasoning” (p. 127). Hutchins (1980) continues that “The clear difference between cultures with respect to reasoning is in the representation of the world which is thought about rather than in the processes employed in doing the thinking” (pp. 127-128).

In a study of the Navajo, Hamill (1990) concluded that “Consultants considered the same kinds of arguments valid and invalid, and in no case did they draw conclusions that were invalid according to the rules of textbook logic.” He did offer the qualifying conclusion that “Consultants rejected several arguments that logicians consider valid; all of these involved particular statements for which the corresponding universal statement was true (e.g., ‘Some oaks are trees’)” (p. 61). These results suggest a degree of commonality between the folk logic of the Navajo and the textbook logic of European and American academics.

The Argument from Authority

No one could be surprised to encounter arguments from authority in non-industrial societies. It is interesting to find that the Bearlaker hunter-gatherers employ the argument from authority in a way that reminds us of the relevant chapters in any good argumentation or informal logic textbook.

In his study of these people, Rushforth (1992) found that they prefer to learn things for themselves. They value firsthand observation over other means of learning, which might surprise a postmodernist who believes that pre-industrial societies devalue empirical knowledge. When they rely on authority, Bearlakers strongly prefer to seek knowledge from persons who do have direct experience on the matter in question. Furthermore, the Bearlakers do not transfer expertise

in one field to expertise in another. To a Western logician, a physician has expert knowledge only in medicine (see Kahane, 1992, pp. 28-34 for a modern logician's very similar analysis of argument from authority). To a Bearlaker, a hunter's expertise does not translate into expertise about fishing. The Bearlakers criticize as proud anyone who claims knowledge that is not based on primary experience. The stress on primary experience furthers the Bearlakers' egalitarian society, but it also clearly distinguishes between persons whose knowledge is based on experience and those whose knowledge is not based on experience.

In his research among the Fang of Africa, Boyer (1990) discovered that opinions offered as expert judgments are expected to be true, and that it is a violation of the people's standards for a person claiming expertise to offer untrue information. People attend carefully to expert opinion, discussing it even after the event in question is long past (p. 33).

Hypothesis Testing: Not a "Modern" Idea

Over thirty years ago, anthropologist William S. Laughlin (1968) pointed out that hunting and gathering—the evolutionary human way of life—“has placed a premium upon inventiveness, upon problem solving, and has imposed a real penalty for failure to solve the problem” (p. 304). It should surprise us very much if members of societies living in anything resembling the primeval manner lack reliable methods of investigating problems.

To be more precise, pre-industrial peoples are not imitating science; it might be fairer to say that scientists developed their methods using universal, primeval methods of thought as their starting point. The Harvard research team's studies of the !Kung San of the Kalahari merits our attention because these people earn the bulk of their sustenance by hunting and gathering in the African savanna, where they rely on the flora and fauna of humanity's ancestral home. It would

certainly overstate the case to claim that the San are an uncontaminated relic of primeval human culture (Lee, 1992); however, their way of life may provide the closest modern simulation of primeval life (Solway & Lee, 1990). In any case, the !Kung San differ substantially from the culture of European modernism. Yet, we find that their manner of reasoning and arguing parallels the structure and methods of modern scientific thought.

Blurton Jones and Konner (1976) note that the !Kung San possess a naturally inquisitive turn of mind that leads them to acquire knowledge of animals for the sheer pleasure of holding that knowledge. Yet, this knowledge has practical application. The reasoning that the !Kung San follow during a hunt seeks solutions to a series of questions: “Where is the animal now? Which way is it going, and how fast? Is it likely to stop or to reverse direction? Where and how seriously is it wounded? How long will it live?” (Blurton Jones & Konner, 1976, p. 342). In answering these questions, the San hunter relies on a resource of prior knowledge of animal behavior. During a typical hunt, the hunter forms “a working hypothesis” about the animals’ location and behavior “and then tested continually against the spoor” (Blurton Jones & Konner, 1976, p. 342). Blurton Jones and Konner give a number of interesting examples of this sort of thinking; for example, one hunter was following a gemsbok trail that he claimed to have been made earlier in the day. However, the hunter abandoned the chase when he discovered a mouse footprint inside the gemsbok’s footprint: “Since mice are nocturnal, the gemsbok print must have been left during the night” (Blurton Jones & Konner, 1976, p. 342). The anthropologists’ insightful conclusion is that:

Such an intellectual process is familiar to us from detective stories and indeed also from science itself. Evidently it is a basic feature of human mental life. It would be surprising indeed if repeated activation of hypotheses, trying them out against new data, integrating them with previously known facts, and rejecting ones which do not stand up, were habits of mind peculiar to western scientists and detectives. . . . That they are brought to impressive fruition by the technology of scientists and the leisure of novelists should not be allowed to persuade us that we invented them. (Blurton Jones & Konner, 1976, p. 343)⁴

Observation of the Hadza of Tasmania, a present-day hunting and gathering group, establishes a similar pattern of observational analysis and decision-making. The Hadza scavenged game based on such evidence as animal sounds and observations of predator behavior (O'Connell & Hawkes, 1988, p. 117). The analyses of the !Kung San and Hadza are consistent with Atran's (1990) finding that numerous human societies name and organize species taxonomically in ways that are at least roughly analogous to those of European biology (p. 17).

Conclusion

Syllogism, deductive logic, inductive logic, the argument from authority, empirical observation, and hypothesis testing are widespread in diverse human societies. They are even found in cultures that share features in common with Pleistocene hunter and gatherers. When some postmodernists argue that these basic patterns of human reasoning and discourse are the products of European thought, they claim on behalf of European society what is actually the property of humankind.

Postmodernists often contend that people of other times and places need not be bound by the strictures of this uniquely “European” style of thinking and speaking. An analogy illustrates why this is a fallacy. Suppose that a European or American scholar were to note that all modern Westerners breathe in a certain way and value a certain way of breathing. Suppose that this philosopher then claimed that modernist Western breathers invented this method of breathing. Nonetheless, this mythical philosopher argues, we should not assert the rightness of the Western way of breathing and should acknowledge that other peoples have every right to breathe in their own manner.

This is, more or less, how postmodernists sometimes think. Neither Aristotle nor the Renaissance philosophers invented syllogistic thinking, the scientific method, observation and generalization, or any other fundamental method of rational thinking. Their contribution was, more likely, to refine and systematize ways of thinking that are the common property of many peoples. These ways of thinking appear to be more similar from one society to the next than what scholars sometimes seem to realize. People of different times and different lands have dealt with different kinds of problems, have possessed different bodies of knowledge, and have had varying insights into the world that we all inhabit. Nonetheless, they all learn about that world, and transmit their knowledge about the world, in ways that are often comparable to the ways in which “modern” thinkers in the European tradition draw conclusions.

Perhaps the best statement is that of Blurton Jones and Konner (1976): “We have gained little or nothing in ability or intellectual brilliance since the Stone Age; our gains have all been in the accumulation of records of our intellectual achievements. . . . It is an error to equate the documented history of intellectual achievement with a history of intellect” (p. 348). Logic is a

tool for learning: both a tool for individual learning, and to convey new ideas to others. Learning is fundamentally a method for dealing with the problem of changing environments (Lopreato, 1984, p. 74). This might lead us to think when one society is more technologically advanced than another, this does not establish that one society is smarter than another or that its members reason in different ways. Thus, the San should be perfectly capable of developing rocket ships, but their traditions and environment instead lead them to excel at living from nature. It is likely that they merely have a different stock of traditions on which to build, or that their environment poses different practical problems for them to solve.

As long as we human beings all continue to inhabit the same planet, to have the same nutritional and safety requirements, and to live in family groupings, we should expect to share many methods of reasoning. Thus, although one should expect to find cultural variations in how people make arguments, one should also expect to find many cross-cultural similarities.

MacIntyre's (1988) work gives us a much more solid foundation than most of the other figures sometimes associated with the postmodernist movement. MacIntyre finds in the Aristotelian tradition a way to seek rapprochement among competing traditions about rationality. This does at least offer one possible way to seek common ground, and has the merit of recognizing to at least some degree our common intellectual heritage.

The question of whether there are different ways of being rational loses its force when we realize that, in the human condition as it is, people really may not differ all that greatly in thinking, reasoning, and problem solving.

Whether it is possible to develop a sound theory of universal rationality is a prototypical question of modern thought. In their efforts to discredit this attempt and expose what they see as

its Euro-centric bias, postmodernists have exceeded the anthropological evidence. The origins of human rationality may lie deep in the evolution of our species. The postmodernists have done the world of scholarship a favor to point out the importance of tradition and culture in human thought, but have, most likely, gone too far when they contend that methods of reasoning are greatly different, even incommensurable, from one society to another.

Notes

¹ For example, see Willard (1989), Blair, Jeppeson, & Pucci (1991); McKerrow (1991); Stewart (1991); Brummett (1976).

² A particularly good critique of the postmodernist conception of reasoning is Rowland (1995).

³ Hamill (1990) does note some variations in the Navajo's propositional logic, however, which he attributes to culturally variant conjoiners found in the Navajo language.

⁴ Thomas (1976) makes similar observation about the Gikwe San.