1.1. Introduction

Relativism precisely represents the standpoint or position that moulds the ideas forming a system of philosophy rather than any specific system of ideas or any particular school of philosophy. Hence, “Relativism is a philosophical position based on the belief that all points of view are equally valid” (Richards 1). It is not that easy to propose a single unified definition of the term. The controversy over different forms of relativism depends upon the specific object/aspect that a relativist takes into account. The position will vary according to the manner in which it is viewed. So, relativistic tendencies determine the inclination and orientation of the thinkers who contribute to any domain of knowledge such as metaphysics, ethics, politics, or physical/life/social sciences.

The notion of relativism had moulded philosophical debates over human knowledge and morality, and Sophists thousands of years ago in ancient Greece had first projected the view. But in science, the concept of relativity gained currency only by 1905, the year in which Albert Einstein published his first paper on the Special Theory of Relativity in a German journal. Henceforth, deliberations in physics have been centered round the
dispute between absolutists and relativists representing the Newtonian and Einsteinian traditions respectively.

What Einstein has achieved is the successful means to provide experimental support to the relativistic interpretations of physical reality. It involved the rejection of the Aristotelian-Newtonian belief in absolute space and time. The principle of relativity in metaphysics becomes more pronounced in terms of this scientific negation of the concept of absolute space and time. The obvious consequence of Einstein’s paradigm shift in physics was the transferring of substance to cause or the object to the subject. He replaced the absolutistic model of the universe with a picture of the world in terms of subjective experience. In classical mechanics, Newtonian mass is an intrinsic property of the body, and does not depend upon its velocity. In relativity theory, the mass of a body is not a constant, but a function of its relative velocity, and for Einstein, space- motion-time is not absolute, but a continuum.

Relativity theory has the potential to cast a shadow of doubt upon the claims of absolutistic metaphysics as propounded in Hegelian Idealism. The ontological reality of an entity like the Welt-Geist is more at risk in the light of the relativity theory which is the direct outcome of the application of the experimental method. The concreteness of space, time and idea as absolute
entities has been a matter of dispute since Einstein proposed a new theory of gravitation in his general theory.

It is relevant here to ask whether the paradigm shift brought about by Einstein’s revolutionary theory of relativity has relegated metaphysics to the realm of fancy. The truth is that the progress in science at any stage presupposes points of falsification as Karl Popper has warned\(^1\). Metaphysics with its long history of intellectual debates on the issues later taken up by physicists stands out as the storehouse of conceptual frameworks for experimental sciences. The rationality of scientific method can be established only with reference to metaphysical principles such as the postulates of induction. The revolutions in science help to abandon the age-old fantasies and absurdities in the realm of metaphysics. Physicists and metaphysicians are not enemies in an intellectual warfare, but they are in constant dialogue to facilitate the progress of man’s quest for truth. Hence, there is nothing wrong in saying that the new principle of relativity is the triumph of an old principle of philosophy.

The principle of relativity emerged as a turning point in theoretical physics, and history repeated with the introduction of uncertainty principle. These two developments in theoretical physics also implied the decline of the previously dominant theories. Hence, Einstein was able to weaken the widespread influence of Newtonian absolutism, and the same Einstein was
annoyed by the indeterministic implications of Quantum Mechanics. Thus we can conclude that theories in physics have a history of becoming metatheories, and it is at this point that they become the concern of the philosophy of science. George Couvalis says that philosophers of science like Kuhn and Feyerabend have claimed that the view of science that which increased our knowledge of the world through using objective, and shared standards for evaluating theories is deeply mistaken (111). With these objective and shared standards, science cannot give us any absolute knowledge and truth.

1.2. Relativism - Positions

Relativism prompts one or another context-specific understanding of any given phenomenon, may it be physical, metaphysical, ethical, or cultural. Relativism can take various forms based on the character of the viewpoint or framework to which truth is relativized. These frameworks may be the individual, culture, language, or certain conceptual schemes. Westacott writes, “These frameworks do not exclude one another…” (n.pag). Hence one way of comprehending relativism is to analyze how a given perspective moulds an understanding of various phenomena. Philosophical analysis of relativism hands us on a plate the conventional classification as cognitive, epistemic, aesthetic, moral, and cultural. Here
we take up the first three for a brief study and the last two will be discussed in the succeeding chapter.

1.2.1. Cognitive Relativism and/or Epistemic Relativism

Cognitive relativism implies the relativity of rationality and knowledge. One system of belief or reasoning is chosen as the best by and for one person or group, while a quite different system is preferred by another. Here is a classic definition of the term epistemic relativism:

It is a species of normative cognitive pluralism. Normative cognitive pluralism claims that there is no unique system of reasoning that people ought to use, because various quite different systems can be equally valid (Stich n. pag.).

Some philosophers in the western tradition other than Sophists have adopted certain forms of cognitive relativism. They assume that there is some standpoint in relation to which our judgments are definitely true or false. For example, theologians consider God as the cognitive pivot in relation to which all things exist and subsist. But in the nineteenth century, this assumption came to be seriously questioned by some important thinkers like Nietzsche and William James. Westacott observes that cognitive relativism consists of two claims and they are the following:

i) The truth-value of any statement is always relative to some particular standpoint.
ii) No standpoint is metaphysically privileged over all others (n.pag).

As propounded by relativists in general, the system of reasoning that a person ought to use will depend on the environment of that person. The cognitive process will depend on the factors like the existence of a system of writing the structure of disciplinary communities and the relation of those communities to the political and economic arrangements within the wider society. It will also depend on the level of conceptual, mathematical, scientific, and technological sophistication that has been achieved. There will be no one ideal method of inquiry, no cognitive system that excels alike in all historical settings. The evaluation norms of a cognitive system will vary when its historical context changes. For instance, Descartes’ belated proposal of the pineal gland as the meeting point of body and mind cannot be termed nonsense in the historical context of Cartesian dualism that had taken shape in an era without sufficient scientific knowledge of the neurological bases of mind. It was a solution, though not final, relevant within a given cognitive context.
1.2.2. Aesthetic Relativism

Aesthetics is “the term applied to the philosophical study concerned with the understanding of beauty and its manifestations in art and nature” (Honer et.al. 185). In short, aesthetics is the philosophical study of beauty in art and nature. One of the main questions in aesthetics is whether beauty lies in the object perceived or in the subject who appreciates beauty. Subjectivists claim that there is no one particular quality in the object which guarantees its beauty because beauty lies in the subject and it is grasped only as a subjective impression. But objectivists argue that aesthetic judgments are based on universal and objective factors. Indian aestheticians contend that the beauty of an object lies in the perfect union of all qualities in that object. This harmony or togetherness of qualities is called Samyōga. Aesthetic appreciation is the apprehension of this harmony, but the description of this is not easy for the one who apprehends beauty (Ramachandran 29).

The subjectivist vs. objectivist dispute does not obliterate the fact that the sense of beauty is inherent in the perceiver, but the circumstances and conditions (contextual) in which an aesthetic perception takes place together with the innate dispositions of mind (subjective) determine the range and extent of one’s feeling of beauty. It is like tasting the same food by the same person with different dispositions in different circumstances. A
person tasting the food of relish in condition A of having a restful balanced state of mind is likely to dislike the same thing in condition B which is a tensed mood under dejecting circumstances. It is true that the objective factors of beauty namely the qualities in togetherness are subjectivized and contextualized in the aesthetic experience of an individual. Hence the aesthetic perception of an object of beauty by a perceiver is a dynamically changed perception due to the inner dispositions of the subject and the conditions in which it takes place. Subjective element is not an egoistic isolated personhood, but a distinct and unique self-hood developing and operating under certain contextual variables which are broadly termed ‘cultural’.

The question whether beauty lies in the object or in the subject leads to the conclusion that like the faculty of rationality and morality, aesthetic faculty is also biologically inherent, but the expressions or aesthetic judgments differ because of the subjectivisation and contextualization of the experience. It is so because the perceiver is moulded in a particular cultural context and environment and moreover there are specific trans-individual factors that determine a certain aesthetic judgment. For example, when we listen to a Karnatic music concert, it is better enjoyable for a person well versed in Karnatic music than for a layman because the mindset of the former is different from that of the latter, and this creates the difference in enjoying the selfsame concert.
T.P. Ramachandran observes, “Beauty is a quality which depends for its continuance not only on the nature of the object but also on the attitude of the subject” (39). Following the general attitude of Indian aestheticians, we can state that aesthetic expression is holistic. For them, it is neither universal nor constant. In different times and under different circumstances the expression of beauty changes due to the difference in the mindset of the perceiver and that in the circumstances. If beauty is entirely universal and objective, it should remain the same for different persons in different contexts. So a relativistic standpoint in aesthetics recognizes that the range and degree of beauty perceived at a certain point is relative to the subjective and contextual elements pertaining to that point.

One of the perennial questions raised in aesthetics focuses on the presence/absence of certain universal features in forms of artistic creation. Philosophers of art are divided upon this issue. Denis Dutton observes that philosophers like Leo Tolstoy, Schiller and Clive Bell agreed upon the common element in the features of art that is the existence of a fundamental human nature (n.pag). This set of characteristics is present in all human beings irrespective of culture. Dutton continues, “This universalist conception therefore regards art as a natural category of human activity and experience” (n.pag).
It is true that the aesthetic sense of human beings is universal, that is why some masterpiece works remained great even after thousands of years. It is due to the uniformity of human nature in the case of aesthetic sense. But why aesthetic judgments differ in different persons or in the same person at different times? The reason may be personal or cultural. Cultural and personal factors affect aesthetic judgments, and hence in different cultural contexts aesthetic judgments are likely to vary. This element of contextuality determines the relativistic nature of aesthetic norms and judgments in spite of the innateness of the common faculty for aesthetic judgment and appreciation. Dealing with the relativism vs. universalism question in aesthetics, Dutton points out ‘the cross-cultural unintelligibility of arts’ as the reason for judging “a good work of art … “good” only in a specific culture” (n.pag).

1.3. The Philosophy of Relativism - Western and Indian

The impact of relativism can be found throughout the history of human intellectual quest. The ongoing revisions in philosophy and other disciplines imply the recognition of relativism in all areas of knowledge and praxis. So it is quite relevant and necessary to take relativism as a significant reference point in order to resolve the conflicts/tensions emerging in the various realms of life in the present day world. It is widely acknowledged that the earliest form of relativism can be seen in the Sophist
tradition of ancient Greece, but its impact has become more obvious and far reaching in this age of postmodern critiques. Here it will be useful to attempt a brief sketch of the historical development of relativism by analyzing some of its paradigms in the western and Indian context.

1.3.1. Relativism in Western Philosophy – The Sophist Legacy

The early Greek cosmologists were concerned primarily with the problem of objective reality, and they considered man as a part of the Cosmos. A remarkable transition in the Greek philosophical tradition became obvious as the Sophists attempted to shift the focus of metaphysics from the macrocosm of universe to the microcosm namely man. This metaphysical shift of emphasis from object to subject first appeared in the works of Sophists who were disposed to argue for subjective norms in metaphysics, ethics and politics.

Russell remarks, “The Sophists were prepared to follow an argument wherever it might lead them” (94). This lack of concern for any definite truth as something preconceived and predetermined may be one of the reasons for the bias against Sophists’ way of thinking and preaching. It is well known that Protagoras as the leader of the Sophists had initiated the trend of relativistic thinking in philosophy. Sophists were skeptical about the existence of any absolute or universal truth which is one and the same for all individuals in all times and places. There are no means to measure
my truths against yours, and I have no right to say that what seems true to me is truer than what seems true to you. What appeared true yesterday may look false today.

Gorgias, one of the most controversial Sophist philosophers, boldly declared the impossibility of knowledge. In his book, *On Nature, or the Non-existent*, Gorgias says that nothing exists. Something cannot arise out of nothing. All existence is self-contradictory (Stace 117). The second proposition of Gorgias is that if anything exists, it cannot be known. Sophists refused to rely upon the rational essence of man and claimed that sense perception is the source of knowledge. Perceptions differ in different people, sometimes even in the same person, so we cannot conclude any truth beyond doubt. In the third proposition of his skeptical argument, Gorgias says that even if something can be known it cannot be communicated. We are dependent upon language for sharing our ideas. Language is mere noise, but knowledge of the truth of reality cannot be a mere noise.

W.T. Stace observes that in Sophists’ view, truth is identified with subjective sensations and impressions (115). Thus the Protagorian dictum - “Man is the measure of all things; of things that are that they are, and of things that are not that they are not”- not only shows the relativity of judgments but also proves the impossibility of any universal and necessary
knowledge. The earliest systematic postulates of relativism were first put forward by Sophists, and Protagoras (490-420 BC) is considered first and foremost as the first relativistic thinker rather than the first Sophist thinker.

B.A.G. Fuller brings out the origin of relativist position thus:

The sense of relativity . . . has been reinforced by the temper of times. The growth of trade, the increase of travel, and the awakening interest in the geography and history of other lands disclosed the difference, and even the opposition of religious beliefs, political and social conventions and institutions, standards of taste and ideas of moral right and wrong, all of which seemed to work equally well in their respective communities and times. And this disclosure was bound to make men skeptical of the absoluteness or even the superiority of the particular views and ways to which they had happened to be born and bred (100-01).

Sophist philosophy is a fine blend of skepticism, phenomenalism, and agnosticism. Anyway, the most remarkable element in their philosophy is relativism. It is the theory that truth has no independent absolute existence, but is ever dependent upon the individual in a given situation. This relativity of truth formed the basis of Protagoras’ teachings, and hence it is rightly treated as marking a radical turn in philosophy.
Protagoras with other Sophists extended relativism and skepticism in epistemology, ethics and further into politics also. When we discuss the ethical and epistemological relativism of Sophists, it is necessary to analyze the famous dictum of Protagoras - *Homo mensura*. The crux of Protagoras’ teaching is implicit in this dictum. Man is the measure of all things means that man is the measure of whatever exists ontologically, epistemologically and ethically, and man determines what is not real also. The postmodern relativist Feyerabend says, “Protagorian relativism is reasonable because it pays attention to the pluralism of traditions and values. And it is civilized for it does not assume that one’s own village and the strange customs it contains is the navel of the world” (28).

Even before the rise of systematic philosophizing, human mind had never been idle on the question of truth, and the notion of truth was not conceived on rational grounds but through authority, custom and habit. Sophist philosophizing undermined all the established ideals of truth and goodness. Their radical view of truth invited both acceptance and attack from various quarters. Sophists could declare that it is not possible to know what is absolutely true even if there is such a category of truth.

In Sophists’ time, society was becoming more and more complex, and this growing complexity had reflected in their intellectual pursuits also. Anyway, Sophist relativism emerged, existed and flourished in a limited
intellectual and geographic sphere. Sophists tried to divorce human affairs from theoretical natural science for the practical betterment of life. They claimed that God or any such absolute idea exists for the sake of human beings for satisfying their needs.

1.3.2. Relativism in Indian Philosophy

Heterodox systems in Indian philosophy in general show an inclination to the metaphysical/epistemological relativism, and this is evident in the case of Lōkāyata, Buddhism and Jainism. This is also a clear index of the anti-brahminical stance adopted by these schools. There is consensus about the significance of Jainism and Buddhism as religions without the notion of God, but what is relevant to note here is their uniqueness as systems of thought holding realistic and relativistic pluralism. The Cārvākas, holding the popular view of Lōkāyata, in spite of their contempt for any spiritualistic salvation, shared the phenomenalistic-relativistic inclination of Buddhism and Jainism with added critical fervour.

1.3.2.1. Relativism in Jainism

The ontological and epistemological position of Jainism is expressed as Anēkāntavāda and Syādvāda respectively. It is widely acknowledged that most of the systems of Indian philosophy take the absolutistic standpoint in their approach to reality and knowledge in one way or another, but Jainism is an exception. Before we reach a conclusion, it will be helpful to analyze
the non-absolutistic dimensions of Jainism in order to divulge its proper position in the context of absolutism vs. relativism dispute.

*Anēkāntavāda*, as the term itself suggests, is obviously the doctrine of the manyness of reality. The nature of reality can only be expressed in several steps and hence no single definition is sufficient to describe its innumerable aspects. Every object possesses positive and negative attributes and exists independently. This substance (*dravya*) persists in and through attributes (*guna*) and modes (*paryāya*). Attributes are essential and permanent, but modes are changing and accidental. From the point of view of substance, reality is one, permanent and real, but if taken from the point of view of modes, reality is many, momentary and unreal. Jainism points out that both are just the two different expressions of the same reality. All things are relatively manifold. All affirmations or negations are true only under certain conditions, i.e., there is no absolute affirmation or negation. Hence “All judgments are double-edged. Affirmation presupposes negation as much as negation presupposes affirmation” (Sharma 52).

Jainism extended its ontological theory into epistemology to propound *Syādvāda* or the theory of the relativity of knowledge. The word *syād* literally means ‘probably’, ‘perhaps’ ‘may be’ or ‘relatively’. Accordingly, there are seven forms of judgment, and so it is known as *Sapta-bhangi-naya*. 
i) \(Syād\) asti- Relatively S is.

ii) \(Syād\) nāsti - Relatively S is not.

iii) \(Syād\) asti nāsti- Relatively S is and S is not.

iv) \(Syād\) avaktavyam- Relatively S is indescribable.

v) \(Syād\) asti avaktavyam- Relatively S is and is indescribable.

vi) \(Syād\) nāsti avaktavyam- Relatively S is not and is indescribable.

vii) \(Syād\) asti nāsti avaktavyam- Relatively S is, is not, and is indescribable.

It is therefore true that reality has infinite aspects, which are all relative, and we can at once know only some of these aspects. Therefore, all our judgments are necessarily relative, conditional and limited. All philosophical, ideological and religious differences and disputes are due to mistaking a partial truth for the whole truth and it is called the fallacy of ēkāntavāda or one-sided view. Jainism recognizes all the partial views, and that is why their ontological theory is termed Anēkāntavāda. Thus Jainism teaches tolerance and respect for all different points of view. It is argued that if we do not take into account this probability of judgments, we shall slip into unwarranted absolutism which is directly contradicted by experience.

A thing is existent and non-existent at the same time. It exists in terms of its own substance, space, time and form, but it does not exist if
viewed from another point of view. *Syādvāda* is severely criticized as a self-contradictory doctrine by Buddhists and Vedantins alike. They argue that existence and non-existence cannot belong to the same thing in the same sense. But Jainism argues that contradictions are attributed to a thing from different viewpoints, which are all partial and relative. Another objection is that if everything is probable, the theory itself is probable. But the criticisms do not blur the scope of *Syādvāda* as a theory of relativity rather than a theory of probability.

When we go through the ethical theory of Jainism we can see that the ultimate goal of the soul is to become free from bondage. Liberation is attained through the observance of *triratnās* or the Three Jewels of Jainism namely Right faith, Right knowledge and Right conduct. The *Pañcasīla* or five-fold discipline of Jainism also aims at this liberation of the soul. The pure self transcends all the relative viewpoints. Jainism admits that it is not possible for ordinary people to know all the qualities of a thing simultaneously. Ignorance is the cause of bondage, and pure knowledge of the self, which transcends all dualities, is the only means to liberation. It is true that only through a lower stage we can go to a higher stage, but in Jainism it culminates in nothing but the acceptance of the Absolute.

We have seen that even Jainism cannot provide an absolutely relativistic standpoint in its theory. From the paradigmatic analysis of the
much debated distinction between Absolutism and Relativism it becomes clear that apparent distinctions between them will vanish to expose the complementary relationship between Absolutism and Relativism. At least there is no irreconcilable contradiction between them. For postulating the Absolute as independent and immediate truth, relativism is inevitable and vice versa. The whole dispute can be reduced to the question of affirming or denying any single primary-pure substratum of all that is real.

1.3.2.2. Relativism in Buddhism

The metaphysical doctrines of Buddhism in concert produce a relativistic worldview that does not give place for anything absolute or independent. The cause and effect both are impermanent and as the effect emerges the cause vanishes. The law of causality applies to the past, present and future. Buddhism holds the doctrine of transient causation. There is no first cause because nothing is uncaused and nothing is eternal. *Pratītyasamutpāda* is the view that everything is dependent on everything else. The world is a *bhāvacakra* or cyclic process of becoming (*bhāva*) that has no beginning or end.

Buddhism does not accept the notion of the permanent existence of reality. Everything is in flux. Buddhist concept of *Anityavāda* can be compared to the concept of flux in Greek philosophy as introduced by Heraclitus. According to Buddhists, in every moment a person changes
into another person. There is no independent reality, and accordingly the postulate that entities like Ātman and Brahman exist independently of everything else is a wrong assumption. Thus the theory of impermanence or Anityavāda of Buddhism is closely related to their theory of dependent origination i.e. Pratītyasamutpāda. Anātmavāda or no-soul theory of Buddhism holds that there is no permanent soul. The existence of imperishable, impermanent self is rejected. Everything is subject to change, decay and destruction.

P. T. Raju has summarized the metaphysical doctrines of Buddhism as follows:

i) Everything is painful.

ii) Everything is momentary.

iii) Everything is without its own nature, or without any Ātman (self).

iv) Everything is Śūnya (emptiness), because everything can be analyzed away into the others.

v) Everything comes into existence dependent upon something else that precedes it as cause; and

vi) Everything is unique; i.e. itself without any essential natures (121).
These postulates show that both the metaphysical and epistemological theories of Buddhism show a relativistic inclination. Each school of Buddhism in one way or another accepts the relativity of empirical phenomena. J. N. Sinha observes, “The Mādhyamika philosophy is so called because it adopts the mean between extreme affirmation and extreme negation. It adopts absolutism on the basis of relativism” (395).

1.3.2.3. Relativism in Lōkāyata

The literal meaning of the term Lōkāyata is ‘one who goes the worldly way’. It is also referred to as Cārvāka philosophy which remains the most controversial of classical Indian theories of epistemology with its radical opposition to the orthodox Vedic schools. Cārvākas hold perception as the only source of knowledge and all other sources of knowledge are reduced to perception because, for them, what we cannot perceive is not real. So Cārvāka epistemology is a kind of subjective relativism. P. T. Raju puts it thus, “Every event is a chance. Everything comes into existence and passes out of it according to its own nature. Even this nature is not a universal law; it too may change” (88). Thus there is no universal law/process that governs the cosmic events and human actions. Every event or action is a context in itself that cannot be compared with or related to some other context. The relativistic inclination of Lōkāyata metaphysics, as it is evident in the above position, becomes more pronounced as we look at
its resemblance with the Nairātmyavāda of Buddhism and the eternal flux theory of Heraclitus.

Heterodox schools like Buddhism, Jainism and Cārvāka stood in opposition to Vedanta strictly in terms of their metaphysical positions which reiterated their relativistic inclination to mark their thoroughgoing dissent with the orthodoxy of the Vedantins.

1.4. Relativism - The Postmodern Condition

Here it is relevant to close our discussion on relativism with a study of postmodern relativism as its latest expression in philosophy. It will help us to see how the trend has been persistent throughout to show its power again in the most recent forms of philosophizing. Postmodern thinkers take relativism as a critical tool for analyzing theories and postulates. The critics of relativism show the tendency to view it from an absolutistic standpoint. Postmodernist approach to relativism helps us to understand and apply it as the most flexible mode of philosophical analysis. The easiest way for understanding postmodernism is to understand modernism because the term postmodernism is composed of two parts, ‘post’ and ‘modern’ and this implies how the phenomenon has been linked with modernism and modernity in spite of its evident break with the latter. Hence what needs elaboration in this context is the meaning of modernism and modernity.
1.4.1. Modernism and Postmodernism

Modernity is “the condition in which society must legitimate itself by its own self-generated principles, without appeal to external varieties, deities, authorities, traditions” (McGowan 3). Hence it looked upon the scientific worldview of the Enlightenment as the source of the legitimization of modernity’s prop ups. The Enlightenment attitude and approach to nature and culture thereafter dominated our social, economic, moral, and cognitive enterprises. There are some claims of modernity that justify and explain certain sets of social structures and institutions including democracy, law, science, ethics, and aesthetics. Modernism placed rationality as the highest form of mental faculty and as the ultimate centre and sanction of all human ventures, both intellectual and practical. Postmodern critics generally attack this view as the intellectual construct that found the ‘projects of modernity’.

In philosophy, modern era was pioneered by the doctrines and critiques of Descartes (1596-1650). He believed that human reason can grasp truths independent of time and place, and on the basis of this he recognized the epistemological priority of geometry and metaphysics in place of the dogmas of Scholasticism and other forms of conventional theocentric philosophizing. Descartes was confident that human reason can
grasp reality with utmost clarity and certainty. This marked the logocentric turn in modernism.

Another basic premise of modernism is based on the categorical recognition of (modern) science as the source and standard of universal truths. The knowledge produced by science leads to universal and necessary truth. This shows modernity’s boundless faith in human reason and its highest expression namely science. Modernists placed the individual-rational man as the pivot of knowledge and reality. Traditional authority of the Church had been challenged more and more, and gradually intellectual enterprises became secularized. The omniscience of God reflected in the natural self of man, and theocentric logic became obviously anthropocentric as the knowledge of objective reality got centered in the subject/knowing self.

J.P. Sahoo observes that the demarcating line between modernism and postmodernism always remains a matter of uncertainty (50). Some thinkers argue that there can be no clear, objective distinction between modernism and postmodernism. Hugh J. Silverman writes:

Postmodernism has no special place of origin. The meeting and function of postmodernism is to operate at places of closure, at the limits of modernist’s productions and practices, at the margins of what proclaims itself to be new and a break
with tradition, and at the multiple edges of these claims to self consciousness and auto reflection. Postmodernism does not open up a new field of artistic, philosophical, cultural, or even institutional activities. Its very significance is to marginalize, delimit, disseminate and decentre the primary and often secondary works of modernist . . . inscriptions (1).

Postmodernism is not a uniform or unilateral system of ideas. It is actually the terminal point of an ongoing synthesis between the post-structuralist inclinations in cultural anthropology and a variety of critiques attacking the anthropocentric concern of modern science and philosophy as also of capitalist economy and polity.

1.4.2. Anti-foundationalism

Postmodernism encouraged anti-foundationalist tendencies in all areas of knowledge. In economics, both capitalism and its antithesis Marxism have been attacked as jointly responsible for projecting the ‘human creator’. In philosophy of science, epistemological anarchism was developed by critical thinkers like Feyerabend. He declared boldly, “Science is not sacrosanct” (Feyerabend 16). Science does not play any privileged role in our lives. Equating science with rationality is not logically necessary, because rationality is only a ‘tradition or an aspect of tradition’. Feyerabend says, “Traditions are neither good nor bad, they simply are.

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Rationality is not an arbiter of traditions” (27). Feyerabend tries to convince that science has no specific methodology as he says, “All methodologies, even the most obvious ones, have their limits” (199).

The emerging revisions in philosophy and other disciplines implied the recognition of relativism in all areas of knowledge and action. In anthropology, Lévi-Strauss used the term multiculturalism to underline the principle of equal respect for different cultures (16). His concept had far-reaching implications to those who studied the culture of indigenous peoples from various platforms. The respect for the lives and cultures of alien peoples was a strange value for the western scholars who monopolized even colonial studies.

The anthropocentric tradition that determined the various expressions of modernity was the target of attack in postmodern critiques. Hence the new generation ‘skeptics’ argued against the Enlightenment humanism and techno-scientific enterprises of modernity as based on the self-esteem of modern philosophers and the champions of modern science. The epistemological ‘faith’ in the objectivity and universality of knowledge was brought under the relativistic revision of modernism. Anthropocentrism that plagued modernist epistemology and ethics was challenged in the light of postmodern ‘self-criticism’ of the modernist axioms of knowledge and morality.
1.4.3. Creation of the Other

Postmodern relativism marks out a political praxis with the radical rejection of the modernist devices for creating the other to monopolize power. No power structure is justified absolutely, since no moral or political institution is free from the interests of those who create it. So, the creation of the other reflects the unilateral justification of a certain social or cultural section or segment. It implies the dominator/dominated, exploiter/exploited and the oppressor/oppressed bifurcations. This is unethical and unwarranted even if the interest group can justify the domination in terms of rationality, racial superiority or technological excellence. But it has been the custom throughout modernity that projected the absolutistic bases of truth, culture and morality. It is with the intention to break this customary justification of class/race/gender domination that postmodernists advocate open-minded relativism in all domains of life including humans’ relation to nature. Hence every culture is unique in itself, and every society has its own norms to judge its systems, customs, and institutions. There are no universal and necessary standards to measure different cultures and morals.

From the above discussion, it has become clear that the themes of postmodernism are obviously moulded by the relativistic trend. In other words, postmodern relativism emphasizes the culturally particular over the universal. All values are created contextually, and are relevant only to
particular cultural contexts. Ideas and values pertaining to different cultures are equally valid. Hence there is no reason to suppose that ‘Western’ or ‘Enlightenment’ beliefs are superior to any other worldview. We shall never arrive at universally agreed norms. Glenn Ward observes that postmodernism “aims at preserving the maximum number of competing value systems” (199). Postmodernists have let loose a virtual battle against all absolutistic projects including those in philosophy, culture and ethics. They are in favour of recognizing and protecting the identity of any number of rival value systems. Our main concern here is to analyze this growing impact of relativistic philosophizing in the specific ethico-cultural context of the fast changing social life. Before that, it becomes necessary here to delineate the proper sense in which relativism is associated with philosophy and its allied areas of concern like Cultural Studies.

1.5. Tracing the Relativism Proper

The difficulty in understanding relativism properly is mainly due to the reluctance to treat it as a tool for analyzing theories and postulates. The critics of relativism show the tendency to view it from an absolutistic standpoint. This results in interpreting relativism as the mother of anarchism. Hence it becomes necessary here to analyze relativism in its proper philosophical perspective taking into account the fact that following the recognition of relativity as a physical fact and its natural culmination in
the indeterminacy principle, falsificationists in philosophy of science have challenged the possibility of any absolutistic claim in theoretical sciences. Further, social sciences have to bear the repercussions of relativity principle more evidently in Cultural Studies that require the theoretical integration of various social sciences. With this express intention to place relativism in its proper philosophical context, we shall attempt in the following part to delineate the concept in the light of its comparative linkage with subjectivism and absolutism, as the former is often taken as a synonym and the latter as the antonym of relativism. Here we should be cautious about the conventional preoccupation with the absolutism vs. relativism polarity in philosophical analyses and debates.

1.5.1. Relativism and Subjectivism

Subjectivism as a philosophical concept is applicable to metaphysics, epistemology and axiology if it is asserted that the nature of reality is determined by subjective experience. It is often confused with relativism and hence we have to distinguish between the two terms. Subjectivism is the philosophical view that an individual’s mental or subjective experience is the source and sanction of everything. Subjectivists deny the objectivity and hence the universality of truth because it is not possible to lay down any inter-subjective norm of verification in the case of knowledge and truth. It is to be noted that relativism is not a concept equal to or derivable from
subjectivism. Subjectivism as a philosophical position stands in contrast with objectivism, but relativism is only the logical opposite of absolutism.

Relativism should not be confused with subjectivism or egoism because subjectivism focuses on the individual and only on the element of self-interest, but relativism if removed from the egoistic bias is not concerned with the egoistic separation of the self but with the affairs of collective life. Hence relativism has wider dimensions over and above subjectivism if taken in the perspective of Cultural Studies. Relativism is an attitude of tolerance applicable to all realms of life. Relativists face the criticism that it is self-contradictory because if relativism is accepted then relativism itself gets only limited validity in relation to similar other theories. If relativism is true, then absolutism is as true as relativism. This kind of thinking arises out of the tendency to confuse relativism with subjectivism.

In order to discover the clear distinction between relativism and subjectivism, it is necessary to analyze what relativism is not. First of all, relativism is not synonymous with subjectivism. Relativism is not a system of thought but only a tool of analysis or analytic index to understand different conflicts and contradictions prevalent in various theories and in various realms of life. The two terms are confused (only) in the context of ethical issues. That may be due to the plasticity of ethical disciplines. The
notion of subjectivism and relativism in metaphysics and epistemology is more distinguishable than that in ethics. So here it is necessary to analyze the distinction between these two terms in ethics.

1.5.1.1. Ethical Subjectivism and Ethical Relativism

The two key terms in ethics namely subjectivism and relativism are very often used synonymously, but exactly these two terms are semantically different and they represent two different positions in ethics. Subjectivists do not explicitly mean relativism in their ethics. Their asserted purpose is to make the subject/the individual human being the source and locus of moral deliberations and judgments. More than this, they do not want to show that one is choosing ‘for himself/herself’ without any concern for other individuals involved in an ethical context. They do not deny the existence of identical moral faculty and identical norms of moral choice in different individuals, on the contrary, subjectivists, especially those in the deontological stream, wanted to prove the existence of some innate moral faculty being shared by different human beings. They do not bother asserting relativistic differences between the moral choices of different individuals in a common context that demands good/evil distinction. Here it is clear that subjectivism does not necessarily imply relativism in spite of the conventionally motivated tendency to treat them synonymously.
Subjectivism in simple terms asserts that “X is good” means “I like or prefer X”. Moral principles are derived from the subjective feelings and experiences of the individual. It has been stated that moral principles are developed and moulded in the context of social customs and practices. So initially in our childhood, we get our values from society. But in adulthood, one may come forward to question a value that has been recognized good by society. Then one’s value judgments become based upon his/her personal choice rather than on the socially approved ethical conventions and practices.

Subjectivism holds that moral truths are relative to the individual. The problem is that subjectivism is misread as relativism or vice versa and some thinkers consciously or unconsciously misconceive subjectivism and relativism as the two sides of the same coin. The interchangeability ascribable is more in the case of ethical subjectivism and ER because ethical concepts are more abstract than any other philosophical concepts.

1.5.2. Absolutism vs. Relativism

In order to understand the proper denotation of relativism, it will be helpful to delineate its position in contrast with that of its (conventional) logical opposite namely absolutism. To a certain extent, the impact of this polarity has been moulding the development of philosophy in the East and West alike. Hence the tension between various philosophical positions in
terms of absolutism vs. relativism conflict can be taken as an analytic index to understand the crucial debates in the history of philosophy. The question can be stated precisely as whether there is any philosophical position/system that can be termed as absolutely absolutistic or absolutely relativistic? Within the limits of this work, it will be appropriate to attempt a paradigmatic analysis of these two positions. So we take here Hegelian Absolutism from the West and Sankara’s Advaita from Indian philosophy as the obvious expressions of philosophical absolutism.

The concept of the Absolute has had a significant role in all metaphysical discussions. In the West, the term first assumed its full metaphysical significance in the philosophical works of Schelling and Hegel by the end of the 18th century. Philosophers, in general, use the term to signify the ultimate reality regarded as the unitary source of everything. It is the independent and all-embracing reality that is characteristically infinite and eternal. Aristotle’s notion of the Unmoved Mover and its theological expressions as the Uncaused Cause bears testimony to the earlier concern of western thinkers for the Absolute.

*The Cambridge Companion to Hegel* marks Hegel’s position thus, “Hegel remains the watershed of modern philosophy, the source from which its many streams emanate and divide” (Beiser 1). According to Hegel, the purpose of philosophy is to attain the rational knowledge of the
Absolute and hence it is inseparable from our quest for knowledge. In another work on Hegel, Beiser observes that he could hardly provide a simple and single definition for the term ‘Absolute’ (58-59).

Hegel postulates the fundamental law of dialectical process as the unity of opposites/contradictories. It implies that without accepting the reality of relative things, we cannot conceive the Absolute Idea. Hence we can conclude that it is impossible to conceive Hegelianism as an absolutely absolutistic position analogous to the darkroom in which all appears to be black. To put it briefly, oppositional relativity between the categories of thought and reality as well as the ontological relativity between the phenomenal categories and the absolute are at least implicit in Hegel’s Absolute Idealism. The Absolute Idealism of Sankara has had very strong impact upon the intellectual landscape in his times and later. The continuity of philosophy in India was either for or against Sankara’s position as it had been the case with Plato’s Idealism in the West.

Sankara stressed the reality of the unconditional and unqualified Brahman (nirguna) and postulated that God (Īśvara), the individual souls (jīva) and the world (Jagat) are mere appearances of the Absolute. These are only manifestations of the ultimate reality, Brahman. The appearances are due to the indefinable principle of māya, which is neither real, nor unreal, nor both, nor neither. Brahman is the one, eternal, pure and
transcendental consciousness. It resolves the subject-object duality. Sankara admits three grades of reality namely, vyāvahārika satta (empirical reality), prātibhāsika satta (illusory reality), and pāramārthika satta (ontological reality). He accepts nirguṇa Brahman as the sole ontological reality, but never denies the empirical reality of the world. Only thing is that from the standpoint of the transcendental Absolute it is only apparent.

Sankara in Indian philosophy and Hegel in western philosophy are the acknowledged sources of philosophical absolutism. Their position is at the same time ontological, epistemological and transcendental. In the ontological dimension, the Absolute-Welt Giest for Hegel and Brahman for Sankara - is the one and only one ontological truth that serves as the objective ground of all multiplicity that appears to be so to the subject i.e., individual minds.

For Hegel, human mind is the highest level of Absolute’s dialectical evolution and it is through this human expression of Welt Giest that the Absolute becomes conscious of itself. Thus Hegel postulated the Absolute as evolving into higher and higher grades of self-know ledge in which finally all barriers to the Absolute’s self-conscious understanding vanish. Each stage of dialectical evolution is the transcendence from the lower to the higher levels of reality. So reality progresses through higher and higher stages of the self-unfoldment of the World Mind.
For Sankara, Absolute is the one and only one existential truth that is knowable in terms of the identity between the individual self (Ātman) and the Universal Self (Brahman). Hence genuine knowledge is attained by transcending the apparent sense of duality between Ātman and Brahman. This experience of transcendental identity can never be contradicted by other experiences. In spite of the categorical emphasis on Absolute reality, Advaita accepts the relative reality of phenomenal world (Vyāvahārika Satta). Hegel too is not a nihilist in recognizing the multiplicity of empirical world as a dependent reality; anyway, for both, the Absolute which is originally pure consciousness is the undisputed infinite source of everything else.

Both Sankara and Hegel accept the postulate that the phenomena are modifications/manifestations of the Absolute. In Hegel, dialectical necessity makes it inevitable that the Pure Being/Absolute Idea negates itself to become the antithesis of non-being that further gets synthesized in becoming. But Sankara does not emphasize this dialectical mutability of the Pure Being as necessary; and Brahman remains unaffected by any force of change even if it is dialectical. Moreover, the emergence of apparent phenomena is not a change in Brahman but only the play of māya. In spite of these differences, we can note down the following points shared by these champions of absolutism:
i) Both recognize the existence of phenomenal world as relative to the Absolute.

ii) They had to admit relativity at least in the context of the Absolute’s becoming (the apparent world).

This is obvious in Horkheimer’s remark, ‘Absolute relativises subjectivity’ (32).

From the preceding studies of absolutistic and relativistic positions in metaphysics, it becomes clear that even in the extreme form absolutism and relativism have to accommodate a certain element of relativity in order to explain the relationship between the pure absolute and the phenomenal world. So it is hardly possible to hold an absolutely absolutistic or an absolutely relativistic standpoint.

1.6. Summary of the Study

In the light of the above discussions, we can conclude that the relativity theory and uncertainty principle in physics with falsificationism in philosophy of science had laid the ground for challenging the absolutistic claims of science and scientists.

With reference to Sophist relativism and the classical Indian heterodox systems like Buddhism, Jainism and Cārvāka, we have noted that philosophers’ concern for relativistic, phenomenalistic and pluralistic
metaphysics has been recurring through in spite of the conventional belief that philosophy is characteristically the search for absolute truths in metaphysics, epistemology and axiology.

Moreover, the most recent trends in western philosophy and their echoes in non-western views have been vehemently critical of modernity as responsible for certain intentional constructs and binaries to justify its own self-asserted ideological superiority and the eligibility to carry out intellectual and cultural invasions over ‘others’. This postmodern critique testifies the continuing influence and impact of the age-old relativistic trend in philosophy. It continues in use as the tool of self-criticism among philosophers as a whiplash for the anthropocentric conceit in theory and praxis.

We have also discussed the various types and positions widely termed as relativistic and noted that whichever is the type, relativism in its proper sense can be analyzed and understood only by integrating and synthesizing the various areas of study all termed relativistic. Hence, relativism proper can be understood only by means of philosophical analysis which characteristically involves the integration of relevant disciplines.

It has been noted that in the analysis of absolutism vs. relativism question it has been problematic to understand these terms as lexical
contradictories. We have therefore discussed the problem in order to pinpoint the need for analyzing them dialectically. Thus it is noted that there is hardly a theoretical position in philosophy or elsewhere that is absolutely absolutistic or absolutely relativistic. This hypothesis has been further corroborated in the light of the western and the Indian absolutism with focus on Hegel and Sankara.

In spite of the variety in expressions, all the different forms of relativism have two features in common:

i) They all assert that moral values, aesthetic and epistemological categories, the meaning of culture and so on as relative to some particular framework or standpoint such as the individual, a culture, an era, or a language.

ii) They all deny any standpoint that recognizes the normative superiority/privilege of a certain individual or group over others.

In the light of the foregoing discussion, we could see that relativism has been developing as a philosophical position with visible impact on all domains of knowledge including sciences. Social sciences have already become concerned with the phenomena of culture in its diverse forms, and hence Cultural Studies is coming to the fore in all philosophical deliberations.
Hence it becomes necessary to delineate the philosophical/ethical dimensions of CR in order to examine the issues of viewing any one culture from the point of view of any other culture. This is the point we are going to take up in the succeeding part.

NOTES

1. According to Karl Popper, falsifiability is the belief that for any hypothesis to have validity, it must be inherently disprovable before it can become accepted as a scientific hypothesis or theory. If a theory is not falsified then it can be accepted as truth. If a theory is falsifiable, it is scientific, and if not, it is unscientific.

2. Historians of classical Indian philosophy classify classical Indian systems into orthodox and heterodox schools. Orthodox schools include Nyāya Vaiśeṣika, Sāṇkhya Yoga and Vedanta and heterodox schools include Buddhism, Jainism and Lōkāyata.

3. The flux theory of Heraclitus holds that nothing remains what it is. Even in one and the same moment a thing is and is not the same.

4. It is relevant here to remember that Buddha had marked this dissent also in linguistic terms by using Pāli as the medium of preaching to combat the Sanskritic insistence of brahminical religion.