

# Relativism based on Buddhist epistemology

J. A.D.F.M. Jayatilleke  
Department of Philosophy, University of Kelaniya.

---

## ABSTRACT

The resurgence of relativism in Western philosophy occurred in the 1960's through the works of the American philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn. Two important concepts introduced by Kuhn, namely 'Paradigm' and 'Incommensurability' led to the logical conclusion that theories have only relative validity. But Kuhn hesitated to be branded as a relativist. Kuhn was severely criticised by the contemporary scientists and philosophers for leading science, thereby knowledge, towards relativism. Very few contemporary philosophers of Kuhn, namely, Paul Feyerabend, Nelson Goodman, Joseph Margolis, Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela openly defended relativism of knowledge.

Most of the western philosophers and scientists could not accept relativism of knowledge because of their deep rooted belief that there is a world out there independent of us. In other words the majority of western philosophers and scientists believe in a reality independent of human beings. According to them, cognition is the representation of the world 'out there'. Even some of the philosophers who reject this representational view of the world 'out there' do not accept relativism. They prefer to call them pragmatists.

There are few philosophers and scientists who openly embrace relativism. Philosophers like Feyerabend, Goodman, Margolis and scientists like Maturana, Varela belong to this category. According to the two scientists (as well as philosophers) Maturana and Varela, cognition is not a representation of the world 'out there' but rather an ongoing bringing forth of a world through the process of living itself. Both of them were colleagues at the University of Chile. Varela died in 2001. Maturana still works at the University of Chile. Both of them are Biologists who are specialised in Cognitive Science, and their theory is called the 'Santiago Theory of Cognition'. They were largely influenced by the Buddhist philosophy.

The Sri Lankan theoretical physicist cum philosopher Nalin de Silva has developed a relativism namely 'Constructive Relativism' which is based on Theravada Buddhist philosophy. According to him, knowledge is constructed relative to our five senses, mind and culture, due to ignorance (*avidya*). He has introduced the important concept '*Chinthanaya*' which is broader and deeper than Kuhn's 'Paradigm'. For example a *Chinthanaya* could give rise to a number of paradigms. While Allopathy (Western Medicine) has been created in the Juda-Greek-Christian *Chinthanaya*, Ayurveda Medicine has been created in the *Bharatha* (Indian) *Chinthanaya*. Different *Chinthanayas* give rise to different knowledge systems. The hallmarks of Juda-Greek-Christian *Chinthanaya* are very high degree of abstractness, analysis, linearity, and reductionism. Whereas the hallmarks of Sinhala Buddhist *Chinthanaya* are concreteness, balance between analysis and synthesis, cyclicity and holism.

## References

1. Kuhn, T.S. (1962) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, University of Chicago Press
2. Feyerabend, P.K. (1975) *Against Method*, Verso London
3. Goodman, N. (1978) *Ways of Worldmaking*, Hackett Publishing Company
4. Maturana, H.R. & Varela, F.J. (1998) *The Tree of Knowledge*, Shambhala, London
5. Varela, F.J., Thompson, E. & Rosch, E. (1993) *The Embodied Mind*, MIT Press, Massachusetts
6. De Silva, Nalin, (1986) *Mage Lokaya*, Chinthana Parshadya,
7. De Silva, Nalin, (2003) *Vidya Kathandara* Visidunu Publishers
8. De Silva, Nalin, (2006) *Ape Prawada* Visidunu Publishers