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## Truth in postmodern philosophy: absolute vs. relative truth

Ashwani Nagar

Research Scholar, Department of African Studies, University of Delhi

### Abstract

The discourse on truth in postmodern philosophy revolves around the tension between absolute and relative conceptions of truth, reflecting a significant shift from modernist faith in universal rationality to postmodern skepticism toward grand narratives. Classical philosophy and Enlightenment thought privileged absolute truth as objective, timeless, and independent of human perspectives, a view central to science and metaphysics. Postmodern thinkers, however, reject such universality, emphasizing the relativity of truth as shaped by cultural, linguistic, and historical contexts. Nietzsche's critique of objective facts, Foucault's power/knowledge framework, Derrida's deconstruction of meaning, and Lyotard's incredulity toward metanarratives all highlight truth's instability and multiplicity. While this relativist turn opens space for pluralism and marginalized voices, it also raises concerns about nihilism, moral relativism, and the erosion of universal justice, prompting critiques from philosophers like Habermas. Thus, the debate between absolute and relative truth in postmodern thought remains central to contemporary discussions of knowledge, ethics, and human coexistence.

**Keywords:-** Postmodern philosophy, Absolute truth, Relative truth, Power/knowledge, Deconstruction

### Introduction

The question of truth has remained central to philosophical discourse across ages, oscillating between the quest for absolute, universal principles and the acknowledgment of contextual, relative perspectives. In classical philosophy, thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, and Kant emphasized truth as fixed, timeless, and independent of human subjectivity, embodying the ideal of certainty and objectivity that was carried forward into the Enlightenment and modernity through the dominance of rationality and science. However, postmodern philosophy marks a radical departure from this trajectory by rejecting the idea of absolute truth and instead affirming the relativity and multiplicity of truths as shaped by language, culture, history, and power. Friedrich Nietzsche's provocative assertion that "there are no facts, only interpretations" paved the way for this skepticism, later elaborated by Michel Foucault's notion of truth as inseparably tied to power/knowledge relations and Jacques Derrida's deconstruction that exposes the instability of meaning itself. Postmodernism, articulated by Jean-François Lyotard's famous "incredulity toward metanarratives," challenges the grand narratives of modernity that claimed universal validity, instead privileging local, plural voices and micro-narratives. While Richard Rorty further emphasized truth as a product of linguistic consensus, Jean Baudrillard blurred the



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line between truth and representation by introducing the concepts of simulacra and hyperreality, where reality dissolves into endless images and signs. This shift from absolute to relative truth, however, raises significant philosophical and ethical dilemmas: if all truths are relative, the grounds for justice, morality, and human rights become precarious, leading critics like Jürgen Habermas to defend the possibility of rational consensus against postmodern skepticism. Thus, the debate between absolute and relative truth in postmodern philosophy is not merely abstract but deeply consequential, influencing epistemology, ethics, and politics, as well as shaping contemporary debates on cultural diversity, pluralism, and authority of knowledge. The introduction of relativism destabilizes long-standing assumptions of certainty but also opens space for marginalized voices and alternative perspectives, forcing philosophy to grapple with the tension between the desire for universal foundations and the recognition of plurality and difference. The confrontation between absolute and relative truth in postmodern thought illustrates the complex, contested nature of truth itself and its far-reaching implications for understanding reality, knowledge, and human coexistence.

## **Significance of the Study**

The study of truth in postmodern philosophy, particularly the tension between absolute and relative truth, is significant because it addresses one of the most fundamental questions in human thought: how we define, access, and apply truth in an increasingly complex world. By examining the postmodern critique of absolutes, the research highlights the limitations of universalist claims rooted in Enlightenment rationality and reveals how truth is often shaped by culture, language, history, and power. This focus is especially relevant in contemporary contexts marked by pluralism, globalization, and digital hyperreality, where competing narratives and perspectives constantly challenge established notions of objectivity. Understanding this philosophical shift not only enriches debates in epistemology but also has practical implications for ethics, politics, education, and social justice, as it compels us to reflect on how knowledge is produced, whose truths are legitimized, and how societies can balance plurality with the pursuit of shared values.

## **Brief History of Truth in Philosophy: From Plato and Aristotle to Modernity**

The concept of truth has been central to philosophy since its earliest beginnings, undergoing significant transformations from the classical Greek tradition to the modern era. In ancient philosophy, Plato envisioned truth as eternal, immutable, and transcendent, located in the realm of ideal Forms beyond the material world, where knowledge was equated with the soul's recollection of these perfect realities. Aristotle, on the other hand, grounded truth in empirical observation and logical reasoning, defining it as the correspondence between thought and reality, thereby laying the foundation for the correspondence theory of truth. During the medieval period, truth was closely associated with divine revelation, where theologians like Augustine and Aquinas sought to harmonize reason with faith, presenting truth as both eternal in God and



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accessible through human rationality. The Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution marked a decisive shift, as emphasis moved toward human reason, empirical inquiry, and the search for universal laws governing nature. Thinkers such as Descartes, with his methodic doubt and cogito, emphasized certainty as the hallmark of truth, while Kant sought to reconcile rationalism and empiricism by locating truth within the structures of human cognition, arguing that knowledge is shaped by a priori categories of understanding. Modern philosophy increasingly regarded truth as objective, universal, and verifiable through reason and science, reflecting the Enlightenment's confidence in progress, rationality, and human autonomy. The pursuit of truth became intertwined with the ideals of universal knowledge, scientific method, and moral universality, giving rise to grand narratives that claimed absolute validity. However, this trajectory also provoked challenges, as skepticism, historicism, and cultural pluralism began to question the possibility of a single, unchanging truth. By the late modern period, truth was no longer seen as simply discovered but as constructed within human contexts, paving the way for postmodern critiques that dismantled the very notion of absolute foundations. Thus, the history of truth in philosophy from Plato and Aristotle to modernity reveals an evolution from metaphysical absolutes to rational universals, ultimately setting the stage for the relativist turn of postmodern thought that destabilizes long-held certainties about knowledge and reality.

## The Enlightenment's Emphasis on Universal Reason and Absolute Truth

The Enlightenment, spanning the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, represented a transformative period in Western intellectual history, characterized by an unwavering faith in human reason, scientific inquiry, and the pursuit of universal truth. Emerging from the decline of medieval scholasticism and the turbulence of religious wars, Enlightenment thinkers sought to liberate knowledge from dogma and superstition by grounding it in rationality and empirical observation. Truth was conceived as absolute, objective, and universally accessible through the proper use of reason, with science and logic serving as its guiding instruments. René Descartes' methodic doubt and emphasis on clear and distinct ideas exemplified this quest for certainty, while Newton's laws of nature reinforced the idea of universal principles governing reality, discoverable through systematic observation and mathematics. Enlightenment philosophers such as Kant, Locke, and Voltaire advanced the belief that reason was the common faculty of all humans, capable of transcending cultural and historical differences, thus making truth universally valid. This universalism also extended to ethics and politics, with notions of natural rights, equality, and justice being framed as universally true and binding. Kant's famous dictum "Sapere aude" (dare to know) captured the spirit of the age, urging individuals to use reason independently as a path toward truth and autonomy. The Enlightenment's emphasis on absolute truth was not merely theoretical but also practical, influencing the development of modern democracy, legal systems, and scientific progress, all rooted in the belief that rational principles



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could provide universal foundations for society. However, this exaltation of reason and universal truth also generated critiques, as it often marginalized non-Western knowledge systems and overlooked cultural plurality in its pursuit of universality. Nevertheless, the Enlightenment's commitment to universal reason and absolute truth provided the intellectual bedrock for modern philosophy, science, and politics, establishing a legacy of rational inquiry and human progress. This belief in objective truth and rational universality would later come under scrutiny in the postmodern era, where thinkers began to question the very possibility of absolutes and to challenge the Enlightenment's grand narratives of certainty, progress, and universality.

## **Concept of Absolute Truth**

The concept of absolute truth in philosophy refers to a universal, timeless, and objective reality that exists independently of human perceptions, cultural contexts, or historical conditions. It implies that truth is not contingent upon subjective interpretation but remains fixed, consistent, and binding across time and space. This idea suggests that there is a single, ultimate reality that can be discovered and articulated through reason, logic, or metaphysical insight. Unlike relative truth, which changes with perspective, absolute truth claims to transcend individual bias, cultural diversity, and historical change, presenting itself as universally valid and applicable.

## **Examples: Laws of Logic, Mathematics, Metaphysical or Religious Absolutes**

Examples of absolute truth are often drawn from domains where certainty and universality appear evident. In logic, the principle of non-contradiction—that a proposition cannot be both true and false at the same time in the same sense—is often cited as an inviolable truth that holds irrespective of cultural or temporal context. Similarly, mathematical truths such as “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ” or the properties of geometrical figures like triangles are regarded as universal absolutes, existing independently of opinion. Metaphysical and religious traditions also invoke absolute truths, such as the existence of God in monotheistic religions, the concept of the soul, or eternal principles of morality believed to be binding on all human beings. These examples highlight the scope of absolute truth as encompassing logic, mathematics, metaphysics, and theology, presenting a worldview anchored in certainty and permanence.

## **Modernist Tradition**

The modernist tradition, shaped by the Enlightenment, elevated the notion of absolute truth by linking it to the ideals of science, rationality, and progress. Modernism upheld the belief that truth could be accessed through reason and empirical inquiry, thereby establishing foundations for knowledge that were both objective and universal. Scientific laws, such as Newton's laws of motion and gravitation, epitomized this conviction, as they appeared to reveal truths about the natural world that were consistent, measurable, and valid for all observers regardless of context. Modernist philosophy emphasized certainty, rational order, and the pursuit of truth as a process of uncovering fixed principles governing reality. This vision aligned with the Enlightenment's



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faith in universal reason, positioning absolute truth as the cornerstone of scientific objectivity, moral universality, and human progress.

## Key Thinkers

Key philosophical figures shaped and refined the concept of absolute truth within modern thought. René Descartes, often called the father of modern philosophy, sought indubitable foundations for knowledge through his method of radical doubt, arriving at the famous cogito (“I think, therefore I am”) as a self-evident and absolute truth. For Descartes, truth resided in clear and distinct ideas, accessible to reason, and grounded in certainty. Immanuel Kant, while critical of both empiricism and rationalism, argued that truth depended on universal categories of the human mind that structure all possible experience. According to Kant, truths about the phenomenal world—such as causality, space, and time—are universally valid because they arise from the a priori conditions of cognition shared by all rational beings. Both Descartes and Kant contributed to the modernist belief that truth is not arbitrary or contingent but grounded in universality, rationality, and necessity.

The concept of absolute truth represents a foundational pillar of Western philosophy, affirming the existence of timeless, universal, and objective principles discoverable through reason, science, and metaphysical inquiry. It finds expression in logic, mathematics, metaphysics, and religion, while in the modernist tradition it is reinforced by the pursuit of scientific objectivity and rational certainty. Thinkers like Descartes and Kant exemplify this tradition, each providing distinct but complementary accounts of how truth can be secured beyond the contingencies of individual perspective. Although later challenged by postmodern critiques, the notion of absolute truth remains central to philosophical debates, shaping enduring questions about the nature of knowledge, reality, and human understanding.

## Concept of Relative Truth

The concept of relative truth challenges the traditional notion of timeless and universal absolutes by asserting that truth is not fixed but instead contextual, culturally constructed, and perspectival. According to this view, what is considered true in one society, historical period, or cultural framework may not hold the same validity in another, because truth is always mediated by language, social practices, and human interpretation. Unlike absolute truth, which seeks permanence and universality, relative truth highlights the dynamic, fluid, and situational nature of human understanding. It recognizes that all claims to truth are embedded within particular contexts and shaped by the perspectives of individuals or groups, making truth less a matter of objective discovery and more a matter of interpretation and negotiation.

## Postmodern Skepticism of Absolutes and Universals

Postmodern philosophy emerged in the twentieth century as a reaction against the Enlightenment and modernist traditions that privileged universal reason, scientific objectivity, and absolute





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truth. Postmodernism is marked by a deep skepticism toward absolutes and universals, arguing that such claims are often disguised instruments of domination that mask the partial and situated nature of knowledge. Instead of endorsing a single, overarching account of truth, postmodern thinkers question whether such universal foundations are even possible, let alone desirable. Jean-François Lyotard famously defined postmodernism as an “incredulity toward metanarratives,” capturing the rejection of grand, universalizing theories of truth in favor of localized, fragmented, and plural narratives. This skepticism destabilizes the Enlightenment ideal of universal knowledge, replacing it with a recognition of diversity, contingency, and multiplicity in human experience.

## **Emphasis on Plurality of Truths Depending on Language, Culture, and Power**

Central to the idea of relative truth is the emphasis on plurality, acknowledging that different cultures, languages, and power structures produce different truths. Language plays a crucial role, as meaning is never fixed but depends on usage, context, and interpretation, leading to multiple possible understandings. Cultural traditions, historical conditions, and social practices all shape what counts as true within a given community, making truth inseparable from context. Moreover, power relations are critical in determining whose truths are recognized and legitimized, as dominant groups often impose their perspectives as universal while marginalizing alternative voices. This emphasis on plurality resonates with contemporary discussions of identity, diversity, and multiculturalism, which argue for the recognition of multiple, coexisting truths rather than the enforcement of a single absolute framework.

The philosophical foundations of relative truth are powerfully articulated by several key postmodern thinkers. Friedrich Nietzsche, often considered a precursor to postmodernism, declared that “there are no facts, only interpretations,” highlighting the perspectival nature of all knowledge and the impossibility of attaining an absolute standpoint outside interpretation. Michel Foucault advanced this idea by arguing that truth is not objective but intimately bound to relations of power and knowledge. For Foucault, what societies accept as true is the result of discursive practices shaped by institutions, authority, and historical conditions, meaning that truth always reflects dynamics of control and exclusion. Jacques Derrida further contributed through his method of deconstruction, which reveals the instability of language and the impossibility of fixed meanings. For Derrida, truth is contingent and undecidable, as texts and discourses constantly defer and disrupt stable interpretation. Together, these thinkers underscore that truth is never absolute but always contingent, contextual, and subject to ongoing reinterpretation.

In summary, the concept of relative truth emphasizes the perspectival, culturally constructed, and contested nature of knowledge, standing in sharp contrast to the universalist claims of absolute truth. Postmodern skepticism dismantles the certainty of universals and opens intellectual space



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for a plurality of truths shaped by language, culture, and power. The insights of Nietzsche, Foucault, and Derrida reveal the complexities and instabilities of truth, demonstrating that it is not a static entity to be discovered but a dynamic process continually negotiated within human contexts. This perspective, while liberating in its recognition of diversity and difference, also raises profound questions about the limits of knowledge, the possibility of consensus, and the role of philosophy in a world without absolutes.

## Relevance in Postmodern Philosophy

The debate over truth in postmodern philosophy acquires its sharpest relevance through the works of influential thinkers who collectively dismantled the Enlightenment ideal of universal truth and instead foregrounded plurality, contingency, and representation. Jean-François Lyotard articulated this shift by declaring postmodernism as an “incredulity toward metanarratives,” emphasizing the collapse of grand narratives such as scientific progress, rational enlightenment, or religious teleology that once claimed to provide absolute truths applicable to all humanity. For Lyotard, the end of these universalizing stories meant the rise of micro-narratives—localized, fragmented accounts of truth shaped by specific cultural, historical, and linguistic contexts. These micro-narratives highlight diversity and difference, undermining the idea that one overarching system of truth can encompass all human experience. In a similar vein, Richard Rorty advanced a pragmatic conception of truth, famously defining it as “what our peers let us get away with saying.” This provocative redefinition underscores that truth is not about correspondence with objective reality but about social justification within a community of language users. Rorty’s view places truth within the realm of consensus and discourse, suggesting that what counts as true is contingent upon collective agreement rather than fixed universal principles. Such a stance democratizes truth but also reveals its fragility, as it depends upon shifting cultural norms and practices rather than eternal foundations. Jean Baudrillard radicalized this critique by exploring the effects of media, technology, and consumer culture on the nature of truth. Through his concepts of simulacra and hyperreality, Baudrillard argued that in contemporary society, representations no longer reflect reality but instead create a world of signs and images that substitute for the real, leading to a situation where truth dissolves into endless simulations. In hyperreality, distinctions between reality and representation collapse, leaving truth suspended in an infinite play of images. Together, Lyotard, Rorty, and Baudrillard illustrate how postmodern philosophy redefines the relevance of truth, moving away from absolutes toward plural, pragmatic, and simulated conceptions that reflect the complexity of late modern life. This reconfiguration not only destabilizes the philosophical pursuit of universality but also compels contemporary thought to grapple with the consequences of a world where truth is contingent, negotiable, and often indistinguishable from representation.



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## Conclusion

The debate over truth in postmodern philosophy, framed in terms of absolute versus relative truth, reflects a profound transformation in the way knowledge, meaning, and human understanding are conceived. Absolute truth, long upheld in classical and modern philosophy, rests on the conviction that reality possesses objective, universal, and timeless principles discoverable through reason, logic, and science, as seen in the works of Descartes and Kant. By contrast, postmodern philosophy destabilizes this certainty by rejecting universalist claims and emphasizing the relativity of truth as contextual, culturally constructed, and inseparable from language and power. Thinkers such as Nietzsche, Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, Rorty, and Baudrillard expose the limits of foundationalist notions of truth and instead advocate for pluralism, interpretation, and recognition of contingency, thereby opening intellectual space for marginalized voices and alternative perspectives. Yet, this relativist turn is not without challenges, as it raises questions about the possibility of consensus, the risk of nihilism, and the foundations of justice and ethics in the absence of absolutes. The significance of this debate lies not merely in abstract theorization but in its implications for contemporary life—shaping cultural discourses, ethical debates, political structures, and our very understanding of reality in an age marked by diversity, uncertainty, and mediated representations. Ultimately, the confrontation between absolute and relative truth within postmodern thought underscores the enduring complexity of philosophy's central concern: whether truth is a universal discovery that transcends human limits or a contingent construct that reflects the multiplicity of human experience.





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